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Beloved and the Water Dancer: A Longitudinal Study of Book Reviews From 1987 and 2019

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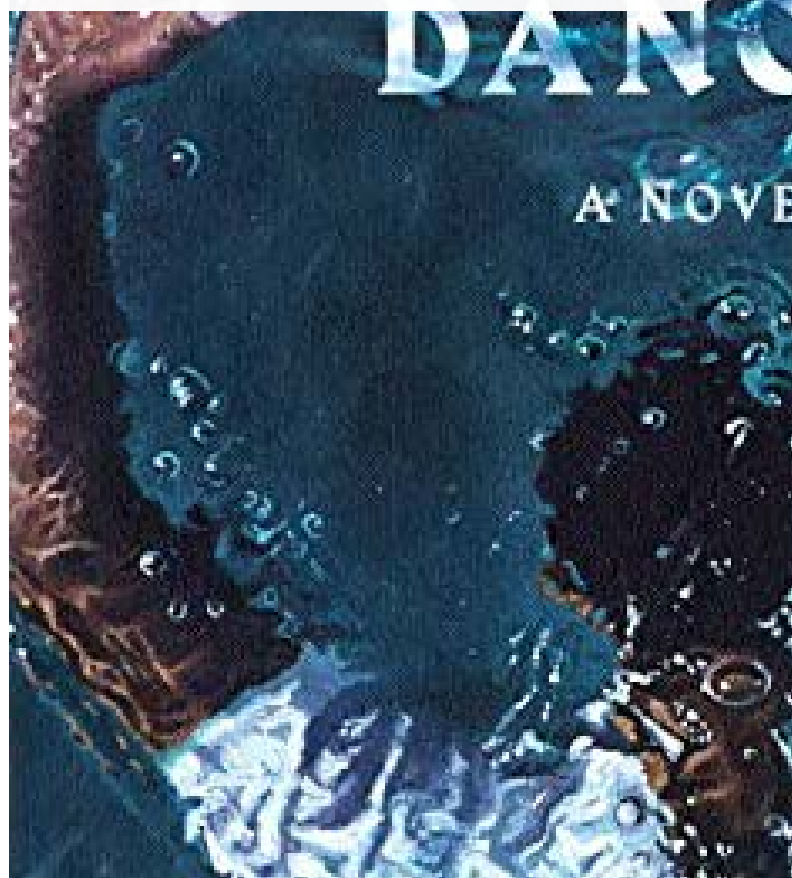
VEED



Beloved and **The Water Dancer**

A longitudinal study of book reviews from 1987 and 2019
by Tiffany Watson

ISON



Introduction:

There is a trail of profoundly pessimistic opinions on the state of book reviews and critics from Lorentzen¹ to Hardwick²—to Marshall and McCarthy³—to Poe⁴—to Pope⁵.

In earlier drafts, I tapped into that same despair. I considered calling this essay “The Death of the Book Reviewer”. I must admit I was committed to the allusion more than to the truth of such a statement. Because, as I read each essay which laid out the faults of the then most-recent form of book reviewing, I came to the conclusion that if the book reviewer is to die, it is a very slow death and much more like obsolescence. In the end, I scrapped the title.

The cultural character that we call the literary critic is in flux and adapting to the changing world of print. Definitely not gone—not yet.

My research leading up to this paper looked very different. I want my work here to reflect this process, should I wish to someday return to it. My beginning intentions were never so finely focused on reviews, rather I wanted to define literary fiction—a hard to pin down concept.

In my quest for definitions, I had privileged awards as an indication of literary merit and therefore as an identity-building mechanism for this not-really-genre book genre. However an analysis of even one literary award, my eyes were on the Booker, would take up more pages than I am allowed to waste on this thesis—a project perhaps for the future. I had to change and adapt my work to serve both my ambitions and more realistic ends. I decided that what was most important for me was to capture a change in literary fiction reading over a period of time and the potential shift in opinions on literary fiction based upon it.

Literary fiction is in decline, some fear it is endangered, I wanted to perhaps identify a factor or two that could explain this beyond the patronizing reading reports that seem to crop up in the news every few years—the ones that like to blame digital disruption and low attention spans as a reason for the seemingly declining levels of literary fiction reading.⁶

This work I felt could give me a sense of how literary fiction was read by critics in the past and how it is read today. But first, I needed to pin point the date of literary fiction readings most-recent shift and compare a book published then to now.

In the 1980s libraries were introducing genre fiction into their adult reading programs and phasing out the classic literature from their community-based adult literacy curriculum. This shift of popular reading can be described as reading as a means of cultural value to reading for pleasure. It changed views on literary fiction and particularly who reads this type of book.⁷

Therefore, I set out to find and compare two books: one from back then and

¹ “Like this or Die”

² “The Decline of Book Reviewing”

³ “Our Critics, Right or Wrong?”

⁴ *Marginalia*

⁵ “An Essay on Criticism”

⁶ These studies and their results can vary depending on their definition of literary fiction. The most cited study by these articles and books is the 2015 National Endowment for the Arts survey, which defined literary reading to include poetry and plays.

⁷ Brendan Luyt and Bill Crowley speak particularly to the change in view of genre fiction and literary fiction among Readers’ Advisory Boards.

one now, then catalogue and read the literary criticism written about the two books published over three decades apart.

The two books that I chose and had help with choosing, were *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. *Beloved* was published in September 1987, just in my timeline and *The Water Dancer* was published just last year in 2019.

I began collecting book reviews on the two books.

As of today, I have the full-text of twenty-four reviews for *Beloved* and twenty-six reviews for *The Water Dancer*. However, I count twenty-six reviews for *Beloved* in my dataset because two reviews from the Library Journal were misplaced or lost during my research, although I still had data on their date of publication, therefore I wanted to include them when I charted out the publication schedule for reviews.⁸

⁸See Figure 1 for the publication schedule.

Methodology:

My reasoning behind picking these two books had to do with their use of magical realism and contemporary slave narratives, which made for comparable books in terms of subject, themes, and motifs. One particular motif that I had hoped to explore and would have if this were a literary review was the way in which both authors approach memory. But alas, I am constrained!

I was happy to find that many of the book reviewers agreed with the comparison of Ta-Nehisi Coates to Toni Morrison, especially as she was mentioned a number of times in relation to Coates throughout *The Water Dancer* reviews.

One major difference between these two books had more to do with both authors' status as a literary figure. Morrison was an established literary author by the time *Beloved* was published, and although Ta-Nehisi Coates is a significant cultural critic and writer in his own right, *The Water Dancer* is a debut novel, so much of his reviews put a great deal more focus on his work in non-fiction than fiction which was not the case with Morrison's reviews.

The archive and collection methods:

I was able to collect a majority of the reviews by means of digital copies, a simple copy and paste of the complete text either from a website or PDF. However, seven of the *Beloved* reviews had to be transcribed and therefore may include some errors of my own creation. I have done my best to ensure that no words were added or misspelled, but it is a possibility that I did not catch them entirely.

⁹[hyperlinked here](#).

I have created an archive⁹ of these reviews in a Google sheet that is linked to this document. Each book has a tab of its own. The reviews are ordered

by date of publication. Most publication dates include the month, day, and year but there are a few that are simply the month and year. In this archive, you will also find that the reviews have been labeled with the author, publication name, word count, the review in its entirety, source links, and notes. Not all reviews have authors or source links. There is a third tab in this archive which lists all the publications and tallies if or when either book was reviewed in them.

Both books were reviewed in the same eight publications: *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Kirkus*. There is an asterisk on two tallies, *The New Yorker* review of *The Water Dancer* is more of an excerpt and the review of *Beloved* in *The Los Angeles Times* was more of an op-ed piece. It should be noted that there is a legitimate book review for *Beloved* in *The Los Angeles Times* but I was not able to get a hold of the full-text.

In building this archive, I limited the scope of book review outlets, focusing mainly on print magazines, journals, and newspapers. I wanted to collect critical reviews, so I focused on outlets with either enough funds or prestige to attract experienced book critics.¹⁰

Finally, I limited the time period of reviews published for *Beloved*, choosing to look for reviews published between the years of 1987-1997. A majority of the book reviews (sixteen) were published in 1987, six in 1988, and five more from 1989-1997. I chose the cut-off date for the reviews to take place before the 1998 film adaptation. Although, the time span of reviews for *Beloved* is much longer than *The Water Dancer*, I have made efforts to extend my review archive to the most recent date for *The Water Dancer*. As of right now, no additional reviews for *The Water Dancer* have been published in the publications within my scope.

Book Reviews:

Book reviews are a kind of public reading. The book critic communicates their understanding of a text, their experience of a text—in a forum meant for public consumption. Book critics typically have some sort of expertise either in literature or adjacent subject areas: an author, cultural critic, academic, or journalist.

However, in recent years book critics identify as professional writers whose writing of criticism takes up a much smaller portion of their overall work¹¹—among the book reviewers of *Beloved* many were not all professional book reviewers, although they did have expertise in terms of literature or academically adjacent fields. For *The Water Dancer* this was a bit more difficult to define but many seemed to be professional writers or novelists.

The expertise associated to this title of critics has essentially been dropped in recent years. Therefore this definition of a book review is an idealized one.

Contemporary book reviews are more often a document that has three functions: it serves as prestige depending on the media outlet it was published in (*The New York Times*), it is a marketing document tethered to a book's publication date, and it serves the function that I already mentioned prior,

¹⁰ The term critical reviews, although defined on page 6 of this paper, was much more loosely applied in practice. I focused on outlets over the book reviewers themselves. Many book reviewers as you will soon come to find out, do not identify or meet the rigid definition of expert critics.

¹¹ Phillipa K. Chong's book *Inside the Critics' Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times* details this through a series of interviews she has with book reviewers at various newspapers and magazines.

a cultural document of public reading. The intention behind a book review can shape its form.

There are two types of reviews that dominate this archive: summary and critical reviews.

Summary vs Critical Reviews:

Summary reviews have a certain autological charm to them. They contain primarily summary. These reviews are typically found in trade publications like *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly*. In my case, these two publications served as the most consistent form of book reviewing that stands up to the 32 year gap between the two books I examined.

Although, I have chosen to give a separate name to the type of book reviews I read for *The Water Dancer* that expands upon the summary review, essentially the bulk of these reviews could be labeled as summary.

Critical reviews are also autological, however there can be some interpretation with this definition. To give a clear image, I will borrow one from William College:

“Critical reviews are written for an informed readership, and exist at a crossroads between journalism and scholarship. The authors are often experts in their fields, but they are writing for a general rather than a scholarly audience. These reviews are longer than general interest reviews, and might appear in such publications as the *New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, or *The Village Voice*.”¹²

¹² Few things I want to focus on are the terms “informed readership”, “experts in their fields”, and the focus on the publication as a means of defining the criteria of a critical review.

With the experts portion of this definition no longer a major factor in recent years, it may seem that publication defines what is a critical review as of late. This is something I can confirm from my research.

¹³ [hyperlinked here](#).

Reading the archive:

In my analysis of this review archive, I have noted two specific elements that differentiate the type of reading being done in these book reviews. *The Water Dancer* reviews consist primarily of what I have come to call micro-analysis, while the *Beloved* reviews favor more traditional forms of close reading that feed into a thesis.

In this section, I will define both types of reading and give examples from review excerpts. I have also broken down a much longer section of a review for *The Water Dancer* which will be linked¹³ to this document so as not to interfere with my word count. I have broken down this larger excerpt to give you a sense of the overall effect of micro-analysis in book reviews and how this topic-sentence-based analysis reads in the long form as a disjointed yet still enriched summary-heavy reading of the text. You do not need to have read this longer excerpt to understand my main argument.

You may notice that I give much more explanation regarding micro-analysis as this idea and form is something that I have created a term for based on my research while close reading is a well establish literary analysis form and needs much less explanation.

Elements of Ta-Nehisi Coates reviews:

Micro-analysis

Consists of one paragraph that is three to five sentences long. The first sentence will usually consist of a topic sentence or statement. The next one to two sentences is a quote or summary from a section of the book to serve as proof. If there is a fourth sentence, it may be a restatement of the topic sentence.

One key element of micro-analysis reviews was the proliferation of these types of paragraphs each moving onto the next topic without really transitioning or building onto a larger discussion of the book. You end up with pockets of summary and statements, going back and forth throughout, the effect can sometimes feel like entering a wide but shallow puddle of analysis.

While I would call it a step above pure summary, it doesn't really add depth to the reviewers reading of the text nor did I find it as engaging or emotionally moving with regards to the analysis done in Toni Morrison's reviews.

Examples of Micro-Analysis in *The Water Dancer* archive

[Topic Sentence] Home, for Hi, ceases to be a place, and becomes a condition, located within those who love him. [Supporting Quote] “I have so rarely been afforded the right of farewell,” Hi thinks, summarizing the tragedy of human entanglements for the enslaved. [Additional Analysis] True intimacy is impossible because the loss of a loved one is inevitable. One loves without possession. But this, Hi suggests, is perhaps for the best — for a human being must never belong to another, not even for selfless reasons.

(Esi Edugyan, *The New York Times*)

[Topic Sentence] In depicting the fall of the plantation, Coates provides something of a microcosm of the nation. [Supporting Quotes] “Eat up the land, then keep going,” one character muses about the plantation's future. “Someday they gonna run out of land, and I don't know what they'll do then.”

(Chris Barton, *The Los Angeles Times*)

[Topic Sentence] In response to that time-honored delusion, Coates has cleverly constructed “The Water Dancer” so that the act of remembering is key to Hiram’s supernatural ability. [Contextual Summary] For several years, the young slave doesn’t understand what’s happening to him or have any control over the phenomenon, but, gradually, he comes to realize that by recalling neglected experiences and people, he can fold physical space like fabric and thereby travel instantly to distant points. Naturally, that’s a skill of great interest to agents working for the Underground Railroad.

(Ron Charles, *Washington Post*)

Elements of Toni Morrison reviews:

Close Reading

The form of close reading in book reviews can be anywhere in length from three to four paragraphs or may also serve as the entirety of the book review. Some book reviews will explore a particular theme or idea while gathering evidence from the text throughout. This is more in line with traditional critical reviews.

Examples of Traditional Analysis in *Beloved* archive

Margaret Busby’s review in the *Independent* explores a **central thesis** of Toni Morrison and her identity as a black female writer and how this has led to the diverse works of fiction including *Beloved* within this scope.

Verna Williams’ book review in the *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* **revolves around a thesis** of “Toni Morrison’s latest novel, *Beloved*, explored the effects of this institution [slavery] upon those it classified as real property. Morrison has stated that *Beloved* is not about slavery; however, the novel’s focus is on the people who were slaves, and on the system’s impact on their thoughts and actions, [which] powerfully indicts both the institutions and the endemic societal racism that perpetuates a subtler form of slavery today.”

Jane Miller's review in *London Review of Books* is also **constructed around a specific thesis**: "Toni Morrison's novels have been constructed, and are magically unsettled, by the unique character of historical memory for black Americans... Indeed, the verb 'rememory' is invented in her astonishing novel, *Beloved*, to stand for something like a willed remembering which includes its own strenuous reluctance to return to the past."

Karen Baker-Fletcher's review in *Commonweal* was among the most moving reviews to read. Her **main argument** focused on the concept of the novel as a contemporary slave narrative and battled with the merits of keeping these stories alive in a culture that often glorifies the suffering of martyrs, while also understanding and valuing Morrison's sensitivity and skill as an author. A deeply moving review.

Conclusions:

The differences in the type of reading found in these book reviews should not be seen as an indication of a decline in quality of literary analysis or criticism but rather a response to a change in both book publishing and print media.

Additionally, one of the most beautiful readings of either book can be found in the *NPR* review by Annalisa Quinn: "The book's most poignant and painful gift is the temporary fantasy that all the people who leaped off slave ships and into the Atlantic were not drowning themselves in terror and anguish, but going home."

Yet this beautiful reading of the text has sort of been tacked onto the end of 639 word review and without greater historical or textual exploration like those found in the Toni Morrison reviews it doesn't have the same effect.

Factors like the timeline of review publications, word count, and reader expectations all weigh into the change of this form of literary reading in print.

So, lets talk about all three.

Notes for Figure 1:

This chart is limited to the first year of both books' publication.

The *Beloved* reviews extend past this schedule.

Timeline of Reviews:

Figure 1 is a graphic I have made to show the timeline for each reviews publication. The red squares are for *Beloved* and the blue squares are for *The Water Dancer*. You will also notice that two shades of both red and blue exist on this chart, the darker shade indicates more than one review was published on that date. The greatest number of reviews published on a single date did not exceed two.

One important thing to note is that the calendar graphic is based upon the year 1987-1988, when the *Beloved* reviews were published. I did this because I believed that the calendar year for 2019-2020 was more accessible and I wanted both books to exist on the same chart.

Additional notes and observations:

Beloved had a pub date of September, no particular day of the week was specified. *The Water Dancer* had a pub date for September 24, 2019.

A quick scan of this graphic will show a cluster of *The Water Dancer* reviews on the week of publication, while the reviews for *Beloved* are less clustered.

Also take note that a second cluster of reviews for *The Water Dancer* exists in February likely as a celebration of Black History Month.

One thing that I plan to go into more depth in the reader expectations portion of the essay is the timing of reviews in relation to sales.

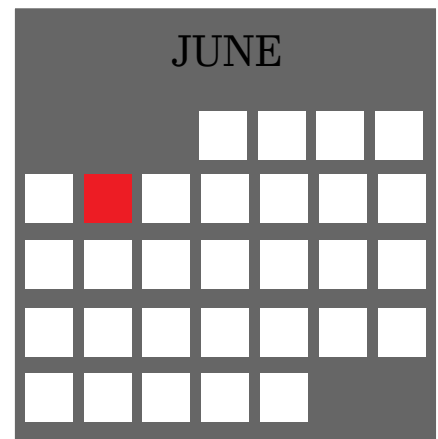
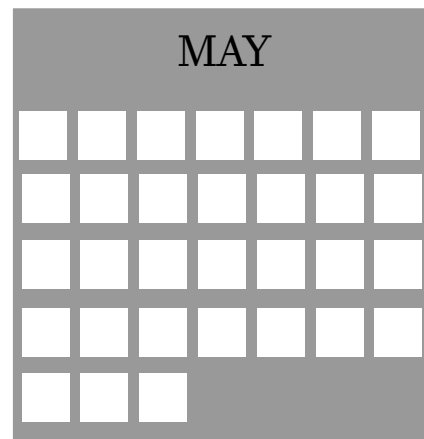
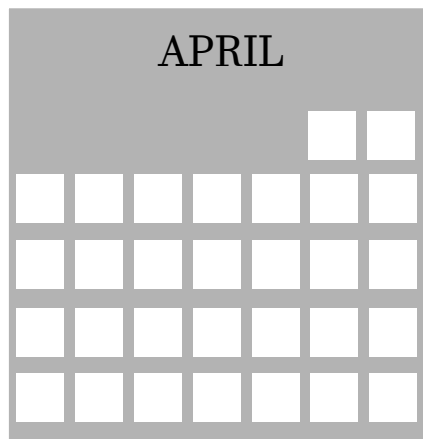
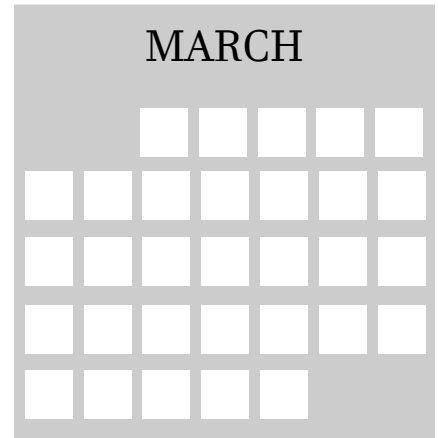
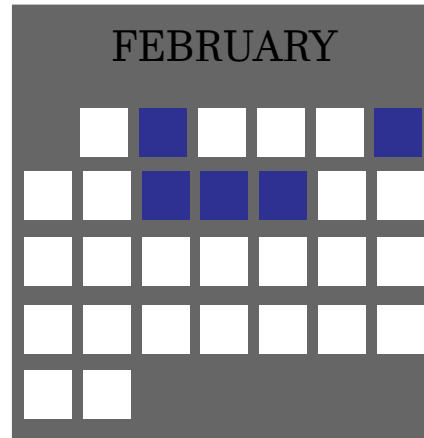
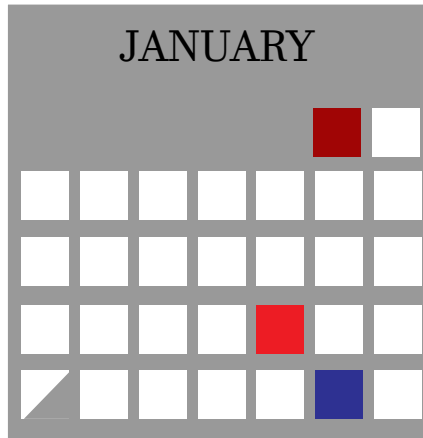
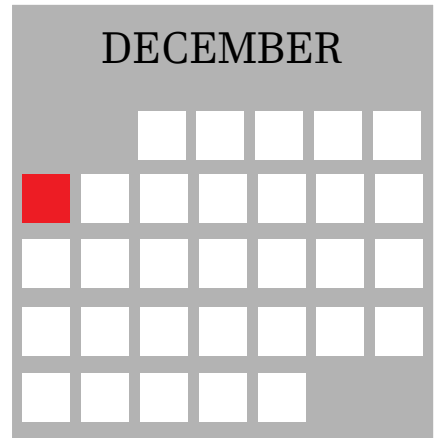
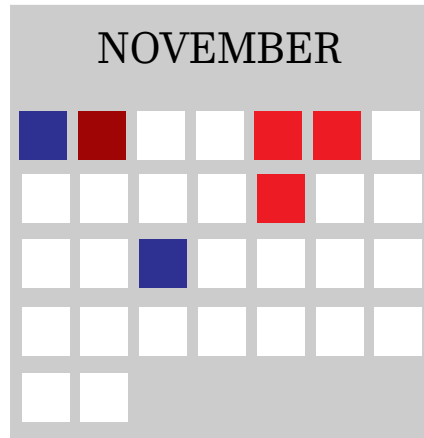
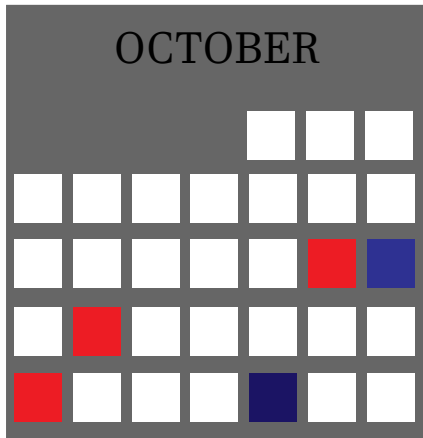
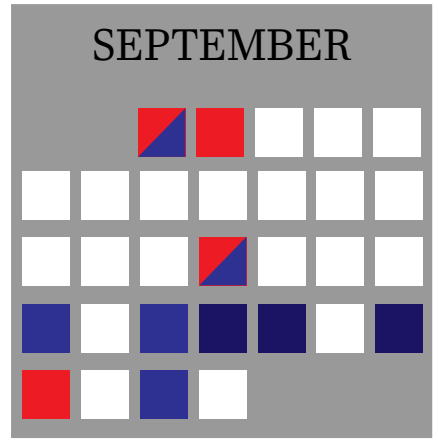
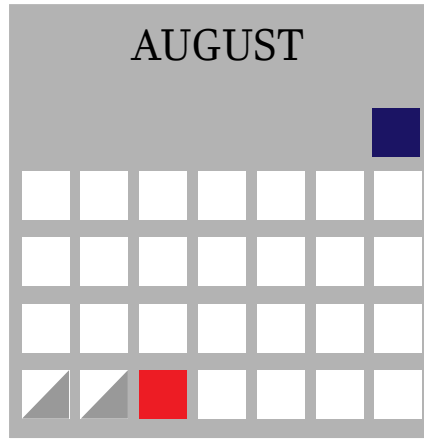
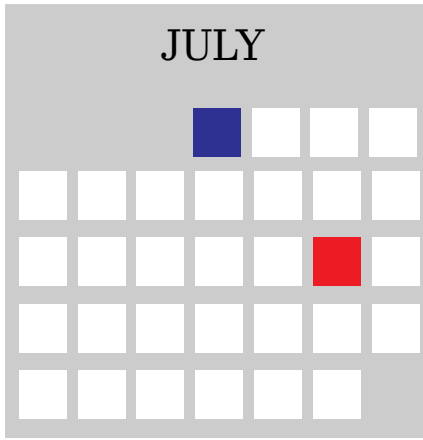
While the weeks before and weeks of publication are dedicated to informing potential readers of this new title, the weeks to months following may allow for readers to have read the book prior to seeing these reviews. If I were to do more work within this archive I would look at *The Water Dancer* reviews published in February and compare them with those published in September to see if there is any difference in the content based on the possibility that book readers may have already accessed the book prior to reading the review.

Wordcount of Reviews:

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, I decided to collect every full-text review within two word documents. This preplanning had allowed for me to have better access to these texts for ease of reading and I was even able to print this archive for my own annotation.

In the process of transferring reviews over to a word document, I noticed a discrepancy in the over-all word count. *Beloved* had a much larger word count than *The Water Dancer*.

As a way of confirming that I didn't miss any reviews, I went through each review to confirm its appearance in the print archive but also did a word count of each article.



I then calculated averages as well as ranked the highest and lowest word counts to show any major impacts made on the average. Figure 2 highlights the word count calculations I made.

Two reviews within both the *Beloved* archive and *The Water Dancer* archive had the potential of tilting the scales of the average word count, so I calculated averages excluding both reviews. Hannah Giorgis *Atlantic* review had a 2,864 word count of which included an interview with Coates, while Michele Bonnet's review in the *African American Review* was 7,962 words and was tailored more towards an academic readership. I have tacked on the additional averages to the description underneath Figure 2.

It is important to note that both the shortest reviews for both books were from *Library Journal* or *School Library Journal* which are both trade publications and have a standardized format of small librarian reviews consisting of a few sentences. Suffice it to say, they are not standard for overall book review publications.

What does the decline in word count mean?

There is an overall decline in serial-print articles word count. Dean Starkman of the *Columbia Journalism Review* has tracked the changing word count in major papers showing that articles greater than 2000 words have been in a steep decline since 2003.¹⁴

¹⁴ His article tracked: the words counts in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

Although the averages for both books' word count fall below Starkman's scale, a noticeable decline can still be observed. It is very likely that the reasoning Starkman identified can be applied to book reviews, mainly the shift of ad revenue from print to digital platforms and the financial state of newspapers and periodicals because of this loss of revenue.

Smaller print budgets lead to smaller print articles.

In no way is this idea more perfectly summed up than by Laurie Hertzell, of *The Star Tribune* and the National Book Critics Circle President, "It's expensive to mail ARCs and finished books all over the country to critics; it's expensive to pay critics; it's expensive to devote pages in the Sunday newspaper (as well as space during the week) to book reviews; it's expensive (though not nearly expensive enough, I would maintain) to pay my salary."

Another reasoning behind this word count decline can also be related to the people writing book reviews. Phillipa K. Chong in her recently published book *Inside the Critics Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times* interviewed book reviewers across many of the same media outlets that I collected reviews from and she noted that these reviewers are professional writers who write reviews on top of the other writing they do. This has led to an overall standardization of book reviews and thus word count.

There is one final reason behind a decline in word count in more general terms. Readers are seen as not readily reading longer-form articles. Although the argument can be readily made for more snackable content in the increasingly digital-dominated reading climate, I question this as being a reason behind the decline of word count in book reviews. Book reviews are intended for an audience that has an interest or sees value in the act of



Figure 2: *Beloved* average word count increases to 1439 with the book review from *African America Review*. Additional shorter word counts included word counts of 132 and 188. *The Water Dancer* average word count increases to 822 with the *Atlantic* interview. Additional shorter word counts included word counts of 48 and 153.

reading in the longform. It seems a bit strange that this audience may be off put by longer word counts.

Which leads to my final point.

Reader Expectations:

This is perhaps the most difficult factor to define with regards to the change in book review formats over time. Should I wish to expand on this research, a survey on book review readers may be a good place to start to better define this subject.

Although I am survey-less, I have some ideas about reader expectations taken from a parallel medium, film reviews. Film reviews take multiple forms and are communicated through various mediums, but primarily exist as print and YouTube reviews. They can exist for the same purpose as book reviews; however, YouTube reviews have a unique structure and effect which I want to talk about.

YouTube film reviews take a similar shape to traditional book reviews and some even refer to their format as a film essay—aligning heavily with this idea of academic analysis being utilized within the review. YouTubers like Lindsay Ellis¹⁵, Lessons from the Screenplay¹⁶, Folding Ideas¹⁷, and Nerdwriter1¹⁸ are able to utilize analysis for the purpose of entertainment while on average having a subscription base of 1.33 million. This proves that there is a desire for more in-depth analysis of cultural artifacts as a means of entertainment rather than simple marketing or publicity.

Something about this feels promising, yet how might it be applied to book reviews?

One element of these film reviews that I think is worth noting is the use spoiler warning. This element implies that there are two groups of audience members watching: people who have watched the film and people who have not watched it. The existence of this warning also goes to show who these reviews are intended for, the people who have watched the film already.

Having the shared knowledge of the film's plot, main characters, and narrative arch allows for these reviewers to expand beyond summary and interact with the film in a unique way that highlights both their "reading" and their reaction to it, which makes for a unique viewer experience that is both engaging and entertaining.

This lead me to wonder when, in a book review publishing cycle can or should a book review go from mere (enriched) summary or marketing content to analysis for entertainment and would this be worthwhile for readers?

I can't answer the second question but I can try for the first.

Early reviews:

Much like the reviews we saw in the weeks leading up to a book's launch,

¹⁵ Lindsay Ellis has 931,000 subscribers.

¹⁶ Lessons from the Screen play has 1.22 million subscribers.

¹⁷ Folding Ideas has 344,000 subscribers.

¹⁸ Nerdwriter1 has 2.83 million subscribers.

these reviews must serve as summary because the reader has no way of accessing the book at this time and is perhaps needing to be persuaded into a purchase.

When I was talking about book reviews serving as a marketing document tethered to a book's publication—this is what I meant.

Later reviews:

To me these reviews could and should contain more literary analysis as the potential reader will likely have had prior knowledge of the book and perhaps is seeking out more in-depth writing on the book they have just read.

This hypothesis is based in the viewpoint that reviews aren't necessarily for people making a decision to purchase a book but rather want to hear an opinion by an expert on the book they have already read as a source of entertainment.

One great thing about the way in which film review channels on YouTube function is the community building and readings/analysis being done in the comment section of the reviews.

This community reading, I feel is something that book reviews lack and may be a reason behind the lack of engagement in literary fiction reading.

Implications:

What does this mean for book reviews and literary fiction?

All I can really conclude is that there is a measurable shift in the way in which we talk about and discuss literature in the public forums that have traditionally hosted this type of literary criticism.


The fact that contemporary book reviews are more summary and less analysis may have implications in the way in which people read literature and could speak to the overall decline, but as of right now I can't conclude with such a grand statement.




I fear that in doing such, I would be no different from the essays that have come before me in critiquing the current critics and crediting them for the decline of literary fiction. How I have set myself apart is through my data and analysis of book reviews, rather than relying on anecdotal or broad sweeping statements. Understanding the implications of this shift in book reviewing on the reading public would require more research, some of which I have mentioned throughout this paper.

Additionally, I have left out many book review outlets most significantly Goodreads. I did this so as to have a fair comparison between the two books. However, not that I have defined this change in book reviewing, it may be of interest to see how this plays out on a much larger and more community driven reading platform.

But that is the work for my future self and others.

An admission of guilt! Who would have thought that all I needed to do to prove my research was to login to my Twitter!

 **Tweet**





 **Ron Charles**  
@RonCharles



It's not enough that the Super Dad down the street plays with his kids all day long. Today, we passed him doing push-ups **while** doing a handstand.

(But can he summarize the plot of a literary novel in 800 words??)





2:00 PM · 06 May 20 · [Twitter Web App](#)

125 Likes

 **Rudy Faust** @RudyFaust · 1d 
Replying to [@RonCharles](#)

Yeah, but I'm sure that his sourdough is middling.

 1   4 

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