

High Fidelity

N.Hornby

November 16-24, 2008

Hornby is born in the early sixties, too young to have really experienced the sixties and thus coming of age in the late seventies. Ten years can make quite a difference when it comes to generations, and Hornby is part of the post post-war generation, for which the last traces of the war had been totally eradicated by the welfare state firmly in place. The book is of course not autobiographical, although it is written as if, following a time-honored literary trick, suggesting to the reader that what follows will be taken from life itself. It all fits chronologically with the author, and indeed, the imagination of most (if not all?) people being limited to the elaboration of their own experience, one may be forgiven to suspect that what follows is if not true in details at least true in spirit.

What is it all about? Growing up. Growing up, we are told, used to be a simple thing. Childhood ending early as the necessities of work intrudes itself. Getting mated was a question of expediency, and children soon followed, continuing a cycle. Nowadays growing up can be made into the dominating project of your life, something you have to optimize, as the chance is but given once. In particular it means finding the perfect mate, and this is an elusive ambition, especially, as with most of us, we are far from perfect ourselves. Hence those successions of girl-friends (or boy-friends) the one replacing the other in a potentially endless cycle involving no improvement, nor any learning from experience, but the same thing going on over and over again, with the initial kick of excitement to be followed by a sustained downwards slope of disillusionment.

But your love life cannot fill up your entire life, if for no other reason that there usually is not enough of it to sustain you through the day, so you need some distraction to while away your time, and in the case of the protagonist it is popular music and its love-struck lyrics. In fact the protagonist, just dumped by his latest girlfriend (and this fact of being ditched is a powerful aphrodisiac), is a forlorn character owning a record store, eking out a precarious living, yet miraculously generating enough revenues to employ two other, even more forlorn characters as assistants. It all is about the trivia of arcane recordings and obscure artists, an obsession creating a body of parodical expertise, creating the *raison d'être* for marginal men just having crossed the chronological margin of youth into their early thirties.

So what is life? A quest for getting the intermittent lay, or better still of being laid, as after all the object is of less importance than the act itself, being in the nature of a confirmation of existence. And the novel starts out with the protagonist's recollection of all his past powerful break-ups addressed to the very woman who have just left him (a more educated and enterprising individual, and the reader cannot help wondering what ever she could see in him) to assure her that he has seen worse.

So the recollection, the brief amorous encounter with an American country-singer (obviously out of his league), the attempts of getting in touch with the past (i.e. former amours) and the unexpected and gratifying reconciliation with his last girlfriend (through

the unlikely venue of her beloved fathers funeral) make up the plot of the novel. In a way it is a moral tale, the protagonist coming in terms with himself and his growing up, coming to the profound conclusion that this process cannot extend indefinitely unto death, but at some point one has to accept imperfection and forego the allures of a diminishing future, making the inevitable compromises between dreams and reality and settle down.

Modern fiction (of say the 90's) is of course very different from modern classical ones (say that of Lawrence in the 20's). In particular it concerns stylistic features. The trend has been towards increased snappiness and simplification catering to a public easily distracted, and hence with far less patience for commitment. Attention spans are supposed to have diminished in accordance with the higher tempo of modern living. And indeed there is little of philosophical digressions, or extended descriptions of locale and weather, instead much dialogue supported by running commentary. What will future generations make of this time, if guided as they would be by fictional representations. Will they be shocked, assuming a future retroaction of life and circumstances (say by exacting environmental degradations), or will they all take it as normal, merely refracting a world of stabilization, in which nothing really happens apart from asymptotic refinements of consuming passions.

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