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### The Next Story to Deserve a Reevaluation

The Canon of English Literature is the “Great Books” list – the complete list of English novels that are considered to be of the greatest worth. Criteria for inclusion into the canon vary; some of the most common types of criteria include age or endurance, influence, tradition, and originality. Not all books are deemed worthy of inclusion into the canon, however. Many novels, including most popular fiction novels, are often deemed too commoditized, lowly, or formulaic to ever be seriously evaluated as canonical. There are, however, many faults to this practice; just because a novel or a series of novels is popular does not mean that it is “formula fiction” – not all popular fiction follows the traditional formula fiction patterns, such as the “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back” story line or the “end of the world as we know it” pattern, only to be sold at grocery store check-out lines and dogged as a sorry attempt at literature. Some popular fiction deserves to be reevaluated as literature that is well-written and potentially worthy of a canonical status. Simply because a work of fiction isn’t deemed extraordinary and canonical immediately following its publication, but is instead something that is perhaps a bit escapist and enjoyed by the masses, does not mean that it is incapable of meeting some of the requirements for inclusion into the canon. Such is the case with British author Jasper Fforde’s *Thursday Next* series of novels. While Fforde’s work contains elements that might be seen as formulaic, it is so remarkably different than anything else currently written that it can be described as nothing other than original. Therefore, while Jasper Fforde’s *Thursday*

*Next* series is popular fiction, it deserves to be reevaluated, for it meets at least one traditional requirement for inclusion into the literary canon – originality.

The world of Fforde's novels is something that's never been seen before – new and fresh, much like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* might have been perceived upon its publication. It is a dual world: partly the real, but alternate, world of England in the 1980s – also referred to as the “Outland” – and partly the “book world”, the world inside novels, with its own police force, government, exchange program, and method for providing authors in the Outland with the ideas necessary to create their stories. The protagonist of Fforde's series is Thursday Next, who in this alternate England is a Crimean War veteran and Literary Detective, responsible for dealing with illegal trading and literary fraud on a good day. She is the owner of a pet dodo, part of an extinct species reengineering program, the wife of a man who was killed as a toddler, the daughter of a corrupt Chronoguard colonel who can travel across time, and sort of a celebrity. Yet, Thursday also has the ability to “book jump”, an ability which also allows her to be a part of the book world. In the book world, she is a member of Jurisfiction, the police force responsible for policing the inside of fiction, lives inside of a novel entitled *Caversham Heights*, and makes friends with the literary characters that the world has come to know and love throughout the ages – characters such as Mr. Rochester, the Cheshire Cat, Miss Havisham, and Hamlet.

The *Thursday Next* series is, therefore, most aptly described as an amalgamation of genres – it is a literary detective novel with a distinctly science fiction twist that features a strong female lead who lives in an alternate reality and struggles with romance. Furthermore, it is extremely comedic – the combination of Fforde's wit and his ability to make fun of society, literary genres, and canonical characters make for quite a fun read. As Margarete Rubik states in her essay on Fforde's parody of *Jane Eyre* in *The Eyre Affair*, Fforde “ingeniously mixes literary

pastiche, satire and subversive humour with hard boiled female detective fiction, fantasy and science fiction into a colourful and intellectually stimulating literary cocktail” (168). There is truly no other way to describe Fforde’s Thursday Next series other than unique and “a firework of fast-paced action and clever literary parody” (Rubik 167). It is stock-full of puns and word play which are pure genius – take, for example, the conniving half-brothers Jack Schitt and Brik Schitt-Hawse who work for the gargantuan Goliath Corporation, or the Hades family, all of whom are pure evil. It takes place in an England where time travel isn’t strange, dodos and mammoths are an ordinary part of life, and literature is the height of culture. It soon becomes evident that literature is the object around which Fforde’s novels function, for “in this 1985, there is a very fine line between literature and life” (Hateley 2005). Yet, it is Fforde’s parody of literary genres and canonical works that make his series truly original.

Parody, or “the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material” (Rose 52), can oftentimes have the negative image of something, whether it is literature, music, or art, which serves no other purpose than to mock the original piece. Yet, not all parody is that base; some parodies can be far more sophisticated or complex than the original work, particularly in literature. As Margaret Rose observes in her text on parody throughout the ages, “Whatever our attitude to comedy, the complicated structure of the more sophisticated parody – in which the target text may not only be satirized but also ‘refunctioned’—nonetheless demonstrates a more subtle (though still comic) use of other literary works” (28 – 29). She goes on to say that “parody may aim both at a comic effect and at the transmission of both complex and serious messages” (Rose 29). Through this description of parody, it soon becomes apparent that Fforde’s work is less of a spoof on canonical and well-known literature and more of a humorous, but intricate, melding of elements from dozens of sources that combine to create an impressive

display of refunctioned texts. Rose continues her definition of parody by saying, “Both by definition...and structurally...most parody worthy of the name is ambivalent towards its target. This ambivalence may entail...the creative expansion of it into something new.” (51) This is precisely why Fforde’s *Thursday Next* series is so original. Even though the novels are comprised of endless parodies and puns of other literature, it has allowed for the creative expansion of the original texts into something new – something totally original and definitely worthy of notice.

Jasper Fforde’s parody of literary genres within his *Thursday Next* series is not immediately obvious, until you realize that certain characters and their novels – Vernham Deane, Emperor Zhark, and Commander Bradshaw are prime examples – are not actual characters from canonical literature, as many of his characters are. They are, however, parodied characters that might be found in stereotypically bad formula fiction. Take, for example, Vernham Deane, the male romantic lead in Daphne Farquitt’s novel, *The Squire of High Potternews*. Daphne Farquitt is nothing more than a figment of Fforde’s imagination, and yet she is just like the stereotypical Harlequin Romance writer who has published seemingly hundreds of books, each of which is just like the others – all formulaic and all reputedly bad. This stereotype has carried over into Fforde’s world and his parody of the Harlequin Romance novels, for even Thursday carries the prejudice against them: “‘This is lunacy, Miss Havisham!’ I replied indignantly. ‘I will *not* fight over a set of Daphne Farquitt novels!’” (Fforde, *Lost in a Good Book* 212). Fforde continues his parody of literary genres with the science fiction Emperor Zhark novels, which are comprised of “weird worlds, tentacled aliens, space travel, and square-jawed fighter aces” (Fforde, *Something Rotten* 156). Zhark is a “pantomime emperor who lived for no other reason than to cause evil and disharmony in the galaxy” (Fforde, *SR* 156). Yet, the audience also gets to see the author,

Handley Paige's, point of view concerning the Zharkian empire: "I did it as a joke – a pastiche of bad science fiction – and blow me down if it isn't the most popular thing I've ever done" (Fforde, *SR* 278). With these fictional friends and co-workers of Thursday, Fforde has humorously and ingeniously parodied the typical romance, science fiction, and adventure formula fiction novels that do exist in the real world outside of Fforde's novels.

Yet, Fforde does not stop his humorous parodies of literature with the truly formulaic fiction. Instead, he goes on to parody the novels and their characters that are about as far from formula fiction as possible – canonical literature. Fforde, however, doesn't seem fazed by the fame, endurance, or love for the characters that he parodies in his *Thursday Next* series – rather, he continues to treat them with the respect that they have garnered over time by making the England of his novels a place where authors and characters have attained celebrity status and literature is the force around which culture seems to revolve. The truly amazing feat that Fforde has accomplished in his parodies of the canon is his ability to rewrite each character and novel with the impressions and thoughts that readers over the ages have developed concerning the canonical works. The characters who are flawed have had their weaknesses capitalized on, the characters who are adored continue to feel as though they are the best friends of those who are reading them, the curious kinks have been worked out, and the "what ifs" and "why nots" have finally been addressed. In this way, his novels are not mocking the novels that are a part of the canon, but are offering a reworking of them – shedding a new light on old characters, so to speak. Therefore, Fforde's parodies are sometimes hilarious and sometimes endearing, but always a breath of fresh air.

Fforde's intention when extensively parodying texts such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* does not seem to be to rewrite them in a modern text, but to reintroduce characters who are

already widely recognized and loved into his novels, so that his audience can see them in a new light. What is different about Fforde's parody of *Jane Eyre*, along with Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Great Expectations*, is that the actions of the characters in the *Thursday Next* series allow originally different versions of the canonical works to transform into the tales that the audience would have read. In this case, Fforde's way of making concepts such as time travel both ordinary and essential to his story has been expanded to "have an effect on fiction within his narrative, thus adding 'alternative fiction' to the 'alternative reality' of the Nextian world" (Berninger and Thomas 184). In Fforde's original version of *Jane Eyre*, for example, Jane decides to go off to India with her cousin, St. John Rivers, and never returns to Thornfield Hall (Fforde, *The Eyre Affair* 271). Within Fforde's world, this is certainly a contentious ending to the beloved Brontë novel; as Thursday puts it, "It is a crap ending. Why, when all was going so well, does the ending just cop out on the reader? Even *Jane Eyre* purists agree that it would have been far better for them to have tied the knot." (Fforde, *TEA* 272). Yet, marriage is exactly what should happen at the end of Brontë's novel. Because Thursday is eventually forced to bring the battle with *The Eyre Affair*'s villain, Acheron Hades, into the world of *Jane Eyre* so that Jane can be saved, enormous changes to Fforde's original version of the novel begin to take place: Hades sets Thornfield on fire, so the fight is taken to the roof of the hall, where Bertha Rochester is thrown off the roof by Hades. Hades is killed by Thursday, and Mr. Rochester's hand and eyesight are maimed while attempting to get Thursday and himself to safety. Following this, Thursday makes the ever-curious call to Jane in mimicry of Mr. Rochester's voice, and Jane and Mr. Rochester are reunited for good. Thus, Fforde produces a parody in which "The alternative version of *Jane Eyre* turns out to be the original and our original is depicted as an alternative version. This produces a half-shocking, half-pleasurable feeling of combined disorientation and

stability” (Berninger and Thomas 188). It also produces a set of novels with something completely new and different to offer to its readers.

Fforde continues his parody of the canonical works through the characters that he reintroduces in Thursday’s world. There are two particular cases of this that speak to the true originality and cleverness that underline the *Thursday Next* series – the characters of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The parody of *Wuthering Heights* in Fforde’s third novel of the series, *The Well of Lost Plots*, is ingeniously funny and addresses many topics which readers over the ages have been left wondering about, even going so far as to have Thursday and Miss Havisham question what on earth Joseph is ever muttering. In the book world, Jurisfiction tries to help the characters of *Wuthering Heights* deal with their emotions, particularly those concerning Heathcliff, through “Jurisfiction Rage Counseling sessions” (Fforde, *The Well of Lost Plots* 124). Thus ensues a hilarious therapy session, including all of the major characters of *Wuthering Heights*, in which they all eventually end up complaining about how Heathcliff ruined their life; all, that is, except Catharine Earnshaw, who claims, “‘I love Heathcliff more than life itself!’” (Fforde, *WLP* 126). Adding to the humor, she later continues, “‘He is a *real* man...a Byronic hero who transcends moral and social law...Group, I am Heathcliff!’” (Fforde, *WLP* 127). Soon, violence threatens to end the therapy session and Heathcliff finally arrives late – much to the dismay of all but Catharine – when an assassination attempt is made on his life. Fforde’s original but eerily apt parodies of canonical characters continues in his fourth novel, *Something Rotten*, with Hamlet, who decides to go back into the real world with Thursday because he was “concerned over reports that he was being misrepresented as something of a ‘ditherer’ in the Outland” (Fforde, *SR* 20 – 21). By the end of the novel, Hamlet has had an affair with Lady Emma Hamilton which, of course, made him

worry about Ophelia most of the time, has worked with a “conflict-resolution consultant”, allowing him to help Thursday save the world from a megalomaniacal politician, and has certainly gone off on a number of tangential monologues. But when it is time for him to go back to Elsinore Castle, he explains to Thursday that he finally understands the appeal of being a “mouthy spoiled brat who can’t make up his mind about anything” because he realizes that, in the real world, his indecision reflects the indecision of all (Fforde, *SR* 371). Fforde, once again worked his magic, for he managed to turn a fictional character’s escapade into the Outland something both hilarious and extremely poignant.

However, simply because much of Fforde’s *Thursday Next* series is stock full of ideas and characters borrowed from canonical literature through the use of parody and is home to many phenomena, such as time travel, that have certainly been used frequently in literature, it does not mean that his work is tired, overused, or unoriginal. Instead, *Thursday Next*’s world is something that has never been seen before and something that is certainly worthy of recognition. Never before have characters from Shakespeare, Dickens, Carroll, Austen, and the nursery rhymes been together at one location; never before have the products of bad formula fiction worked side-by-side with the famous and dearly beloved characters from the canon; never before has a character needed to work so diligently to keep literature the way it is read and loved in the Outland. However, if any of this has ever occurred in fiction, it has likely not been paired with Fforde’s ingenious word play and his obviously extensive understanding of background knowledge – stemming from literature, history, mythology, and perhaps even conspiracy theories – which would be necessary to undertake a series of this caliber and depth. Therefore, even though most of the characters in Fforde’s novels were the product of someone else’s brain, it was Fforde who was capable of combining all of them into a series of novels that not only blurred the

boundary between fiction and reality, as many readers desperately wish they could when curled up with their favorite novels, but also evolved into something totally new and different.

Margaret Rose's idea of "creative expansion" in works of parody has certainly been developed in Fforde's clever use of canonical novels and the world of literature to create an original world for *Thursday Next*.

Jasper Fforde and his *Thursday Next* series should not be automatically dismissed as formula fiction or unworthy of the canon simply because it is popular. Rather, maybe because of the series' popularity and originality, a case can be made for their reevaluation. It seems to be the truth when Mark Berninger and Katrin Thomas states that "Fforde's originality...evades traditional literary terminology" (189). The *Thursday Next* series is not something which can be easily categorized into one neat genre and it is just as unable to be slammed as unworthy of the canon simply because of its popularity. While they are escapist novels that feature stereotypical scenarios and parodies of famous characters, they are still remarkably different from anything else around. That, above all else, is why Fforde's novels deserve to be looked at once more. Like Carroll's world of Alice, *Thursday Next's* world is something truly unique and something worthy of the canon. They might be popular and fun, but they are certainly not bad.

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