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**INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN M. RYAN**  
University of Louisville, Kentucky, July 2015



**Susan Ryan** received her PhD in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1999), with concentrations in American literature and American studies. Her research interests include U.S. reform movements; the history of authorship and reception; affect studies/cultural history of emotion; literatures of the American Civil War; archival and digital research methods; and American periodicals. She is the author of *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (2003) and is completing a book-length study titled “The Moral Economies of American Authorship,” under contract with Oxford University Press.

**Vesna Bratić** was born in Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She graduated from the Nikšić Faculty of Philosophy (Montenegro) and received her MPhil and PhD degrees in American Literature from the Belgrade Faculty of Philology (Serbia). Her areas of interest include postmodern literature, intercultural studies, film and visual culture, gender studies, women’s writing, etc. She is teaching English Literature at the Translation and Interpretation Department of the Faculty of Philology at the Montenegrin state university.

Vesna Bratić: Prof Ryan, you have been a professor of American Literature at the UofL for quite some time now. As a SUSI scholar I have had the pleasure of meeting you and some of your distinguished colleagues from the UofL but also from other American universities and discussing some challenging literary and cultural issues. One of the books that caught my attention particularly is Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The titular Goon is, as we will discover while reading the novel, Time. How do you think teaching literature has changed (or has had to be changed) over the past couple of decades? In her journey into what might be termed as near future, pictures millennials as, well, different from both Generation X and Generation Y. Generation X is, I suppose, the one that the two of us as well as most of our journal readers belong, your daughter is a millennial and our students are Generation Y. Egan says of Lulu, a millennial as "an embodiment of a new "handset employee": paperless, deskless, commutels and theoretically omnipresent (...) she was "clean": no piercing, tatoos, or scarifications." Egan has her own explanation for the cleanness of the millennials: they had to put up with the unpleasant sights of "three generations of flaccid tatoos droop like moth-eaten upholstery over poorly stuffed biceps and saggy asses." Literary tastes, aesthetics, cultural patterns can be often likened to a pendulum...Physics has never been my forte but I know as much as that every extreme movement (literally and metaphorically) causes an equally strong reaction which the quotation above kind of confirms. Most of my students would rather see a movie than read a book. Most of people would, actually. And the books that are sold and read are those that have a cinematic quality of sorts. Being very western culture oriented our reading public is into vampire narratives, exotic Middle East women narratives, (quasi) historical novels on British royalty but also popular(ized) western authors, mystical Tolkien or Tolkienlike kingdoms and gory fairy-tales of J.J. Martin, mysteries and chick-lit. Nobel winners and well-read magical realism Latin American authors are the only other authors deserving of book(stores) shelves. Right next to the umpteen shades of gray(ish) page turners...The question seems to be a couple of words too long. But it all boils down to these four :What do people like to read in the States? What do professors read? And what do their students read? How do you think literary preferences have changed if you compare your generation to the generations of students you have been teaching literature to?

Susan Ryan: These are hard questions for me to answer, for a number of reasons. First, I've long taught texts that students probably wouldn't

choose to read on their own (with the exception of maybe Emily Dickinson, some Melville), so it's hard for me to say how my students' tastes have changed over the 20-plus years I've been teaching literature. I'm also somewhat insulated from popular culture in that I haven't watched much TV in a very long time. We now have Netflix, so my daughter has introduced me to a few shows that she likes, but most of the media products I hear people talking about (Breaking Bad, Mad Men, Girls, The Walking Dead, etc.) I've never actually seen. In terms of what I read: obviously 19th-century literature (!), literary criticism, and cultural history. I've also come to enjoy some popular nonfiction (long-form journalism, the lighter end of science writing). I read some contemporary fiction and poetry, but not as much as I should. My favorite beach/vacation options are mysteries. One big change—twenty years ago I gravitated toward highbrow and avant-garde film. Now I watch films more as escapist entertainment and leave the harder intellectual work for my encounters with prose texts.

In watching what my daughter reads, I've noticed some significant changes. Early teen literature now seems much more weighted toward science fiction and fantasy, with a lot more multi-book series. I remember reading more single, one-off volumes. I also remember, at thirteen, trying to get my hands on books that I was told I was too young for—either because they were perceived as too difficult or too “mature” in theme. My daughter doesn't seem as self-consciously precocious in her reading habits—unless she's hiding the books more successfully than I ever did....

V.B.: You have been teaching Early American Literature and the 19th century Am Lit. Taking into consideration all the rapid changes to society and people's lives in the previous century how challenging is it to teach these courses. How do you make them familiar with the context. As we know well different schools of critics had very different views on the issue of “historicity” of literary texts. Some of them “banished” history altogether from the study of literature. As with the very literary production (a term quite adequate for the consumer's era) so with literary criticism, I believe the “pendulum theory” applies. The evident topical interest in “history” could also mean that it has gained in importance when it comes to understanding literary texts as well. At the end of the day, there is nothing outside the text, as Derrida put it brilliantly. So, while authors have been re-writing history and fictionalizing it, what do you think the place of real history (if there is such a thing as real(istic) history) is in teaching literature? How



important establishing historical background is for your particular courses?

S.R.: I spend a lot of time in my classes on historical context, partly because I'm fascinated by cultural history and partly because a lot of the texts I teach are fairly inaccessible to 21st-century students without some kind of contextualizing. I often assign magazine and newspaper pieces from the era in which a literary text was produced, to convey a sense of the era's popular cultural discourses. Throughout, I try to emphasize the following: 1] I take it as an axiom that the past is not less complicated than the present and so encourage students to be suspicious of any broad generalizations they may encounter regarding, say, New England Puritans or antebellum southerners or late 19th-century city-dwellers. Consensus and cultural homogeneity were as rare then as now. 2] Historical inquiry is more engaging and more productive if we at least attempt to understand the perspectives and belief systems of those we're studying. We may then choose to distance ourselves from those positions or pass moral judgment on them, but an attempt at understanding has to come first. 3] Original contexts and scenes of reading are crucial, but they're not the only elements I want to explore. Historicity also means looking at the ways in which a text might register differently over time and across different readerships, in the wake of various historical and cultural events, and in conversation with works produced and read since that initial publication. I find that those questions get more interesting, though, if we start with a serious inquiry into a text's moment of first composition, publication, and reception.

V.B.: Some time ago at a seminar, a colleague of ours mentioned a Facebook post she had read that morning: "Good morning America, what are we offended by today?" Yours is a society of extreme political correctness. There are so many ways to NOT be politically correct that sometimes the best policy is to keep one's mouth shut. On the other hand, freedom of speech is nowhere else held in such high esteem. How does this general attitude reflect on teaching and particularly on teaching literature as an area where, inevitably, one needs to tackle sensitive issues? David Mamets 1992 play *Oleanna* comes to mind because it is set in a university professor's office, as well as the recent Mat Johnson's campus novel *Pym*. Correct me if I am wrong, but I have read recently that students at some US universities can claim that a certain course matter is disturbing or offensive to them in which case

they do not have to take a test or do the required reading? I remember the seminar that our group of international scholars had with you on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It is a truly disturbing story and based on a true event to that. How can a scholar and a teacher be true to their profession and truth itself and whatever-it-is-that-might-be-deemed-offensive sensitive at the same time?

S.R.: Such an interesting question. I often find myself teaching texts that deal with slavery, sexual exploitation, and racism. Many of the works I teach are themselves quite racist, at least by contemporary standards. So this is something I think about often. The position I try to take is to acknowledge that these texts are troubling and in some cases downright offensive and to attempt, again, to put their tropes, rhetorical moves, and plot trajectories into some kind of meaningful historical context. But I also emphasize that an attempt to eliminate racist, sexist, imperialist, and heteronormative themes from the curriculum would probably mean not teaching American literature before 1900 at all—because there's little or nothing extant that meets the strictest current standards of tolerance and progressivism. Further, and perhaps more importantly, ignoring those texts in some sense lets Americans off the hook too easily—by which I mean that their erasure would allow us to cultivate an illusion of an egalitarian past, sensitive to difference and injustice, which is hardly the case. Finally, the 19th-century cultural field is rich enough that I'm very often able to find and teach counter-narratives—texts that quite self-consciously push back against the era's prejudices and blind spots. Those dissenting voices insist, again, that we recognize the complexity and multivocality of the past.