

Book Review: The Lives of the Novel: A History by Thomas G. Pavel

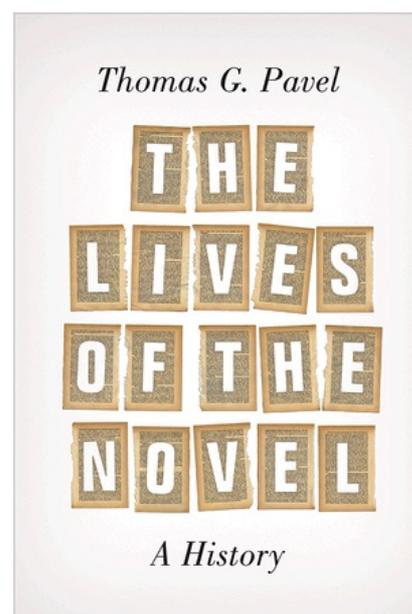
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This book is a history of the novel from ancient Greece to the vibrant world of contemporary fiction. **Thomas Pavel** argues that the driving force behind the novel's evolution has been a rivalry between stories that idealize human behavior and those that ridicule and condemn it. Impelled by this conflict, the novel moved from depicting strong souls to sensitive hearts and, finally, to enigmatic psyches. Pavel makes his case by analyzing more than a hundred novels from Europe, North and South America, Asia, and beyond. **Sophie Franklin** writes that this text presents a cohesive lineage that moves effortlessly from one point to another.



The Lives of the Novel: A History. Thomas G. Pavel. Princeton University Press. September 2013.

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The novel, as [Thomas G. Pavel's](#) *The Lives of the Novel* attests, is an ever-evolving genre. Like any species, it adapts and moulds according to its surroundings. Yet the genre has no fixed destination; it is not progressing in any one direction but more in a multitude of them, steered by the challenges tackled by writers. For Pavel, the environment in which the novel developed from its inchoate ancient Greek beginnings to its apparent monopoly in the current literary market was one of constant rivalry and change. His book aims to 'understand the changing lives of the genre, their secret pact with permanence, and the dialogue engaged in by novelists over the centuries' (p.16). In this sweeping yet intricate study, Pavel has succeeded in his aim, producing a history of the novel that can be placed on a level with such seminal works as Ian Watt's and Mikhail Bakhtin's.

Beginning with the ancient Greek novels, primarily Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*, and the later medieval romances, Pavel set down the foundations of the novel. Early incarnations sought to depict an idealist perception of the world, based more on moral ideals than on real human conduct. The *Ethiopian Story* has been recognised as one of the main sources of inspiration in the novel's progress, particularly due to its sixteenth-century rediscovery and translation. As a series of seemingly random, though as Pavel argues in fact organised and deliberate, events, Heliodorus' idealist novel depicts characters with an 'inner space, the soul', a feature that would re-emerge in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (p.33). Yet perhaps its most significant effect was on Cervantes, whose *Don Quixote* is often deemed the 'first modern novel' (p.114).

The final chapter of the book's first section, entitled 'The Highest Ideals', explores Cervantes' desire to dismantle the idealistic vision of chivalric romances in *Don Quixote*, in order to make way for his Heliodorus-style work, *Persiles and Sigismunda*. This rivalry, between the differing ways of 'conceiving the human ideal' in medieval romance and ancient Greek prose, is at the heart of the novel's conception (p.109). Furthermore, in the act of undermining one subgenre, Cervantes merged others to offer a 'combination of earlier narrative subgenres', something that would become characteristic of the familiar novel's form (p.115). Yet, as Pavel notes, Cervantes did not 'synthesise' these subgenres, unlike eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manifestations (p.115). It was not until these later eras that these subgenres, ranging from the

picaresque to the pastoral, were amalgamated into what we now call 'the novel'.

The



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book's penultimate chapter 'Syntheses, High Points' is perhaps its own high point, due to Pavel's engaging critiques of George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, and Theodor Fontane, to name but a few. This rich, diverse chapter explores the line between the real and the ideal that nineteenth-century writers from across Europe and Russia tried to balance. Eliot's *Middlemarch* gave 'novels the task of celebrating the unknown bearers of the [moral] ideal' (p.230), whilst Tolstoy's *War and Peace* shunned the 'unity of action' which other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels adopted, thereby distancing it from the title of 'novel' (p.231). Despite these texts' apparent differences, this chapter does not lack any 'unity', unlike *War and Peace*. Instead, the numerous threads that the chapter details come together by its end: 'social realism, complex characters, nuanced reflections on love, and accessibility' (p.261). Pavel works through the intricacies of each text slowly, building up their similarities and differences, leading us to the chapter's conclusion that these canonical traits were not limitations but in fact opened up a range of options within the genre from which authors could choose to tackle.

In one of the book's most interesting arguments, Pavel examines the divergent philosophical and theoretical views on the apparent end of history (a topic revisited by Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 essay 'The End of History?' and disputed by Joh Gray in *Straw Dogs*). The respective beliefs of Hegel, Marx, and Comte are outlined as history moving toward a 'happy ending' and art and literature becoming 'obsolete' or 'subordinate' (p.266). Pavel then describes Schopenhauer's more pessimistic vision of history as a relentless 'manifestation of blind Will' which presents a more chaotic and cruel existence (p.266). Yet in the midst of this cynical worldview, art and literature emerge as beacons of hope: they may not 'rule or transform the world'; but these forces free writers 'from the world's bondage' (p.267).

Pavel swerves more towards Schopenhauer's perspective, since his 'Envoi' states that (the novel's) history 'is neither anonymous, nor inevitable, nor arbitrary' (p.297). Instead it is influenced by the deliberate decisions of real people that 'triggered controversies' and created challenges for each new generation of writers (p.297). Unlike Schopenhauer, Pavel's perspective on the novel's history is more optimistic, since it offers endless possibilities for the genre.

The word 'synthesise', as mentioned above, is an important one: not only is the history of the novel about the gradual interweaving of its initially disparate subgenres; Pavel's text itself presents us with a cohesive lineage that moves effortlessly from one point to another. Of course, the history of the novel is much messier and more complex than any single volume can attempt to compress. As the book's conclusion notes, the divisions and rivalries within the novel's development 'make it difficult to find a single main current' in its history (p.298). Yet Pavel ends this engrossing journey through the novel's numerous lives with the observation that, in fact, they are connected by their desire to render the 'ideal visible within a world of transitory, fragile, imperfect human interactions' (p.299).

Pavel's account of the genre's oscillating and overlapping incarnations maintains the history of the novel's necessary complexity, since he resists the temptation to ascribe to it one absolute, limiting principle. What is most astounding is his ability to preserve this complexity with a clarity and thoroughness which will, I hope, place this work amongst the best of its kind.

Sophie Franklin is currently completing her MA in English Literary Studies at Durham University, having graduated from the University of St Andrews in 2013. Her main research interests lie in nineteenth-century literature and society, particularly the Brontës, power, violence, 'thing theory', and representations of gender. For her MA thesis, she is examining the psychological significance of literal and metaphorical windows in George Eliot's novels. Following her graduation from Durham, she hopes to pursue doctoral research on the violence of the Brontës' work. [Read more reviews by Sophie](#).