

Review: The pleasure and usefulness of chasing after curiosity and its risks. Tim Parks, The Novel: A Survival Skill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 185 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-873959-3.

Tim Parks does not just provide an analysis about the work of some of the most prominent authors in literature. Nor does he present a biographical essay connecting these authors to their novels, finding links between events of their lives and core aspects of their narratives. He creates, and invites us to explore, an emotional geography connecting author, book, reader.

It is far from a politically correct operation. Parks does not even pretend to be neutral, he does not shy away from digging into personal (and not entirely edifying) details, and is often unfair with the authors he puts under his lens, including himself. Everything, in *The Novel: A Survival Skill*, is personal. Puzzled at first, the reader eventually accepts Parks' subtle invitation to give up balance in favour of curiosity, and discovers a sense of authenticity in it.

It would be simple to say that novels have a life of their own. Nonetheless, it would be dramatically wrong, according to Parks' perspective. Parks considers the novel as a significant part of the author's life, embedded in the emotional world he lives in. It is a condensed molecule of the author's unspoken intentions, desires and fears.

Parks deals with the novel in a very similar way to how family therapists deal with symptoms. According to Ugazio (2013), symptoms are meaningful manoeuvres within an intersubjective dilemma, involving the patient and his significant relationships. Likewise, Parks sees the novel as something that writers do to solve an existential dilemma, to protect and promote a balance, or to challenge one. For this reason, Parks tells us, a novel is not necessarily a good thing, but it is always something that connects the writer to his own life and, through the emotional exchange involved, to the reader's life.

Parks explicitly recognizes his debt to Ugazio's semantic polarities clinical model (2013). I am fond of Ugazio's model, but I confess I am sceptical when a clinical approach is transferred to other fields, since the core element of the model is often lost in the process. This is definitely not the case with Parks' essay. The author displays a deep and sophisticated understanding of Ugazio's theory, as he is able to demonstrate how emotions, values and relational aptitudes of an author are embedded in his novels. Conversely, applying Ugazio's model does not make the novel itself disappear, as often happens when you try to fit art into theory. Parks is able to dance between aesthetic sensitiveness and theoretical competence, in a very enriching way.

There are several reasons why I would recommend *The Novel: A Survival Skill* to readers of JFT, and to family therapists overall.

First of all, Gregory Bateson (1972) would have undoubtedly appreciated the relational nature of subjectivity this essay conveys. The novel, according to Parks, is not born in a vacuum, and

is far from being the creation of a solitary mind. A novel happens in the world, generated within the network of relationships surrounding the author.

For the same reason, it recalls Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967) in the way Parks shows us that a book is a message within a system. As such, a novel has consequences, 'pragmatic effects' (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967; Palazzoli, Cecchin, Boscolo and Prata, 1980), we might say, that impact on the author's choices, and reverberate in his whole world.

Even more important, being a systemic family therapist (and a reader of the *Journal*) myself, I think there is a merciless grace in the way Parks deconstructs prejudice and common knowledge about the relationship between a writer and his novel. A family therapist should use this same kind of merciless wisdom in deconstructing all the 'terrible simplifications' (Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, [1973] 2011) that paralyse families into their own view of the problem.

This leads us to the ultimate and possibly most important message that a family therapist may get from this essay. When he writes about Hardy, Dickens or Joyce, and especially when he writes about himself, Parks is politically incorrect, argumentative, perhaps even defiant. Nonetheless, he manages to give us such a strong sense of the emotional connection between novels and lives that we end up loving these authors even more. Surely, we know them more in depth, and with such an intimate sense of connection that we can 'feel' them.

This is the kind of empathy, I, as a therapist, always seek. It comes from the effort of understanding. And understanding someone cannot be an act of political correctness. It often means getting your hands dirty. Parks' *The Novel: A Survival Skill* performs the dangerous act of empathy in a way we can surely learn from. For psychotherapy, this tends to be an era of compromise and integration, in which family therapists can easily be tempted by putting political correctness before knowledge and change. Parks' essay sounds like a call to once again discover the pleasure and usefulness of chasing after curiosity and its risks.