A Million Windows

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A kaleidoscopic meditation on fiction-making by one of Australia's most acclaimed writers.

"The house of fiction," wrote Henry James, "has . . . not one window, but a million." In this, his latest work, Gerald Murnane, one of Australia's most acclaimed contemporary authors, takes these words as his starting point, and asks: Who, exactly, are that house's residents, and what do they see from their respective rooms? His answer, A Million Windows, is a gorgeous (if unsettling) investigation into the glories and pitfalls of storytelling. Focusing on the importance of trust and the inevitability of betrayal in writing as in life, its nested stories explore the fraught relationships between author and reader, child and parent, boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife. Murnane's fiction is woven from images-the reflections of the setting sun on distant windowpanes, seemingly limitless grasslands, a procession of dark-haired women, a clearing in a forest, the colors indigo and silver-grey, and the mysterious death of a young woman-which build to an emotional crescendo that is all the more powerful for the intricacy of its patterning.

A Million Windows Details

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From Reader Review A Million Windows for online ebook

David R. Godine says

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“The house of fiction has . . . not one window, but a million.” - Henry James, preface to The Portrait of a Lady

Gerald Murnane, one of Australia’s most acclaimed contemporary authors, delves into the subject of fiction writing in his latest work, A Million Windows. His thoughts are organized into 34 unnamed and unnumbered chapters populated by memory fragments and “image-persons,” including dark-haired women and girls, sunlight reflecting on a windowpane like “spots of golden oil,” and a house with “two, or perhaps three, storeys” in the midst of some grassland. This house, which is intermittently described in great detail but never viewed as a whole, provides the primary touchstone for the other images and narrative fragments in the novel, which form concentric circles around the house and one another by promise of connection with the larger structure. The resulting patterns that they form are dazzling and overwhelming in their complexity, expanding through both time and space.

If we envision the temporal dimension of the novel as a horizontal timeline, as we often casually do when we refer to the past as being behind us and the future as being ahead of us, Murnane reminds us that there is an additional vertical component to consider in the form of levels of narration. He simultaneously locates certain narratives in the minds of the “image-persons,” the minds of the authors writing about such persons, and his own mind as he traverses the ever-present and the distant past. These shifts in focus produce a deliberately destabilizing effect for the reader, but do not muddle Murnane’s conception of the true nature and purpose of fiction, precisely because his meaning swells in the space of “faint lines” between his images. He finds meaning and connectedness to be synonymous:
What others might have called meaning he called connectedness, and he trusted that he would one day see (revelation being for him always a visual matter) among the multitudes of details that he thought of as his life or as his experience faint lines seeming to link what he had never previously thought of as being linked and the emergence of a rudimentary pattern, which word had always been one of his favorites.

The element of elusiveness or obscurity is essential. Murnane accords a deep respect to fictional personages because they capture the moods and patterns that shadow us throughout our lives, and thus cannot be predictably contained. He compels authors to realize that this lack of control can be advantageous, empowering them to “learn from [their] own subject matter...in somewhat the same way that [their] readers are presumed to learn from [their] writing.” It is no coincidence that so many works of fiction are semi-autobiographical. Murnane imagines that fictional personages exist even when writers are not reporting the details of their lives, and we can never expect what sense, memory, or experience will alert us to their existence. Considering the relationship between meaning and connectedness, it is unsurprising that “the details of what we call our lives go sometimes to form patterns of meaning not unlike those to be found in our preferred sort of fiction.”

Murnane despises evasiveness when it comes to writers “using expressions such as beautifully written or moving or powerful in order to hide their ignorance of the craft of fiction,” though A Million Windows is all of these things. It testifies that the “real world,” or the “visible world” as Murnane calls it, is overrated. Many authors and narrators exhaust themselves attempting to describe the visible world with complete accuracy,

while A Million Windows is comfortable with the uncertainty of visualizing abstractions in great detail. The feelings that this process evokes and the persistent hints of underlying connectedness are various, vibrant, and sincere. In his review of the novel in Music & Literature, Will Heyward writes that Murnane "dissects his writing and his memory in the way a Christian doctor might have a human corpse centuries ago: earnestly, hopelessly, in search of the soul." The absence of a specific map or diagram may be unsettling to consider at first, but it ultimately opens both the visible and the invisible worlds to the possibility of something infinite and grand.

Ben Winch says

To ask of fiction that it tell us about the world, I can't help but think, is to sell fiction short. Fiction, surely, tells us more. About the universe, say? Or better, about life. And not just human life, though lacking another shape to adopt fiction's characters may appear as human; they needn't though, not at all.

Apparently I started something when I read *Barley Patch* last year; in the past month or two, in quick succession, I've read *Invisible But Enduring Lilacs* and *A Million Windows* and have just picked up *A History of Books*. All of these are works from Murnane's "late period", after he gave up fiction-writing for eight years following an aborted draft for a long book which was to have followed *Inland*, and all mine the same theme with variations, the core of which could be said to be the interplay of memory, reading and writing fiction. *A Million Windows*, the latest, is, to my mind, the culmination. A manifesto, but at times a baffling one, both tantalising and frustrating, apt to break off at the threshold of its seeming complete, as if it were no more than common sense for the "discerning reader" (a favourite phrase of Murnane's) to piece together the remainder. But that's not to criticise the prose itself, which, I'm tempted to say, is just about as clear as prose can be. After all, it's a hard task he's set himself, this explication of what makes a narrator "strong" in the Murnanian sense by a (we hope) Murnanian strong narrator. And in at least one important respect, Murnane and I concur almost completely:

> I have sometimes tried to explain what I consider a widespread confusion about the nature of fictional personages.

Forget, for now, that (as Murnane ensures us) the "I" of this passage is himself a "fictional personage"; in any case (Murnane also ensures us) he's most likely reliable (Murnane being unable, in most if not all cases, to abide unreliable narrators, or narrators whom he describes as having "acted in bad faith" (Or was it their authors who acted thus? I forget. In any case neither Murnane nor his narrators, we suspect, are likely to repeat this so-called mistake.)). The point is *he means it*, I'm certain. Get this:

> Rather than struggling to write about her, he is mostly content to accept her existence as incontrovertible proof that the reading and the writing of fiction are much more than a mere transaction during which one person causes another person to see in mind a sort of shadowy film; that the whole enterprise of fiction exists mostly to enable her and numerous others of her kind to flit from place to place in mind after mind as though many a fictional text is a mere bridge or stairway raised for their convenience of travel.

Now if that isn't the most beautiful image and concept I've read or heard of in the past months I don't know what is. And Murnane's is, surely, the most singleminded attempt to allow this travel by fictional personages to occur with minimal interruption, so much so that he's apt to disrupt any and every apparent through-line which might have otherwise aided the reader in his or her effort to appreciate the text. Images or potential

plot-points which in another work might have borne scrutiny here are most often ignored, while scenes and images which seem to do nothing more than to note a character's (or fictional personage's) passing are returned to repeatedly. Indeed, at times the structure Murnane hangs it all upon seems close to arbitrary, and Murnane (or his narrator) himself is apt to comment as if ironically on the structural notes he has beside him as he writes, having oftentimes forgotten the import or intention of certain sections and instead leaving it to chance to dictate where he turns next, but always with that goal of facilitating his mysterious creatures/entities in their travel via his work to wherever it is they're going.

As I read *A Million Windows* (carefully, in sections of ten or so pages, with time to reflect on each) I became certain that Gerald Murnane is a unique genius, with all of the positive and negative implications that the word "genius" implies. He (if he's anything like his narrators) is opinionated, and narrow in his tastes, and as if defensive of a stance which can hardly have helped his popularity or his critical cache, deriding as it does all "social" or political novels, seemingly all contemporary realist novels, and in fact even (what he calls) "self-aware fiction", a term which he claims does not apply to his fiction, though self-aware it most certainly is, if after its own unusual fashion. For me, the self-awareness in Murnane's work is like nectar – gold! I flip through the book to find passages on this or that aspect of writing, then turn back and read the (slightly) more traditionally "fictional" passages associated with them.

> On the rare occasions when we discuss authors such as Charles Dickens, we seem to agree that we lack for something that writers of fiction seemed formerly to possess. And yet, if we have lost something, so to speak, we have also gained something. We may be unable to exercise over our fictional personages the sort of control that Dickens and others exercised over their characters, but we are able to turn that same lack of control to our advantage and to learn from our own subject-matter, so to call it, in somewhat the same way that our readers are presumed to learn from our writing. [...] The matters at issue were as follows: could the writer predict with certainty how the personage was about to behave? and, if not, could the personage be said to stand, in relation to the writer, in any way differently from some or another man or woman in the building where the writer sat writing [...]

For me, this is a hard book to review, partly because for all that I love about it, I find something in Murnane's aesthetic dour. (This video helped clarify that for me; will you look at the place he writes in! And that voice! He could just about be much-reviled ex-Australian Prime Minister John Howard!) But then, that's the beauty of his style, especially as it matures, that it becomes so shorn of adornment that such considerations hardly matter. And when he gets on a roll – as he does here about page 116, where he relates the (secondhand) story of a hobo and the dog which befriended him – the results are genuinely moving, uncanny, and shot through with that glow of the otherworldly that accounts for so much of my pleasure in reading.

> The train slowed; the man saw an open door; the man ran beside the train; the man clambered aboard. As soon as he was securely aboard, the man looked for the dog. He saw it keeping pace with the train and looking up at him. The dog was able to keep pace with the train for as long as it climbed the low hill, but when the train passed the hill, the dog began to fall behind. The man lay in the doorway of the freight van and watched the dog falling further behind. The man later wrote in his autobiography that he had recalled often during the remainder of his life his sight of the dog while it tried to keep pace with the train. He had recalled in particular his sight of the nearer eye of the dog while it tried to keep pace. The eye had seemed to be turned sideways and upwards, or so he had thought, as though the dog had struggled, before it lost sight for ever of the only person who had fed it or treated it less than harshly, to fix in mind an image of that person.

Of course, for a writer who purports to write about the travel of fictional beings, the recurrent descriptions of trains in this work are not coincidental. Nor the butterfly alighting on Machado de Assis's desk, nor flying from one side of Casterbridge to another. The best and most thrilling part of Murnane's project is that he's alive to the mystery – the shape-shifting ghostlikeness – of his creatures. When last year I reviewed *Barley Patch* I compared him to Beckett, and again that comparison springs to mind. Compared to Beckett's late period, Murnane's is scarcely less focussed, and will, I'm sure, admit of less and less intrusions as it proceeds. If you're thinking of reading the guy, *A Million Windows*, I think, is the place to start.

Jafar says

This was too "meta" for me. Attempting to write fiction while explaining the process of writing fiction in a strange and self-conscious way?

Jim Elkins says

Why Reviews of Murnane are Not Adequate, and How Complex Failures Produce Great Literature

I find Gerald Murnane much more perplexing than most readers seem to. In a review of "A Million Windows" in the "New York Times," June 17, 2016, James McNamara sums up Murnane's theory of fiction this way:

"The Australian novelist Gerald Murnane has become known for works of difficult genius, and his latest will only burnish that reputation. An exploration of the mind and of literary creation, it is a book of intricate construction and vast intellectual scope.
Moving between fiction, philosophy and literary theory, 'A Million Windows' investigates and demonstrates the aesthetic of what Murnane calls 'true fiction,' which faithfully records the narrator's 'invisible world' of the mind. This is distinct from artifice, where the writer consciously creates, and realism, where the reader is prompted to think of characters and places as actually existing. Rather, 'true fiction' conceives of an invisible metaphysical plane that extends infinitely forward, backward, even sideways, into every possible temporal, topical and spatial dimension. In it are autonomous 'fictional personages' (characters), whose existence the writer 'learns of' rather than creates."

This is as succinct and accurate a theory as I have read, and I think it's substantially correct. It's helpful, reading Murnane, to keep three terms in mind:

1. "True fiction" is about the narrator's (and the author's) mind. (Exactly how it's about the mind is another question.)
2. "Self-referential" fiction (what McNamara calls "artifice") occurs when narrators posture in front of their readers and "wonder aloud, as it were, what fates to assign to various characters," as in "Tristram Shandy." (p. 34)
3. "Film" (Murnane's preferred term) or "realism" (McNamara's term) occurs when the narrator and author wish to present a fictional world as real.

Murnane's idea of fiction isn't any more intricate than McNamara's summary provided that a reader doesn't try to follow Murnane's arguments. McNamara goes on to say "A Million Windows" "performs the theory it

advances," but the book isn't just an example of its concerns: even more than a fiction, it is an investigation. Murnane has described his books, which are marketed as fiction, as "detailed reports" of the contents of his mind at the time of writing. ("The Still-Breathing Author," in "Sydney Review of Books," February 6, 2018.) The narrator's voice is consistently affectless and grammatically precise. The book asks to be understood, not just "marveled at" as a sign of "genius" or "intellectual power and originality" (paraphrasing McNamara).

McNamara's three-point summary would be an adequate conceptual schema for reading Murnane, except that the three positions are exposited in an exceptionally unclear, inconsistent, irrational manner. These difficulties do not occur at the level of the fictional stories in the book, which are more or less continuous and ultimately traditional in affect, enabling readers to find their way through the book, and to experience its stories as expressive and moving. The problem is that the book itself--its language, its address, its grammatical precision--gives no sign that the passages on narrative theory are to be skimmed or taken as signs of a poetic evocation of the complexity of memory. On the contrary, those passages give every sign that they are to be understood and evaluated.

The questions I have about Murnane's fiction require an unusual amount of explication. I recognize the fact that spending 800 words on two sentences, as I am about to do in section 1--without even getting near the book's main topics--puts me way off to one side of the bell curve of reader's responses. Either reviewers and readers are reading too loosely, or my response is as nearly pathological as Murnane's own bedroom full of filing cabinets, which are so well described in Mark Binelli's wonderful piece in the New York Times (tinyurl.com/yd9bf98m).

It's possible to agree with Will Heyward's feeling that "beneath the immaculate surface of his formal, outmoded sentences runs a dark current of hopelessly compressed—hopeless, in that is otherwise inexpressible, and seemingly irrevocable—emotion" and at the same time feel Heyward's reading is entirely too loose and poetic. Reading Murnane, Heyward writes,

"The world can seem... as a maze of as yet unmade phenomenal connections. Navigating this maze, and realizing the connections within it, are part of his preoccupation with the act of writing. In writing, these connections are both invented and discovered. A single, remote phrase might rise to a series of responses, which then, like fractals, multiply again." [Heyward, in "Music and Literature," tinyurl.com/ydcg2ywn]

Fractals aren't the right analogy for Murnane's distinctions, because nothing in Murnane disappears from sight into infinite complexity: everything is carefully named. It's also not enough to note that the book's title comes from "The Portrait of a Lady," and conjures fiction's house of a million rooms, or even to cite, as Heyward does, Murnane saying "I would like to be able to write a text, or create a text, so complicated that I would get lost in it." It's not enough because the book itself asks to be read slowly and carefully.

And I disagree absolutely with Heyward's conclusion: "Given the elliptical and awkward nature of Murnane’s writing," he says, "an easy mistake is to strain to understand him, but his writing is a visual proposition." That is like a review of a physics textbook that proposes readers don't worry about the equations, because physics is to be "marveled at" and praised for its "intellectual power and originality." If those qualities are true, it's because physics has arguments worth attending to--even if some aren't true and others are mistaken.

1

Here is an example. The pages where Murnane's narrator distinguishes his book from "self-referential fiction" open with a description of the phenomenon, and close a page later with the narrator's first negative

judgment about "self-referential fiction." The narrator notes that "Tristram Shandy," "some of the fiction of Anthony Trollope," "much of the fiction of Thomas Hardy," and Italo Calvino's "If on a Winter's Night a Traveller" oppose "writer and reader... as the players on either side of a chessboard." He then says:

"Even the undiscerning reader of this fiction of mine should have understood by now that I, the narrator, would dread to feel that we were separated even by these sentences." (p. 33)

This is both unexpected and apparently poorly aimed as a rejoinder against self-reference in fiction. I might have expected Murnane's first-person narrator to say that the manner in which he makes reference to his fiction differs from the theatrical model in "Tristram Shandy." Or that he did not find the staging of a contest between reader and author to be persuasive. Instead we're given an unusual and emotional declaration: he would "dread" to be separated from his reader "even by these sentences." Of course he is separated by exactly those sentences, so the sentence itself cannot be the end of the matter--and more important, we have been given no particular reason to think the narrator wants to be close to us (I am echoing the "we" in the passage). It's as if the implied author has suddenly realized why he doesn't like what he calls "self-referential fiction."

(It's an entirely separate question whether we can believe that Murnane himself was unaware of the entire movement of postnmodern metafiction beyond Calvino, and whether he knew that it doesn't rely on opposing "writer and reader"--whether he realized other people had been experimenting with different kinds of self-awareness not at all unlike his own. Elsewhere in this book, the narrator becomes suddenly coy about author's names, pretending--how else can we interpret it?--to have forgotten the name of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Of course the narrator's and the author's minds are full of the names of books beyond Henry James and Thomasd Hardy.)

This passage I quoted is only one paragraph from a three-page section on the difference between "A Million Windows" and "self-referential fiction." The following pages just make things even more obscure. At the conclusion he says he's already explained himself, but "for the sake of the undiscerning reader, I shall repeat that I am the narrator of this work and not the author." (p. 35)

This is a common and reasonable position for anyone interested in narration, and when I read it I expected he wuld continue by saying that as the narrator, he cannot play the games of "self-reference" that Sterne or Calvino play. But instead he says this:

"In the matter of my fate, so to call it, I am no more able to exercise choice than is any narrator of any [text]..." (p. 35)

Surely this doesn't address the question. It's self-evident narrators don't have control and so can't play games of the sort Murnane's narrator is imagining. But that has nothing to do with self-referentiality.

2

What matters most in terms of understanding is what Murnane's narrator means by "true fiction." I won't even begin to give arguments as I've done above. Instead I'll just note two salient markers.

(Before I do that, it's ineresting to try to coordinate Murnane's theories about his "true fiction," or "reports," with narrative theory. There's a passage in Gerard Genette's "Fiction and Diction" that is apposite. It's a footnote, in which Genette is talking about relations between Narrator (N), Author (A), and Character (C). If A = N = C, that's autobiography. The footnote describes a kind of narrative that fits Murnane's very well. "A

narrative that betrayed its own fictionality in every sentence," Genette writes, "by an expression of the sort 'Let us imagine that...'... would be perfectly 'serious' in enunciation and would be covered by the formula A = N." (p. 70 n. 1) That's interesting because in Murnane, the author is assumed not to be the narrator, except in his interviews, when he speaks easily about his "fictions" being "reports." Genette would have to say: for the Narrator, A doesn't equal N; for the Author, A = N.)

First, regarding the narrator's (and implied author's) control of the distance between the events he recounts and the narrator who recounts those events.

Murnane's narrator's distance from his "fictional characters" is variable and unstable. I noted this in my notes on "Barley Patch" (on Goodreads and Librarything). In "A Million Windows," the narrator tends to slip downard, in the direction of what he calls "film," from a starting point that is as abstract and metafictional as he can make it. These slips, I think, are not premeditated, and not wholly in Murnane's control.

A typical section or paragraph might begin like this:

"If ever he had asked himself, during all the years since, how a person might feel on seeming to recognize as a version of himself or herself some or another personage in a work of fiction..." (p. 83)

A half-page later these many qualifications are no longer present:

"Sometimes, in later years, he supposed that... the answer quoted should have shamed and humiliated him..."

The hypothetical, atemporal, ungendered character becomes becomes a generalized, temporalized narrator, who becomes a fictionalized character, who becomes a memory of the narrator's, who becomes a memory of the implied author's.

"A Million Windows," like "Barley Patch," contains a central story: in this case, it's about a woman; in "Barley Patch," it's about the narrator's parents. Enframing and infiltrating those stories are metafictional hypotheticals. In both books Murnane (the implied author) can't seem to control the degree of separation. It's an expressive quality, this slippage: it's part of the book's interest and pathos, but there is no sign in the narrative that it is intended.

3
Regarding the narrator's (and implied author's) theories about the ontology--the mode of being--of his "fictional characters."

As McNamara says, Murnane is concerned with "autonomous 'fictional personages' (characters), whose existence the writer 'learns of' rather than creates." Yet Murnane's narrator (and by implication Murnane, since this phenomenon repeats across several books) has a self-contradictory, or at least a very counter-intuitive, theory about the nature of fictional characters. At one point about halfway through the book he rehearses his complaint that reviewers and critics always discuss characters "as though they are persons living in the world." (p. 94) He says he approves of something Evelyn Waugh said: he had never "entertainedf the least interest in why characters behaved as they did." This, it seems, is an anti-realist position, which wants to let fictional characters behave in any number of ways that people don't. Waugh, Murnane's narrator says, "felt no obligation to try to read the minds of his creatures."

So far so good. But Murnane has a theory, both in "A Million Windows" and in "Barley Patch," that characters in fiction can be understood as leading their own lives. In "Barley Patch" he also imagines

characters living "in" the worlds of specific fictions even though the authors don't name them. (And he fails to consistently distinguish those two possibilities.)

The sense in which such "fictional characters" (or characters that are "potentially" available for fictions) are alive without intentionality is entirely obscure. I think the best way to understand this is as a theory ruined by its author's intensely held and mutually incompatible desires: to write about fiction in such a way that it becomes "true" to its author's experience of *writing about* fiction, and at thre same time true to its author's experience of *reading* fiction.

*
At the moment I can't do better than that. Mark Binelli's "New York Times" essay reveals the spectacular compulsive complexity of Murnane's personal archive, and it should be a warning against readings that reduce his books to expressive narratives of memory embedded in vaguely understood theories of fiction.

For me, Murnane's books fail to construct reliable theory, and the theory fails to prevent the narrators from telling the very human, "realist" stories of love and memory that are at their core. Together those two failures produce texts that are expressive in ways no other author has achieved. Beckett, Calvino, Perec, Stein, and other experimental modernists are consistent and controlled by comparison. Murnane's are complex failures of authorial intention and control, and they produce genuinely interesting writing that appears to be literature.

Blair says

Nobody out there is writing books like Gerald Murnane. He is a treasure. The book takes its title from a comment by Henry James, which is included as an epigraph: "The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million..." Murnane imagines a house of two, or perhaps three, stories with numerous windows surrounded by mostly level grassy countryside. The house, which has many wings, is inhabited by writers who often discuss the intricacies of writing fiction, and many of these writers seem to have published books that bear resemblance to Murnane's previous works. We become privy to various stories as well as the musings about the craft of writing. Murnane makes you work, he makes you aspire to be the "discerning reader" that he mentions often, and avoid falling into the traps of mistaking fiction for reality.

One of the images that Murnane comes up with is of the garden of "concentric box hedges and gravel paths" that occupies the grounds of the house of many windows. In some ways, I think this sums up his fictional project. The "chief character" says, as he "stood confused" in this garden: "I was not lost or in any sort of danger. Even if I had not been able to plot a path outwards through the hedges, I could have scrambled over them or through them and could have got back to my room whenever I chose. For as long as I limited my thinking, however; for as long as I observed what I supposed were the conventions of gardens and their designers; for as long as I felt bound to walk only on designated pathways and forbidden from breaking through even a miniature hedge, then I seemed truly a captive of the artifice and of whoever had designed it, even though I could look away at any time from the petty labyrinth and outwards towards the far-reaching countryside or upwards towards this massive building and its numerous windows." Murnane says he wants to secure for himself "a vantage-point from which each of the events reported in a work of fiction such as this present work, and each of the personages mentioned in the work, might seem, at one and the same time, a unique and inimitable entity impossible to define or classify but also a mere detail in an intricate scheme or design."

Murnane has succeeded, I think, in creating a unique and inimitable work that breaks free from the

designated pathways of fiction. He's not for everyone, but for me he's one of the most remarkable practitioners of fiction alive today. Just stunning.

Stephen P says

I've waited after reading to come up to this novel to be able to review it. So easy to say that I, "Cannot do it justice". The temptation is there but it isn't that simple. The work is beyond, not what I can think but what I can grasp. Indeed, this is a large part of what the book is about.

I have traveled through and resided in the land of Murnania having read a few of his works which certainly does not leave me an expert. However, it does give me a sense that, The Millions, is the culmination of his many years of writing, of thinking, of living. It is the most relevant text I have read. This does not mean, that in his enigmatic style, it is a great work of art according to the cartography of literary spells. What it has meant to me is a guide to the thinking of truth and understanding my choices and decisions. Some of which may have already been rendered by an internal cavalcade of attorneys, jurors, and judges without my knowing. Societies robed consorts lined up against the world of my mind with its hazy aperture and gauzed apparitions.

Moving through the many hallways, corridors, wings of Murnane's two or three story house, we pass by windowed rooms. He recalls a castle where a film-maker has placed each of his characters from his career in a window. Murnane's two or three story house is of a million windows, taken from a Henry James quote,

"The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million …".

A room is lit and at a desk by the light a writer, writes. He is an author of personages which exist within their own realm and proceed through the writing of their own accord.

"The single holland blind in his room was still drawn down in late afternoon although he would have got out of his bed and would have washed and dressed at first light. At this moment when he became a personage in this work of fiction, I supposed him to be seated at his small desk with his back to the glowing blind and to be reading, by the light of a desk-lamp, a sentence that he had written, perhaps only a few minutes earlier, at the head of a blank page."

The author no longer believes he is telling the story but it is the narrator. The narrator being also a personage, a personage within the story of personages.

P.78 "The narrator rails against a narrator(s) of close
3rd person seeing only out of the main characters eyes.
Yet, he being only a fictional personage in this text allows
us therefore to see only through his eyes. Who is he? The author?
Like others he/she is a "Fictional Personage."

The narrator does not sound nor seem lonely. Rather, she/he seems content, possibly preferring their world to be filled with such personages who exhibit a very perceptible life of their own existence. The visible world with its complications and disappointments, its aim for the necessities of survival do not measure up.

Although agreed upon as the back slapping confines of, Reality, it is thin and uni-dimensional.

His two or is it three story house, because how can one be sure, is stocked by the windows of the writer's own personages. When we look at this story it is readily apparent that we live within a world composed and narrated by an indecisive narrator. Well she/he should be. The visible world is flossing and tooth brushing filled with people we create, an image in our mind, at times an image of an image. The characters in what Murnane calls the visible world (VW) are flat lacking consciousness as are actors in a film,(who are performing a role or persona imagined by a writer-similar to Mann's problem with film in the Magic Mountain-leaving the watcher two layers away from…? In film there is but room for the screenwriter's imagination, the actors interpretation, but no room for the watcher to slip in and participate.) This is compared to the personages in the invisible world (IW). These personages exist, so shows the narrator of Murnane's text we are reading which Murnane reminds us is a piece of fiction in and of itself. These personages are known at a depth only sought but rarely if ever perceived in the VW. Murnane is quite clear he prefers the IW. This is where meaning resides. Not in the flesh and blood. The IW is seen through the eyes of an unreliable narrator, a world constituted of, as-ifs and may-bes. They are possibilities that writers of true fiction allow for the reader (another personage) to slip into. There characters and stories not only continue on past the end of the text but thrive in relationship to the true reader.

These writers existing behind the windows of the two story or possibly three story house, are of different types; some trying to calculate their fiction to be as close to a replica of the VW as possible, others dealing in allusions, symbols, metaphors, in mysteries, etc. By following the corridors and peeking into the rooms the narrator's journey as a writer over the years can be mapped out. Though these writers generally keep separate at times they do meet, discussing writing, fiction, authors of old (Henry James) moving toward and attempting to arrive at true writing which will engage a true reader..

However, it is important to remember the narrator in this work of fiction is a personage relaying the tale of personages under the pen of the author himself. Yet Murnane is a personage to each of us. We don't know him but for only what we have heard or read. At the end the narrator stands before the large house looking up at the author's window. He learns nothing as though something could be learned from the flesh and blood writer.

What it come down to is that many consider the flesh and blood visible world to be sacrosanct when the reality of this reality is that it can only be constituted of fictions we tell ourselves. This visible world is necessary for survival but does not have to be considered beyond that. We know or have the opportunity to know landscapes, people, in literature that reside in the invisible world. We participate in their coming about and their existence. We sense a soul by what is not said as much if not more than what is. This is a world dense with meaning and offers a life of meaning, therefore a life of maybes, possibilities. We all have a choice. A vital choice.

* Make of it what you will, but though not ordered as such the book came in a large print edition. The words huge. The pages tall.

David Winger says

How I wanted to like this. I'm half way through and forced to bow out. Any given page of it is intriguing, unique. But the effect of a whole lot of these pages read in a row is something else. I reckon The Plains is one of the best two or three Australian novels ever, but is it possible Murnane has succumb to his own legend? Does he believe his esotericism and obtuseness are virtues? Are his editors too frightened to edit him?

He may well be a genius, but I can't quite come at this one. Mind you, three stars for being a literary recalcitrant, and not in the acceptable way [see every 'experimental' New York writer, including Peter Carey]

Maureen says

I can't tell you what this book was about as it annoyed me so much that I quit after 50 pages and it wasn't clear by then. Too many fabulous reads out there to waste time on this one.

Christopher Robinson says

A (seemingly) self-reflective work of fiction about the writing of fiction doesn’t sound like much fun on paper, but Murnane pulled it off magnificently here. This is (somehow) fast-paced, gripping, profound, funny, heartbreaking, powerful stuff, and the writing is stunning to boot. This gets an easy 5 from me. Highly recommended.

Proustitute says

Review published in *The Quarterly Conversation*: http://quarterlyconversation.com/a-mi...

M. Sarki says

A Million Windows could be a culmination of a life’s work, a retreading through past compositions, tried and true ideas, and a useful handbook for all writers of fiction. Problem for me is, the work was boring. After being blissfully exposed to Murnane masterpieces such as The Plains and Landscape with Landscape it is difficult to see the point in reading something inferior to his previous efforts. Often in this book Murnane’s tone was one of *knowing better*, the narrator being an accomplished elder literary man teaching the young novice a thing or two about writing fiction. Better to read a second time both Barley Patch and Inland and have the experience again of being in the presence of something novel.

Lisa says

I found reading the latest book by Gerald Murnane even more challenging than usual, and yet it was impossible to abandon it. In A Million Windows he once again dissects the meaning and process of writing fiction, dredging from memory the books he has read or written; the girls he has imagined (or maybe met); the dreamy landscapes of what might be outer-suburban Melbourne; and the thoughts and dictates of the personage in this work of fiction, who seems like a first-person narrator and may perhaps be a bit like the author (but is most certainly not a character). But it is not easy reading.

For a start, there is an implied expectation that the reader will be familiar with all of the author's previous books. Well, when Murnane draws on his own previous published works of fiction, the allusions may seem like old friends if you have read those books. But if one title or another (in my case, Barley Patch) still rests unread on the TBR, you too may be occasionally flummoxed (in my case, by an allusion to Torfrida) – unless you cheat like I did and consult Google.

But I do not believe that Gerald Murnane writes to be deliberately obscure. And while (certainly in this book) he expects a lot of his readers, nor do I think that he wishes his readership to be an exclusive scholarly clique. To the contrary, he goes out of his way to explain himself and the conceptual framework that underlies his fiction and I think that he would be well pleased to find readers such as myself muddling through, as best they can. I suspect that some of what seem like provocations to the reader in A Million Windows are intended as a spur to arouse stubborn persistence…

My previous experiences reading Murnane meant that I was not expecting to understand everything on the page. With his demanding fiction, it's a case of read on, and pieces will (mostly) fall into place. But still, it is disconcerting to learn that reading what Murnane calls 'considered narration' entitles me to nothing more than to suppose that the narrator of the paragraphs was alive at the time when they were written and felt urged to report certain matters. (p.15) Later on, the narrator/the voice of this work reminds us that he is under no obligation to do anything other than report what's in the mind of the person of the narrator of the fiction (p.159) and that to be deserving to be called the implied reader we must be worthy of the trust placed in us by the writer of 'true fiction'. (p. 185)

To read the rest of my review please visit http://anzlitlovers.com/2014/09/16/a-...

Mark says

This is the kind of book you read that makes you want to write.

The title refers to a quote from Henry James that goes "The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million...."

and Murnane uses that idea as a jumping off point to talk about fiction and the many aspects of it. . .the difference between the narrator and the writer, point of view, what characters know, the relationship between the fictional world created by the author and the real world, time and space in fiction, memory, dialogue, film, literary critcism, Henry James.

It's mindblowing in it's own way. Funny. Frustrating.

He still finds a way to work in some narrative that is maybe autobiographical, or maybe not. It's almost impossible to differentiate by the end of the book.

It's entirely possible that a reader will hate this book and find it unreadable. I don't know. It might be up its own ass. My wife couldn't get started.

But, it's the most memorable book I've read in a long time and has possibly change my point of view towards many things. I'm interested in revisiting this review in 6 months, or a year.

Jonathan says

Precise and carefully constructed. An entirely pleasurable and stimulating reading experience. One of the best books I have read in quite some time.

Jim says

If you've never read anything by Gerald Murnane before this is not the place to start. Maybe find a copy of *Tamarisk Row* or even the essay collection *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs*. In several places he mentions things like marbles which will go whoosh! over the head of anyone not already familiar with his oeuvre. In one regard, however, *A Million Windows* ***is*** actually a good place to start because it tackles what for most people is the hardest to grasp about Murnane, how he views writing, and, at times (most of the time really), the book feels like a long, rambling essay only it's not; it's a work of true fiction or considered narration. (The term is discussed at some length in Paolo Bartolini's article for *Southerly* entitled 'Triptychal Fiction: re-interpreting Murnane's work from *The Plains* to *Emerald Blue*'.) Gerald Murnane is not a novelist although some of his books—probably most notably *The Plains*—look like novels but it's not a term he subscribes to in fact most of the terms we generally associate with writers he has other words for. Like 'time'—he prefers the term 'narrative dimension'; for 'meaning' he prefers 'correctedness'; for 'real world', 'visible world'. He even resists the word 'thinking' and talks about an 'invisible world' rather than his 'mind' although, for convenience, he will talk about his mind where he doesn't imagine, he speculates about things. Gerald Murnane is, you may have gathered, a precise man and at times his books read more like legal documents than works of fiction. He is very much an acquired taste but once you've acquired that taste and started to see the world the way he does (or as best any of us can imagine the way he sees the world thanks to his best efforts to communicate its nuances to us) it is a fascinating—albeit, still occasionally, confusing—place.

If you're a writer then *A Million Windows* forces you to ask serious questions about how and why you write and who you're writing for. Take a simple thing like dialogue. There's never much dialogue in Murnane's writing and there's a good reason for it: "dialogue or so-called direct speech … gives … a text the appearance of a filmscript or a playscript." He calls it "the crudest of the many devices used by those writers of fiction whose chief aim is to have their readers believe they are not reading a work of fiction." Murnane does understand why an author might include direct speech in his or her works because, he says, it "provide[s] the nearest possible equivalents of experiences obtainable in this, the visible world" but why would they do that when what they're producing is fiction? Even his so-called "true fiction," he reminds us, is still fiction. He writes, for example:

> An author demeans fiction if he or she requires the reader to believe that what happens in his or her mind while reading is no different from what happens over his or her shoulder or outside his or her window. What happens in the mind of the reader of true fiction is richer and more memorable by far than anything seen through the lens of a camera or overheard by an author in

> a bar or a trailer park.

If none of the above is in any way of interest to you then I'd stop here and find something else to read. This is the sixth book by him that I've read and I've a seventh lined up but I'm in no rush to read it. Murnane is, for me, a treat, something to be relished. He's far from prolific and probably doesn't have that many years left so I'll have time to read all his works of fiction baring accidents or acts of God.

Murnane's works are, famously, rooted in his own life and at times they can feel like memoirs but shouldn't get confused with memoirs:

> Today, I understand that so-called autobiography is only one of the least worthy varieties of fiction extant.

Murnane believes true fiction comes from men and women who describe the images in their minds and not from confessional writing. In his essay 'The Typescript Stops Here' he says, "What I call true fiction is fiction written by men and women not to tell the stories of their lives but to describe the images in their minds (some of which may happen to be images of men and women who want to tell the truth about their lives)." And in *A Million Windows*:

> [T]rue fiction is more likely to include what was overlooked or ignored or barely seen or felt at the time of its occurrence but comes continually to mind ten or twenty years afterwards not on account of its having long ago provoked passion or pain but because of its appearing to be part of **a pattern of meaning that extends over much of a lifetime**. [bold mine]

Patterns are a big thing with Murnane. A significant thread throughout the book, for example, involves a "procession of dark-haired women" throughout his life, some real, others not so much. One called Davina he… and by "he" I mean the lead character in the book who sometimes shares aspects of his life with the "the breathing author" (title of an essay) whose name appears on the cover of the book… he misreads her name on the cover of a book and thinks she's called Dathar. Dathar takes on a life of her own in fact and he finds he prefers the half-imagined version to the real girl once he gets to know her: "he may well have been in love with Dathar but he could never be in love with Darlene." The dark-haired woman takes on the role of muse although, predictably, that's not the word he uses to describe her, preferring the "ghost above the page," who haunts his work although even the word "ghost" doesn't sit well with him:

> He claims that no word in the language denotes the class of being that she belongs to. Sometimes, for the sake of convenience, he calls her a ghost, but he ought rather, he tells us, to use the odd-sounding term *haunter*, given that the verb *to haunt* comes close to defining her dealings with him.

In *A History of Books* Murnane wrote (or, to be more accurate, translated from an unnamed Hungarian text:

> She is perhaps the Mother, the Other, the Eternal and Unknowable whom I yearn to meet up with … with every line I have written, with every book, and with every sort of literary work, I search for her, hoping she might answer me.

One other thing: she would have to be what Murnane calls "a discerning reader." The term is used often in the book—almost ninety times—but he's realistic and frequently explains things for the benefit of any undiscerning readers who might have decided to have a stab at his book. He—and that "he" might be Murnane or it might simply be the narrator of this text (it's often hard to tell the difference)—thinks of himself as "an ignorant and gullible reader" though not as undiscerning as he once was; now he knows enough to reject works he expects are not going to be his cup of tea early on. I expect most discerning

readers with realise within a page or two whether Murnane is for them or not.

As I've said he's not a novelist in the traditional sense. He writes book-length works about characters whose life experiences often reflect his own but—the word semi-autobiographical appears often in reviews of his work—but there's rarely anything resembling a plot or a story. It took me a wee while to locate where the narrator of *A Million Windows* is but it turns out he's in a building occupied by a… whatever the collective noun for writers is; this is the house of fiction described by novelist Henry James and which furnishes Murnane's book with its title and epigraph. Of his fellow writers he says:

> The word *plot* is seldom heard in the sporadic discussions that take place in this upper corridor of this remote wing of this building that remains largely unfamiliar to most of us. […] We who avoid using the words *plot* and *character* have too much respect for those we call *fictional personages* to do more than take note of their moods and caprices, but we could hardly not admire a writer of fiction or, I should say, an implied author of fiction, who could so assert himself as to prescribe in advance what should seem to be said and done by those he might have called his characters and where and when it should thus seem.

So the text in *A Million Windows* meanders along but not in an uninteresting was; one topic bleeds into another and suddenly we realise we're reading about something completely different to what we were reading five of six pages and wonder how we got there but it doesn't matter; he holds our interest but the longer he goes on the further and further he gets away from his opening remarks—which, in this instance, focus on a line he chanced upon in an autobiography he'd read some fifty years earlier where "the author claimed to remember … the light from the declining sun [falling] at a certain angle, what he called sumless distant windows like spots of golden oil." So often Murnane's books grow out of a single image. Murnane said that his book *Barley Patch* consists of "what I call for convenience patterns of images, in a place that I call for convenience my mind, wherever it may lie or whatever else it may be a part of." That statement holds true for all his books. In this recent on he does actually come back to his opening image at the end of the book which was a little unexpected but gave the text a stronger sense of closure than, say, *Inland* which, if my memory serves me right, just sort of stopped.

This appears to have been a real labour of love for him. In an interview on Vimeo he says he completed in in six months, one draft; most unusual for him.

I liked this book. I'm a fan and he'd have to work hard to produce something I didn't like. I even like all the stuff he's written about racehorses and I have absolutely no interest in horseracing. It's a demanding read but that's the point with Murnane: you have to *read* him. I was looking at a book recently—I forger the name of the author—and what I noticed was that you could literally read the first sentence of each paragraph and then jump to the next and everything in between felt like padding. You really can't do that with Murnane. My only proviso about this one is that, if possible, read it in a single sitting which is what I did. It'll take a few hours and by all means take a break after each of the thirty-four sections but I think you'd lose track if you tried to read the thing over several days.
