

## What's the Matter with *Jarrettsville*? Genre Classification as an Opportunistic Construct

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### **Abstract**

The study of genre classifications within creative industries typically orients toward the maintenance of order within organizational and institutional contexts. This study takes up the case of *Jarrettsville*, a work of fiction published in the United States in Fall 2009 to highlight prevalent disorders and debates in the development of a work of fiction. What looks like a clear and ordered process of genre assignment after-the-fact may actually contain a wealth of negotiations, strategic practices, and decisions to be made. In short, the assignment of genres can be conflicted, debated and opportunistic. As a work of culture is transmuted into a piece of commerce, cultural workers must navigate the interplay between text and context, and sometimes with competing agendas. When texts don't fit a preferred context, the text itself may change. And when the context of the texts' fabrication as a piece of commerce does not fit the text, contexts must be mediated as well.

This case study highlights these processes in action.

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### A Novel Must Be Many Things

For Cornelia Nixon, *Jarrettsville* (2009) was first a family story. The novel would become a work of historical fiction, or literary fiction, or something skewed toward popular fiction that might garner readers to match Nixon's awards. Or perhaps it would become somewhat of a romance novel, or too much of a romance novel. For Charlie Winton, the CEO of *Jarrettsville's* publisher, Counterpoint Press, the novel would be reminiscent of *Cold Mountain*; an investment in a second chance at catching lightning in a bottle. For Adam Krefman, *Jarrettsville's* editor, the novel was an intimate examination of a one-time secondary character's failings, his inability to do the right thing, and the actions and mistakes that young men like Krefman might uncomfortably occasionally relate to. For Krefman — at first, at least — the novel was also not just the novel. It was instead *the* novel written by *the* wife of a poet he admired and who had connections, like him, to the publishing house he yearned to work for again. These were not his primary motivations in advocating for *Jarrettsville* at Counterpoint Press. The novel was in his estimation a great novel, but it was also *the* novel written by *the* woman he had met casually at a reading several weeks before, which was notwithstanding important in his evaluation. For Counterpoint's publicity staff, and for the regional field reps at Counterpoint's distributor, *Jarrettsville* was literary historical fiction. It was "literary" because both Nixon and Counterpoint were "literary," and it was historical fiction not only because the story was historical and a work of fiction, but also because "historical fiction" existed as a market category. Importantly, *Jarrettsville* was not just in the market category of historical fiction, but it was *Civil War* historical fiction, a stable and dependable market category. That the entire story took place after the conclusion of the Civil War, while acknowledged, was mostly incidental.

For reviewers, the novel would be about the unresolved race problem in the United States, or the still lingering tensions of the Civil War, or an exquisite story about social conventions, emotional connections, and the human experience. Or the novel was a failed effort rife with historical inaccuracies. For one reviewer the novel was reminiscent of Tolstoy and even worth reading for the impressive quality of the prose alone. For another, the writing was so bad it was "timeless." For a book group of women readers in Nashville, TN the novel was compared to what they jokingly referred to as the "The Bible," *Gone with the Wind*. For a book group of men in Massachusetts,

it was too flowery and an opportunity to think about if a woman can rape a man. For the nurses in San Francisco *Jarrettsville* was about the history of one of the club's members who actually grew up in Jarrettsville, Maryland. For the teachers in Santa Barbara, it was about readers' own stories about racism in America. For the mothers of young twins, it was about the relationships between men and women. For the lawyers and their friends in Santa Cruz it was about if juries can break from a judge's guidelines and create their own convictions or acquittals for their own reasons. "Is 'justifiable homicide' something that a jury can use, doesn't that seem crazy?" a poet asked. "It's rare, but juries can do whatever they want," a lawyer replied. For the young women in Berkeley, *Jarrettsville* was not just about the two main characters' relationship, it was also about *their* relationships. For the men in San Francisco the novel was a chance to learn more about a similar story in one of their members' family history, a family story he too had investigated and written; if only briefly *Jarrettsville* wasn't so much about *Jarrettsville* but something someone was reminded of and chose to share. For readers in present day Jarrettsville, MD the story wasn't about long dead people whose graves were right down the road, the story was about them. In the last one hundred and thirty years had Jarrettsville changed, or was it still like *Jarrettsville*? Some things had remained the same. "So, are we Northerners or Southerners?" The first question of the morning book club rang out and was met by a meditative pause. The women, in a conference room in the new Jarrettsville branch of the Harford County Library and across the street from rolling fields of sunflowers that were both idyllically pastoral and an investment in bird feed as a cash crop, launched into a discussion of where they live and who they are. But for Cornelia Nixon *Jarrettsville* was first and foremost a family story. For a novel to be a novel — for it to be written by an author, and to make it through a literary agency and into a publishing house and out the other end, and for it to be promoted by a publicity staff and hand-sold in bookstores and evaluated by reviewers and connected with by readers — it must be multiple. A novel must be many things.

*Jarrettsville* was not *just* these things to all these people, it was *also* these things to all these people. It was a personal story, a work of fiction, a work of Civil War historical fiction, a salable commodity, and a chance to reboot a career. It was an opportunity to re-activate embedded social ties within an industry around a new product, a text that had to be finished before a meeting, a leisure activity, a break from life that was "perfect cross-country flight" length. It was a story that was really about a relationship between a mother and a daughter, a story that was, according to two women on opposite ends of the country who had never met and who were both dissuaded from this interpretation, really about the U.S. occupation of

Iraq. *Jarrettsville* was also moonlighting contract work for a copy-editor, another chance to flex a different muscle for the cover designer of travel books, and the day job of an Editor in Chief. The ultimate structure of the novel came through a publisher's rejection letter, the first sentence of the finished novel from an editor. The title came about through an act of friendship. The scene of Martha Jane Cairnes, the protagonist of the novel and an ancestor of Nixon, in her dress shooting a bottle off a fence from a photo of the Nixon's mother that she kept upon her writing desk. Nicholas' McComas' arm, a beautiful arm, was the description of the arm of one of Nixon's students. The setting of a conversation in the trees between Martha and her friend, former family slave, and suspected father of her child, Tim, came from an old memory of the backyard of Nixon's future husband's parents' house. Even Tim himself, his mother based on a woman from Nixon's childhood, emerged through a single sentence in a court transcript noting that there were rumors that Martha's child did not come from Nick, but came from a married man, or another man, possibly a freed slave. Martha's brother's beating of her fiancé, Nick, came from the historical record. There was no actual record of Richard Cairnes beating Nicholas McComas, but according to the Black Codes, a white man could legally whip another white man for having sexual relations with his property. None of this is to say that the creative acts of writing and promoting and selling and reviewing and reading *Jarrettsville* were unconstrained. They were confined by what was possible. They were constrained by what could have happened in Jarrettsville at the time, by the historical record in cases where there was one, by Nixon's experiences, training, and method, the feedback she received, the demands of the publishing house, the length and format of twenty-first century "book length" fiction, the variety of generic conventions of the time.

### **Genre Assignment and the Negotiation of Text and Context**

To grasp the potential multiplicity of novels I focus on the genre conventions through which *Jarrettsville* was created and received. I leave genre to be loosely defined as a semi-stable, often amorphous but mutually-constitutive and ritualized code of classifications through which works of fiction are made sense of at different points in their life cycles. As the designations of genres are ontologically subjective, they exist as a form of contested terrain, both within creative industries in which their assignments serve as shorthand for action, and in the collaborative meaning making practices of readers. Genre descriptions are one way in which creative acts can be temporarily tethered and pinned down to serve immediate goals and purposes, they can be "cultural anchors" that are used to make sense of texts. Yet the assignment of genre labels to cultural texts is much

more than a unidirectional process of “pinning down” meaning. The contested nature of both genre classifications and textual interpretation belies a reliance on mere *a priori* decision making when establishing what a work of fiction “is.” Instead, the application of a genre to a creative act requires decision making. While creative industries may prefer fixed and clear genre assignments — they normalize institutional processes and are good for targeting market categories and ultimately garnering high sales — what looks like a clear and ordered process of genre assignment after-the-fact may actually contain a wealth of strategic practices. The assignment of genre can be conflicted, debated and opportunistic. It can be mediated through the dual forces of need and possibility. As a work of culture is transmuted into a piece of commerce, cultural works must navigate the interplay between text and context, and sometimes with competing agendas. When texts don’t fit a preferred context, the text itself may change. And when the context of the texts’ fabrication as a piece of commerce don’t fit the text, contexts must be mediated as well. This case-study highlights these processes in action.

### **From Culture to Commerce**

Cornelia Nixon’s first pass at what would become *Jarrettsville* was told entirely from Martha’s perspective, and was appropriately titled *Martha’s Version*. It was Nixon’s third novel. Her first novel, *Now You See It*, had received a glowing review from Michiko Kakutani, the hugely influential critic at the *New York Times*, although it had not sold well. This is not to say that Kakutani’s review did not help Nixon, as it appeared as a blurb advocating for the quality of Nixon’s writing on her next two books as well. The cultural and social capital of Kakutani’s approval carried through Nixon’s career, opening doors, and adding to the pile of accomplishments that signal Nixon as a “serious” writer within the industry. Nixon’s second novel, *Angels Go Naked*, was published by Counterpoint Press, and it too received strong reviews but did not sell well. It sold so poorly that Jack Shoemaker, Editorial Director at Counterpoint, could not justify reprinting the novel in a paperback edition, straining the relationship between Nixon and Counterpoint. In the late twentieth century, after the “hardback revolution” spawned through the acquisition of hardback houses by paperback houses and the growth of chain booksellers, paperbacks were a second chance at life for books, and a second chance *Angels Go Naked* never received. “I always felt bad about that,” Shoemaker would say a decade later, “we’re hoping the sales of *Jarrettsville* will be strong enough to warrant to the release of *Angels* in paperback.” While book publishing is a business based on social relationships, the social relationships and the business they’re based on frequently don’t align. These forces must be mediated, and when

they become discordant, efforts must be made to bring them back into harmony. Shoemaker hoped that *Jarrettsville* could repair both the social and business damage done by *Angels*.

Cornelia Nixon wrote *Martha's Version* knowing that the story had the potential to be popular. She had first heard the story from her mother while on an airplane at the age sixteen, about how one of her ancestors, Martha Jane Cairnes, had shot and killed her fiancé, while pregnant with his child, in front of 50 eye-witnesses during a parade celebrating the fourth anniversary of the surrender at Appomattox in a border town in Northern Maryland following the Civil War. In a courtroom stacked with Southern sympathizers, Martha, who was of Rebel family and quite possibly the brother of a member of John Wilkes Booth's militia, was found innocent of killing her Union soldier fiancé on the ad-hoc grounds of "justifiable homicide." Cornelia Nixon had the career that any author would dream of, save for books that sold well. She had steady income from a professorship in English, glowing reviews in all of the major within-industry and popular press publications, and she had won numerous awards, including two Pushcart Prizes, for her short stories. But she had not attracted readers. Until this point, she had been a career mid-list author, embraced in the rarefied world of fiction writers who had their work consistently accepted for publication and celebrated upon release, but not among the even-more rarefied world of "lead" authors. "Mid-list" author is a type of author, a generic classification for authors whose books are deemed worthy of publication, but not worthy of full commercial promotion. As the market for book-length fiction tightened through the 1990s and 2000s, mid-list authors with poor sales records even found themselves at a disadvantage compared to first time authors; for the latter, an editor could at least argue that there *was no* sales track record for a publishing house to base their expectations on.

But Nixon knew that the story of *Martha's Version* had the potential to be popular, and she wrote it both with this knowledge and the trajectory of her career in mind. She also used her training as a scholar whose first book was an academic treatise published by the University of California Press on the work of D.H. Lawrence to inform the research process for her first foray into historical fiction. Yet *Martha's Version* was rejected by upwards of twenty publishers, the first major failing of Nixon's career, and the weak sales for her previous culturally celebrated novels surely played a role. In the rejection letters for *Martha's Version* — evaluations of the novel within the various genres it was interpreted to embody — were a series of often contradictory concerns. There was something wrong with *Martha's Version*, but what that exactly was couldn't quite be pinned down. Was the novel "commercial" or "literary"? Was it "good"

historical fiction or “bad” historical fiction, or was it *too* historical even? At one of the most powerful publishing firms of literary fiction in the United States, the concern was precisely that “it seemed to straddle the line between literary and commercial to [us].” At another literary house it “seemed more plot-driven than character-driven,” easily decodable euphemisms for saying the work was too commercial and not literary enough.

Also troubling was the identification of the work as historical fiction. For one editor Nixon was “a lovely, lovely writer, and [in *Martha’s Version*] she has captured this period and setting just perfectly, but without any of the self-consciousness I often find in historical novels,” despite other concerns. For another “Cornelia Nixon is obviously a gifted writer, but *Martha’s Version* did not seem to soar above its category, the usual realm of historical fiction, through voice or sensibility.” Yet another editor found in the novel “the usual problem I have with period fiction.” The quality of fiction was also questioned by an editor who wrote “while the story remains historically accurate, it might not be satisfying or fulfilling enough for a fiction reader.” Another editor, recognizing Civil War historical fiction as a saleable category noted “I do worry that the language isn’t quite powerful enough to make this novel competitive in the crowded market of Civil War literature.” Of course, working within a genre category with dependable sales also leads to more competition for those sales. Despite fully praising the novel, an editor explained in rejecting the manuscript that “I think this would compete too much with one of our upcoming lead fiction titles... (it’s also a historical novel based on a real incident during the Civil War).” Yet falling within the more general category of fiction was also a problem for *Martha’s Version*, as an editor opined, “Still and all, it’s a very well-done novel and if I weren’t so over scheduled with fiction right now, I might feel more comfortable pursuing. But the fact is I just have to be so careful right now.” And finally, for one publisher of literary fiction, the concern was that the novel may be confused for what is general anathema to a house with literary sensibilities, the dreaded and disregarded if widely selling genre of “romance”fiction: “It was the love story itself that bothered me. I know we’re dealing with Martha’s ‘version’, but the writing seemed overwrought, over-romantic, unlike Nixon’s style when she was relating the courtroom scenes.”

It was in this last rejection letter, the one that noted that *Martha’s Version* was “over-romantic,” that mentioned “And though it’s not possible to get inside Nick’s head, it was a letdown to be left with the feeling that he’s not much more than your stereotypical cad.” Nixon took this disappointment and came to a conclusion about the problem with *Martha’s Version*, the problem being that it solely was Martha’s version of the story. Because *Martha’s Version* was a work of

fiction, the editor was wrong. It was possible to get inside Nick's head. The question of why Nick left his pregnant fiancée in Jarrettsville for the isolation of the Quaker countryside went unanswered in *Martha's Version* because Martha never knew the answer to the question. But there was an answer. Nixon had just failed to create it. She went back through her notes and rewrote the entire book at a torrid pace, with the first third of the story now told from Martha's perspective, the next third from Nick's, and the final third a recounting of what happened and the trial of Martha Jane Cairnes told from the perspective of other residents in the town. Nixon later noted that she didn't originally write from Nick's perspective because at the time she didn't understand Nick's perspective, "sometimes men do things, I don't know why." The challenge to figure out why Nick had done the things he'd done became a great accomplishment for her and he became one her favorite characters she'd ever written: "*Martha's Version* not getting published is one of the best things that has ever happened to me, the book is so much better now." *Martha's Version*, no longer Martha's version, became *Jarrettsville*, a title suggested by a member of her writing group ("why not just call it *Jarrettsville*?" Nixon recalled), and *Jarrettsville* was a novel not only about the people but about the place and its structural effects upon them. Counterpoint Press accepted the novel for publication in a two sentence email to Nixon's agent, "We have great enthusiasm for *Jarrettsville*. I'd like to discuss it further with you." By convention, acceptance letters, which unlike rejection letters do not require explanation, are frequently much shorter.

But Counterpoint Press was not without its own concerns. Counterpoint Press is a literary publisher. As an editor at Counterpoint explained the types of books the press publishes, "I don't know, not highbrow, but well written fiction and nonfiction, not so much 'genre' stuff...there has to be a literary quality to the writing, a book would have to be really special for us to do that." The genre of "literary fiction" is often defined through negation. Work labeled "genre" fiction such as mysteries or thrillers or romance novels are not "literary fiction." When describing what literary fiction is publishing employees often fall back on its ineffable qualities. As one employee noted, "would Justice Stewart's definition of pornography suffice for your purposes [of understanding what literary fiction is]? 'You know it when you see it.'" As a genre, literary fiction is colloquially defined as being *sui genre*, although this classification is surely more celebratory than real.

Yet in other ways the genre spanning divide between "popular" and "literary" that could be attributed to *Jarrettsville* was quite right for Counterpoint as well. The firm's Publisher and CEO, Charlie Winton, had started his career in distribution and had a



better sense than many publishers for both the demands on booksellers and their preferences; he had a trained eye toward the need of commercial appeal. In turn, the firm's Editorial Director, Jack Shoemaker, is an "old school" publisher, an avuncular arbiter of taste, known for his work with celebrated poets like Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder. As a publishing professional who regularly worked with Counterpoint said of the firm, "Charlie really gets the industry and what sells well, while Jack is off buying Buddhist poetry and doesn't care what sales figures are as long as the books are great." That these two men respect each other and work so well together not only make Counterpoint somewhat unique, but also made it the right home for a novel like *Jarrettsville*.

Also of note in the marriage of Counterpoint and *Jarrettsville* is that Counterpoint Press is an independent press. They operate on smaller margins than the conglomerate firms, rely on more streamlined operations and smaller advances, and focus on the money that can be made off of what would be thought of as mid-list or failing books at larger firms. According to an industry insider, authors like Nixon are also "kind of their strategy, taking great authors whose work has been neglected and trying to resurrect their careers." As the conglomerates shied away from mid-list authors, a market niche opened in which smaller presses could compete without being forced to compete over advances. Even the economic downturn and what was thought to be a flat-to-declining book market in 2008 and 2009 could be good for a place like Counterpoint, because as Winton theorized, "the advances at the majors have to come down, and that's good for us...we can compete for authors, we might be able to attract some authors we couldn't get before." Counterpoint Press is a literary publisher, but one with a particularly keen eye toward the overlap of popular appeal. As such, *Jarrettsville* was their type of book, and Nixon, with all of her accolades and limited sales, was their type of author.

Yet the balance between "literary" and "popular" had to be just right. The lists of publishing houses are a duality in that firms both create a publishing list and their identities are created by them. The identity of a firm is an amalgamation of the books they choose to publish, and if the boundaries between high status "literary" fiction and low status "romance" fiction are impregnable, "literary" work that could be confused for "popular" work or vice-versa is a Counterpoint book, whereas "literary" work that could be confused for "romance" work is not. As a result the possible incompatibility of a literary fiction novel which could be confused for a romance fiction novel was a concern. Counterpoint agreed to publish *Jarrettsville* under the condition that Nixon rearranged the structure of the book. The first section of the manuscript, written from Martha's perspective, covers the courting period between Martha and Nick, a love affair taking

place through letters and secret meetings in fields of flowers. Of course, romance fiction is partially defined through its happy endings, and *Jarrettsville* has anything but a happy ending. The end of the love affair is Martha murdering Nick, her trial, her regret, and her bastard child who left town at first possibility and who rejected collection of her possessions upon her death. But the beginning of the book could indeed be confused for a romance novel. As told by Adam Krefman, the editor at Counterpoint who worked with Nixon on *Jarrettsville* and provided a solution to this potential problem:

*“Everything was really strong about it but I had almost, the Martha section... at one point I thought it was sort of like a sappy paperback Daniel Steele kind of thing and I got really nervous that it was not publishable [with Counterpoint], but I knew who Cornelia Nixon was and I just kind of gave her the credit that this was going to be a good story... So then I got to the next part, [Nick’s section,] and it’s really good and...the tension starts to build and you really start to squirm. The big editorial question was how to keep the reader interested past Martha’s, past her very romantic section? So the way that I suggested doing that was... I said ‘let’s bring in about four or five of those peripheral characters [from the end of the novel] and move them to the front and you get about 25 pages of tension just after the murder.’ You get this weird sense that something terribly wrong happened. You don’t really have the details, you don’t know exactly what happened so you’re drawn in and then you get this love story but you kind of know that Martha has killed him... You split [the end] apart and...it takes what was a sappy love section and puts a really weird dark element to it hopefully...Then you’re not blindsided by a murder when you’re reading a love story.”*

Nixon agreed to Krefman’s suggestion. Both as a professor of creative writing and through her experiences in a writing group, the benefits of work-shopping stories were not lost on her. Given both Krefman’s creative suggestion and Nixon’s creative ability to enact his suggestion within the text, a novel that may have been initially confused for a romance novel, and therefore, not something that Counterpoint could publish, became a “Counterpoint book,” both in sensibility and reality. Yet questions of the boundaries between literary fiction, popular fiction, historical fiction, and romance fiction — and the potential to assign these genre categories to the text of *Jarrettsville* — still persisted. How was an industry to make sense of a celebrated literary author who had written a book with popular appeal, a book that begins as a burgeoning love affair within a field of flowers and is ultimately about racism, the unforgettable divisions of the Civil War, and a murder?

At the presales distribution meeting at Publishers Group West, questions of how to make sense of *Jarrettsville's* genre were largely enacted through its cover. In the intervening months, due both to *Jarrettsville's* overlapping literary quality and potential for public appeal and positive response to the novel from industry intermediaries from outside the firm, *Jarrettsville* had become Counterpoint's lead fiction title for the fall 2009 publishing season. It was Winton's background in distribution that allowed this to happen. He was against the practice of swiftly anointing lead titles, and instead, fostered a belief in being circumspect, judging the early responses to new titles within the industry, and identifying lead titles as they emerged. This distinction for *Jarrettsville* as a lead title and not a mid-list title meant both the novel and its packaging and design would receive increased attention at the pre-sales distribution meeting.

The front cover of *Jarrettsville* contains a silhouette of Martha Cairnes laid over a landscape of the region with a gun much like the one she used to murder McComas across the top and above the title. For the cover designer of the novel, the cover worked from a design perspective as it naturally leads the eye in a backwards "S" shape; from the butt of the gun to its tip, sweeping back down across the title, and back again across Nixon's name at the bottom. This was not the designer's personal favorite from the potential covers she had created, but she knew it would be selected by the firm. Her favorite cover was thought to be "too historical" and not popular enough. A previous iteration of what would become the cover was also changed so that the landscape would be more reflective of Jarrettsville, MD (see figure 1).

With regards to what would ultimately become the cover, in a distribution meeting at Publishers Group West Charlie Winton noted with a slight smirk, but not entirely un-seriously, that "Our thinking is that the gun might attract men, and the picture of Martha might bring in women." As a newly minted lead fiction title *Jarrettsville* again had to be multiple. A lily pad, with stylized ripples also drawing the eye in a backwards "S" shape, had been placed below the title. What was it and why was it there? Was it too feminine to attract male readers? How could they signal that the book was Civil War fiction and not a Western, another genre of historical fiction. Might they replace the lily pad with two crossed flags, the Union Jack and the Rebel Flag, both defeminizing the cover and clarifying the story as taking place around the Civil War? This idea was dismissed as too literal, too on the nose, too trashy, and not literary enough for the balancing required of a book like *Jarrettsville*. The lily pad, also used to break up sections in the book, remained.

The next question pertained to putting a blurb for the book on

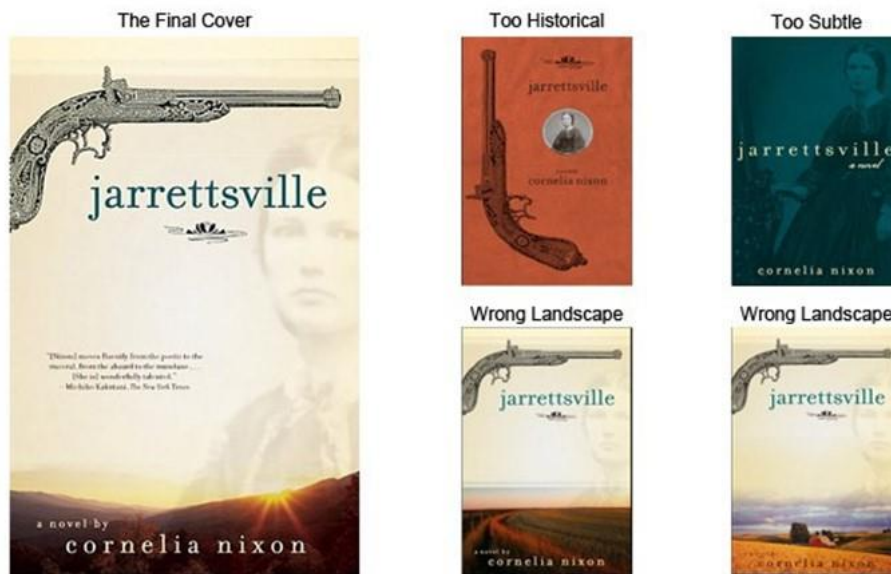
the front cover. "Is that acceptable [for serious literary works] these days?" People around the room offered examples of other literary books which had recently done so. The category of "literary" is in itself unstable, the job of insiders to stay on-trend in its developments. As the lead fiction title, the book was expected to sell, it would be receiving increased promotion and publicity, and despite the popular maxim, people do judge books by their covers. Some estimates claim that covers can be responsible for up to 15% of sales. In an industry in which advertising directly to consumers is quite rare, treating front and back covers as advertising real estate is an important tool in the arsenal of publishers. If it was acceptable for works of literary fiction to engage in what was once the sole domain of market oriented popular fiction (i.e., the practice of putting blurbs on the front cover), then by all means, a blurb should go on the front cover of *Jarrettsville*. Kakutani's blurb on the quality of Nixon's writing, from a review of her first book, was discussed but then rejected out of concern that Kakutani and the *Times* might take affront at having a review of Nixon for one book appear on the front cover of another, causing both *Jarrettsville* and the rest of Counterpoint's list to suffer in attracting future *Times* reviews. A blurb from Ayelet Waldman, a friend of Nixon, wife of celebrated novelist Michael Chabon and a quite celebrated author in her own right, was selected: "Haunting and powerful...flawlessly capturing the authentic, earthy flavor of a blood-soaked land." The blurb, while on the front cover, contained a conspicuous absence of the mention of a love story. Yet questions of the romantic qualities of the book had not entirely disappeared from discussions about the book's packaging. The "flap copy," the description of the book on its back cover, had been written by Krefman. On a blown-up printing of the front and back covers another editor at Counterpoint had circled Krefman's description of Martha and Nick as "star-crossed lovers," and written in pen along the side "too romance-y?"

Finally, there was the question of the book's format. Although book sales had remained stable through the U.S. economic downturn beginning in 2008, in 2009 the prevailing wisdom in the industry was that it was a "down" time, and that the industry was in trouble. Although based on what was then a false premise, publishing employees were being laid off, the perception that money was more tight than usual was real, and people were justifiably skittish. The question was if the book should be published first in hardback, or as a paperback original (PBO)? Like a blurb on the front cover, had the PBO format grown acceptable in the literary marketplace? The argument for publishing first in hardback was that it signaled the importance of the novel, its seriousness as a work. Given the tradition of this format for literary works, using it might also hurt the book in garnering reviews as well as in awards season. The trade-off, or the

argument for publishing as a PBO, was that a PBO would increase the placement of the book in bookstores, as paperbacks with their lower prices and more convenient format are quicker sellers. They require less overhead, and booksellers want them.

Publishing in hardback was a pitch for cultural capital, a pitch to the literary quality of the work. Publishing in paperback was a pitch for economic capital, a pitch to the popular quality of the work. As a novel that straddled these lines, *Jarrettsville* was acquired by Counterpoint and became the lead fiction title for the Christmas season because of its ability to be both of these things at once, and as such the answer to the hardback/paperback conundrum was far from obvious. Krefman strongly advocated for a hardback, even going so far as to surreptitiously switching the novel from a PBO to a hardback on the publishing schedule. Yet Winton decided to publish the book as a PBO. Of concern was how Nixon would respond. As a literary author her cultural capital was the capital she traded in. When Counterpoint refused to pay for an author photo by the industry's leading photographer for literary authors, Nixon paid out-of-pocket for the photos. The photographer's name appears under the author photo, and an author photo from the right photographer signals to other literary authors and publishers the importance of the work. While a hardcover with a photo from the right photographer were important to Nixon, *Angel's Go Naked* was a hardcover that never had the chance to even become a paperback, and wanting a wide array of readers to actually read her work was a concern of Nixon's as well. Regional field representatives, the people who work with booksellers across the country on stocking decisions and who encourage them to give additional placement to titles that attention has adhered around, reported having strong success in getting placement for *Jarrettsville*. "The decision to publish as a PBO made my job so much easier," a field rep would later say, "there are [book]stores that would have passed [on the hardcover] but took two or three copies just because it was in paperback." Winton, relying on his background in distribution, had his sensibilities proven correct. Despite being a PBO, the novel would be reviewed in the major publications, and would twice be noted by the American Booksellers Association, first as a fall 2009 "Title to Watch For" and later as a summer 2010 title recommended to book groups. And despite not containing a single scene set during the Civil War, *Jarrettsville* would be consecrated as a serious and important work during review season, winning the Michael Shaara Prize for Civil War fiction from the Civil War Institute in Gettysburg.

Figure 1: The Covers of Jarrettsville



The wheels for these cultural consecration processes were placed in motion by Counterpoint's publicity staff, which also had to figure out their own genre distinctions for how to push the novel. They traded both on Counterpoint and Nixon's "literary" capital. Counterpoint's publicity manager Abbye Simkowitz explained how to promote the book given Nixon's reputation:

*Well, obviously she's a great literary voice, so all the top reviewers and top papers would definitely want to review her. So like the New York Times Book Review, Harpers, in Bookforum, the New Yorker. Those sorts of publications, as well as maybe some of the women's magazines that are a little bit less commercial, and maybe a little bit more highbrow like a Country Living, or an O Magazine or something like that, and maybe some NPR (National Public Radio).*

Likewise, *Jarrettsville* fell into a different class of fiction because it told a true story that was from the author's family. This was a promotional "hook" for *Jarrettsville* that differentiated it from other novels, a hook that could be attractive to media outlets like NPR. As Simkowitz further explained, "like [the public radio host] Diane Rehm or something like [that] could also be an option. I'd say probably Diane Rehm, because Cornelia could talk about her family, she could really talk to her about the story and flesh it out some more." Of course, also central to the pitch to media outlets was that *Jarrettsville* was the lead fiction title, not a mid-list book like Nixon's previous novels, and that Counterpoint was putting its weight behind it. Simkowitz explained the order and contents of her pitch:

*I would definitely tell them Jarrettsville is our lead novel for the fall season, because you want to establish what your priorities*

*are for them. Especially if Counterpoint holds count with these reviewers, which it does, communicating to them what we consider some of our best books of the season is something that will go somewhere with them and something that they're interested in knowing. So I say, 'this is our lead novel of the season, the editors are just completely in love with it, they think it's brilliant. She has an amazing track record. She's gotten extremely well praised in the past and she's an incredible writer. And then I describe a little bit of the plot and maybe say that it's told in different perspectives, she's been influenced by Virginia Woolf or something like that, some sort of a comp[arison].*

Ultimately, *Jarrettsville* elicited praise in both of the major within-industry review publications, *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*. Of particular note to Nixon was the strongly positive *Kirkus* review. She had never been positively reviewed in *Kirkus*, which has the reputation for being stingy with positive reviews (not least of which, many claim, because *Kirkus* reviews go unattributed). Although *Kirkus* noted the love story at the center of the novel, it focused on Nick's chapter, leading into a final evaluation:

*His portions of the narrative painfully trace faltering will, self-doubt and moral decline. At Martha's murder trial, more than just one young woman stands accused. Thrilling and cathartic, this imaginative, well-crafted historical fiction meditates on morality and the complexity of motivation.*

The American Booksellers Association (ABA) echoed this praise for the novel, calling the *Jarrettsville* of *Jarrettsville* a "microcosm of America in the years following the Civil War." According to the ABA, *Jarrettsville* was "the story of neighbor fighting neighbor, old customs and quarrels dying hard, passion, friendship, and the complicated relationships between whites and blacks, all told exquisitely." Both reviews treated the novel as literary fiction, and successful literary fiction at that. In contrast, *Publishers Weekly* honed in on the overlapping nature of the text, criticizing a lack of clear genre distinction, writing that "the variety of voices and the disparate narrative elements— historical account, tragic romance, courtroom drama—renders unclear what kind of story the author is trying to tell." The very nature of the text, its boundary spanning nature with regards to genre and what would become its chameleon-like ability to be any number of things that readers wanted it to be, could either be a blessing or a curse.

### **Genre as an Unstable and Opportunistic Construct**

For Cornelia Nixon and Abbye Simkowitz, *Jarrettsville* was important because it was a true story from the author's family history, although

this shared importance was felt for entirely unrelated reasons. For Adam Krefman the story was about Nick, for Nixon, it was first entirely about Martha and then about both of them. For Jack Shoemaker the novel was a chance to repair not only a business relationship, but also a deeply embedded social relationship; the paperback for *Angels Go Naked* was finally released in the following Christmas season in 2010. As a well-respected firm with an institutional identity, for Counterpoint Press *Jarrettsville* was important because it was their kind of book and Nixon was their kind of author, although even the text itself could be made to be more their “type” of book, and the packaging and promotion had to be mediated to fit their goals. The boundary spanning possibilities of the text between “literary and “popular” were a blessing, but its boundary spanning possibilities between “literary” and “romance” was a curse. For the committee members of the Michael Shaara prize it was decided that a novel about the Civil War did not have to be set during the Civil War; time and history can slightly shift when need be. Despite industry-oriented studies conceptualizing genre as a way to fix and “pin-down” cultural objects, we start where we began: For a novel to be a novel --for it to be written by an author, and to make it through a literary agency and into a publishing house and out the other end, and for it to be promoted by a publicity staff and hand-sold in bookstores and evaluated by reviewers and connected with by readers -- it must be multiple. While authors and publishers and distributors and reviewers can temporarily pin down novels and orient them towards their needs and purposes, these purposes may differ for varied people along the chain. For a novel to be a novel it must be many things.

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