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ARTICLE

Interview with Mark Watson

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Mark Watson is a British comedian and novelist. His five novels to date – *Bullet Points* (2004), *A Light-Hearted Look At Murder* (2007), *Eleven* (2010), *The Knot* (2012) and *Hotel Alpha* (2014) – explore human relationships and communities in contemporary society. His latest novel Hotel Alpha tells the story of an extraordinary hotel in London and two mysterious disappearances that raise questions no one seems willing to answer. External to the novel, readers can also discover more about the hotel and its inhabitants in one hundred extra stories that expand the world of the novel and can be found at http://www.hotelalphastories.com. In conversation here with Dr Katy Shaw, Mark offers some reflections on his writing process, the field of contemporary literature, and the vitality of the novel form in the twenty-first century.

Keyword: interview

Katy Shaw: *Hotel Alpha* is your fourth novel in ten years. How has your view of novels and novel writing evolved across this time?

Mark Watson: Novel-writing is the sort of pursuit which sets more and more challenges the more accomplished you get – like some computer game which throws tougher and tougher enemies at you. Across the decade of writing, I'd say I have learned an awful lot amount about the process, the technique, the overall craft, but none of this has made the actual writing easier. If anything I'm increasingly conscious of how much further I'd need to improve in order to write the sort of books I dream of. In terms of the novel as a whole, I love it as a form as much as I did ten years ago, but I've got an enhanced understanding of the fact that not everyone in the whole world feels the same way. I used to assume that if you wrote a great book, it would automatically find an audience. I now realise that there are great books everywhere which virtually no-one knows about.

Katy Shaw: Have all your writing projects reached publication or have you experienced any stillborn novels? Why didn't these make it to the final draft?

Mark Watson: No, a couple have ended up as failures: very costly ones from a time and self-esteem point of view. It's hard to say why a book doesn't ultimately make it, but if there's a generalisation you can helpfully make it, it's that perhaps the failed ones are books where you got distracted by trying to write 'about' something – to make some point or explore some weighty topic – rather than telling a story about people. Novels are always about people and the stuff that happens to them. If you take your eyes off that fact, you've got a chance of getting lost.

Or, of course, it might be that the failed ones just weren't good ideas in the first place.

Katy Shaw: You've spoken of your interest in the 'encyclopedic novel' – how does *Hotel Alpha* develop this?

Mark Watson: I've always been attracted to books which set out to capture all human life, not in a neat miniaturist literary-prize sort of way but with a chaotic, almost consciously over-ambitious approach – books like *Infinite Jest*

or *Life A User's Manual* by Georges Perec. But the thing is that those books are often more fun in theory than they actually are to read. Footnotes, digressions, superfluous information about minor characters . . . all these sorts of devices are important in the task of encapsulating life's essentially unmanageable, chaotic nature, but they can also annoy the hell out of a reader (and bulk a book out to 1,000 pages or so). What I tried to do with the short-story half of *Hotel Alpha* was to create something which acknowledges the complexity of even a simple story like the history of a hotel, by going back and peering at 100 aspects of it which otherwise wouldn't make it into the book. The internet allows us to do this without being tied down physically; without forcing it on the reader. (Some of this, looking at it, covers the question two down).

Katy Shaw: The hotel has been a long term site of fascination for writers – what inspired you to set a contemporary novel in an old London hotel? Does the text consciously seek to interact with and develop the 'hotel novel' sub-genre?

Mark Watson: At the most basic level, what inspired me was probably the fact that I've spent so much time in so many hotels that it would be weird if I DIDN'T write about them. On a literary level, you can't help seeing the hotel as a near-perfect setting: anything can happen there, no one knows who anyone is, and everyone is held in strange proximity while remaining separate. Plus, the sheer range of human activity in a hotel makes it the perfect place for the sort of many-little-stories grandstanding I mentioned above. But I don't think I consciously tried to engage with the tradition of hotel books that already exists. It's not a great idea to think too much about the vast body of work you're adding to: you could easily be too discouraged to bother even starting.

Katy Shaw: In interview, you have suggested that the internet 'removes the physical constraints of the novel' – what do you mean by this and how does *Hotel Alpha* respond to it?

Mark Watson: The way *Hotel Alpha* works is that there are 100 short stories, all relating to the hotel in some way, which can be read (in any order, in any

quantity) on a website after the physical novel is over. I think what I meant by the 'physical constraints' remark is what I was talking about in the answer above. Because of the internet it is possible for me to write a book which comes in at an enormous word count, offers a huge range of action and detail peripheral to the central story – yet doesn't have to be a massive tome designed to sit on a shelf (at best). The non-physical space of the internet means that news reports can go into undreamed-of levels of detail; TV shows can give you a series in a single day; and so on. None of this is without its pitfalls, but at the very least, the novel needs to acknowledge the fact that storytelling is a different game in a world where a 'book' itself no longer has to mean a bound volume in your hands. Having said that. . . (continues below)

Katy Shaw: Is the novel no longer enough of an offer for contemporary readers and a market saturated with increasingly long and complicated texts?

Mark Watson: . . . no, I think I'll always maintain that the novel IS enough for anyone. The market might be saturated, but it doesn't diminish the value of the form. Hardly anything is better than a really great novel, and no amount of technological wonderment will change that. But every artform has to adapt to the world it's talking to/about, and we live in an age in which the internet is no longer a mere interesting phenomenon but one of the major shaping forces in our lives. It doesn't mean every book has to address it, but it is there to be addressed.

Katy Shaw: *Hotel Alpha* offers a mediation between+ the short story and novel form. Have you experienced any tensions crossing these forms in a single text?

Mark Watson: I was able to have my cake and eat it – the stories are linked to the main novel, but they exist independently enough that the texts don't get in each other's way. The main problem is, simply, that it's a bit much for some people, or at least feels a bit much. When you emerge from a novel, you're quite likely not in the mood for a raft of smaller stories on the same theme. So it's only the more ambitious reader who's ever likely to mine the book for all it's worth, but you have to write with that spirited few in mind.

Katy Shaw: *Hotel Alpha* and its accompanying extra narratives are enabled by technology, but a reluctance to progress, technophobia and a fear of change occupy many of its characters. How and why does the novel attempt to mediate a pivot-point of technological advancement?

Mark Watson: I think the characters' differing relationships with technological progress probably average out somewhere around my own: I'm fascinated by the places computers are leading us, but – on a more quotidian level – often frustrated as hell by the fact I can't get them to start up. The internet and all its sub-phenomena are among the most amazing things ever conceived by humans, but the flipside of that amazement is paranoia and bemusement. Inasmuch as the novel directly comments on the rise of the virtual – which isn't all that much, because a novel is not an opinion piece – its aim to distil some of this complex mixture of emotions brought to bear by the meeting of humans with humans' inventions.

Katy Shaw: In an afterword to the novel, you tell readers they can choose to 'ignore' the additional 100 stories. So why not just publish the novel as a stand-alone narrative? What would readers lose if they do choose ignore these 'shadow tales'?

Mark Watson: They'd lose out on half the whole story, in a way: on a swathe of background and anecdotal material and on a lot of 'bonus' stuff which helps to make up the soul of the overall work. But they wouldn't miss out on anything essential to the core of the main novel. So the short stories are in one sense a key part of the book; in another sense, entirely missable. That's why they're published separately, yet in a way which ties them to the main book. And the fact the reader's free to read or ignore the stories reflects *Hotel Alpha*'s engagement with the world the internet generation lives in. We can have as much culture/knowledge/information as we want, instantly; or we can discard it all and play Angry Birds instead. Again, this is neither good nor bad. But it is an important way in which our culture is different from any previous time in human history.

Katy Shaw: To what extent do they '100 stories' offer an engagement with social consumerism and the rise of e-reading, platform surfing and the familiarity of

readers with postmodern and post-postmodern narrative fragmentation? Is *Hotel Alpha* a statement on the future of narrative prose?

Mark Watson: A little play on the idea of modern narrative fragmentation: yes. But a statement on the future, no. I've got no idea what the long-term effects of e-reading and so on might be, and I don't think it's the business of a novel to make predictions (not one of my novels, anyway: it worked out pretty nicely for Orwell). All I will say is that I don't think the changing face of the book ought to be a cause of fear for literature itself. People continue to want stories and they will continue to read. The gap between reading from the page, and reading on an e-reader or even online, is not so great really – it still all comes down to the love of the word. The gap between reading and other forms of entertainment: that's what we should be worrying about.

And more boring but kinda staple stuff. . .

Katy Shaw: The life of the stand-up comic and the life of the novelist seem to have many similarities. To what extent has your experience of novel writing informed or shaped the writing of your stand up?

Mark Watson: They're two pretty much separate disciplines for me, because when it comes to a stand-up show I don't really commit anything to paper. I mould comedy shows by a process of trial and error which is pretty much entirely conducted in front of audiences. Book-writing, by contrast, is a solitary pursuit for nearly anyone, and especially for me: I don't let anyone set eyes on work until it's at a fairly polished stage. So the two processes don't so much inform each other as act as two complimentary forces, giving me two different kinds of writerly satisfaction.

Katy Shaw: Have you ever been tempted to publish under a pen name to avoid the (often lazy) reviews that draw on your work as a stand up to judge your literary works?

Mark Watson: Yes, actually I have – because, as you say, it's much more difficult to establish your literary credentials when people are used to seeing you as a chirpy panel-show chap, and the book world is even less flexible in these matters than I imagined it would be. But I remain hopeful that there's an audience which is capable

of enjoying stand-up comedy and/or reading books, without seeing an inherent contradiction between the two. Also, my mum would be so disappointed.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.