

Books



JASON GARDNER

ART BOOKS

WE THE SPIRITS

At Epiphany in the small Polish town of Sopotnia Mała, a troupe representing the Three Wise Men travels from house to house to win the favour of the deceased. Pictured is Augustus, a member of the ritual who offers chaotic comic relief from the sombre masquerade. He rifles through women's closets, steals eggs, and pratfalls all over the place. Photographer Jason Gardner's *We the Spirits*, which documents carnival traditions around the world, captures Augustus in his shaggy glory. *GOST*, £50

Lovers of fiction, you need to get real

Terry Eagleton's paean to literary realism explains why Maupassant is better for you than a Marvel film

By Stuart JEFFRIES

THE REAL THING
by Terry Eagleton

176pp, Yale, £14.99 (0844 871 1514),
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★★★★★



A man once came up to Pablo Picasso in a train compartment. Why, he asked, did the Spaniard not paint people as they really are? "What do you mean?" asked Picasso. The man produced a photograph from his wallet and said: "That's my wife." Picasso responded, "Isn't she rather small and flat?"

Terry Eagleton's delightful new book, *The Real Thing*, explores what artistic fidelity to the "real world" involves, and why many of us still like reading "real-life" dramas – the latest Tessa Hadley, or Karl Ove Knausgaard – and regard the new Richard Osman thriller or the latest instalment in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* franchise only through disdainful lorgnettes.

Being a Marxist, Eagleton cleaves to the idea that realism is a

bourgeois phenomenon, the middle-class art form *par excellence*, in which ink-stained clerks come centre-stage, and anything involving unicorns, gods or flying Ford Anglias is suspect. The realist novel, Eagleton tells us, "turns recurrently on money, property, land and inheritance. Engrossed by the individual, it explores complex psychological states beyond the reach of epic or romance."

One might suspect that Eagleton means these last words despairingly, and that any proper revolutionary socialist wouldn't rest until the last middle-class realist writer wittering about First World problems such as property and land were strangled with Anthony Trollope's entrails. But this is no anti-realist polemic. Rather, Eagleton comes to praise what you might expect him to bury.

Realism arose in the 18th century. It typified what Karl Marx thought was the bourgeoisie's leading achievement: to systematically drown "the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism,

in the icy water of egotistical calculation". But that's why realism is valuable: it tells it like it is. And, like Marx, Eagleton can't help admiring the bourgeoisie he should despise for stripping away romance, God and sentiment, and confronting readers with the naked truth about the material world.

Stylistically, however, realism is a paradox. The realist novel is a crime scene in which the author has erased all traces of their culpability. Guy de Maupassant set out his villainous *modus operandi*: "The realist author will have to compose his work in so skillful and concealed a manner, with such apparent simplicity, as to make it impossible to perceive and indicate its plan." Seen this way, realism is the opposite of modernist literature, which is forever pulling down the fourth wall and shaking readers out of their homes to get them to the barricades.

Realist style, you might therefore imagine, wouldn't appeal to Eagleton's Left-leaning sympathies. And one can almost hear the distinguished professor of literature at

the University of Lancaster hooting with derision when he quotes the 19th-century French "naturalist" Emile Zola: "I am simply an observer who sets down facts." Come off it, Emile.

But how do you define "truth", anyway? Don't many of us feel, some of the time, that Picasso's detractor was right? One of Henry James's short stories, from which Eagleton's book takes its title, meditates on such questions. In *The Real Thing*, a painter struggles to depict a couple, Major Monarch and his wife. The Monarchs look so stereotypically genteel as to repel any convincing representation. "She was singularly like a bad illustration," says the painter waspishly.

Creating a good likeness, in other words, involves not just appealing to conventional codes of depiction, as Picasso's critic may well have thought, but also creating something individual beyond the stereotype. "There can be no realism," Eagleton concludes, "without an admixture of illusion. Truth is a matter of what the artist makes of

his or her raw materials, not just of fidelity to the fact."

And yet: that conclusion makes Eagleton's call for realist art, in his final paragraphs, all the more surprising. "In an unfathomably complex world beset by terrorism and genocide," he argues, "one of our most pressing needs is to grasp the overall shape of what is afoot." The disappointing aspect of *The Real Thing*, then, is that Eagleton doesn't cite any contemporary literature that meets these needs. Possibly he thinks there is none worth mentioning. Lovers of literary realism might feel otherwise. I can't wait to read the latest novel by Ann Patchett, seduced as I am by this paper's description of it as "a fine meditation on ordinary life, our chances at stardom and what we bequeath to our families".

Or consider the recent ITV drama *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, which depicted the real-life stories of sub-postmasters driven to penury and even suicide. Though it was as great-hearted as Dickens or George Eliot, that drama resonated because it showed a recognisable version of reality in the 21st century. We need this kind of realism, Eagleton suggests, to help us to grasp the circumstances in which we are living – even to critique them. Do we need the latest hokum from the Marvel Comics Universe or a turgid Harry Potter book? Not so much.

Stuart Jeffries's books include *Everything, All the Time, Everywhere: How We Became Postmodern*