



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Modern Love:

A Comparison of Nick Hornby's High Fidelity and Juliet, Naked.

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Arnar Ásmundsson

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Abstract

In 1995 Nick Hornby published his first novel, *High Fidelity*, a story about obsession, love and the complications of modern life. Hornby published *Juliet, Naked* in 2009, where he tackles similar topics to those in *High Fidelity*. A key difference between these novels is the presence of the Internet in *Juliet, Naked*, which is not featured in *High Fidelity*. A comparison of *Juliet, Naked* and *High Fidelity* offers an interesting insight into Hornby's vision of life before and after the spread of the Internet, and how it has affected the characters' obsessions, communication and their lives in general.

This essay is, however, not limited to the changes the Internet has brought, as other topics are discussed in the essay's several chapters. The first chapter is a general introduction and is followed by a chapter containing background information on both Hornby and the novels, as well as illustrating how these novels were received by critics. The third chapter tackles a dominant theme in both books, obsession, especially male obsession with popular culture. The ensuing chapter deals with love and its complications, and how it is presented in both novels. The fifth chapter focuses on the Internet and the benefits and limitations it brings to modern life. The following chapter addresses the role of women in *Juliet, Naked* and *High Fidelity*, and how women are represented by Hornby, who has been labelled a lad lit writer. The last chapter concludes the essay with a general overview of the themes tackled in the previous chapters.

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the computer and the Internet have had their impact on modern life. In 1995, at the dawn of this new era, Nick Hornby published his first novel, *High Fidelity*¹. It is a pre-Internet story about Rob, a record store owner and a pop music obsessive, who is reevaluating his life in the aftermath of a break-up. In 2009 Hornby published another novel called *Juliet, Naked*², which tackles themes similar to those in *High Fidelity*; those of pop culture obsession, struggling relationships, male identity and of course love. No knowledge of *High Fidelity* is required to appreciate *Juliet Naked*; however, it can be maintained that familiarity with the former book gives the readers of the latter a wider perspective because of the novels' reciprocal subject matter.

The most prominent difference between the books is the presence of the Internet in *Juliet, Naked*, and how it affects modern life. Despite technological advances and the changes they bring, at the heart of both books are human stories about people trying to find love, happiness and in some cases, their identity. In his simple, unpretentious but effective style, Hornby creates interesting stories about complex but flawed people going through everyday life and the problems that they have.

Hornby's books have been labelled as lad lit, which could lead to the assumption that these are books about men for men. That is, however, not the case as Hornby depicts men as more immature and irresponsible than women, who are the voice of reason. Furthermore, the main character of *Juliet, Naked* is a woman who shares the narrative with two male characters, which is a departure from *High Fidelity* which has a sole male narrator.

A comparison between *High Fidelity* and *Juliet, Naked* shows that people's priorities and problems are still the same despite the spread of the Internet.

¹ All references to *High Fidelity* will be abbreviated *HF*.

² All references to *Juliet, Naked* will be abbreviated *JN*.

2. Background

Nick Hornby's first novel, *High Fidelity*, features the protagonist Rob; a man in his mid-thirties who is unable to find his purpose in life. At the beginning of the book Rob is contemplating the recent break-up with his long-term girlfriend Laura, who has left him for another man. What follows is a period of soul-searching for Rob, as he tries to find closure for all of his former relationships with women. Along the way, Rob exposes his relationship with Laura and the reasons she had for ending the relationship. Furthermore, through Rob, the world of pop music fanatics is introduced. Rob runs an independent record store in London, where he and his employees, Barry and Dick, live in their own little world dominated by popular culture and top five lists. As the story progresses, Rob tries to find his lost passion again and to breathe life back to into his relationship with Laura as he finally decides what really matters to him.

Juliet, Naked does not stray far away from its predecessor, for it also features men obsessed with music, but in the years between the novels considerable technological advances have affected modern life. The novel is about the strange love triangle of three people, Annie, Duncan and Tucker. Annie and Duncan are a couple living in a small English town called Gooleness, while Tucker is a retired and reclusive American musician who is unable to maintain a relationship with anyone but his youngest child. Tucker has always been a presence in Annie and Duncan's relationship as the latter's fascination with the musician has gone beyond what can be considered normal. Annie and Duncan's already fragile relationship begins to unravel after they declare their opposite opinions on an album by Tucker Crowe, called *Juliet, Naked*. It features demo versions of the songs on Tucker's most beloved album, *Juliet*, which was inspired by Tucker's break-up with a woman named Julie. Both Annie and Duncan post their individual review on a website Duncan created in honour of his hero, Tucker Crowe, and through this same website an electronic friendship between Annie and

Tucker is established. Ironically, the man who can be partly blamed for the end of the strange relationship between Annie and Duncan becomes the object of Annie's affection and later her lover. In an interview with *The Telegraph* Hornby explained how the story of *Juliet, Naked* came about: "The initial spur for the book was seeing this article in Vanity Fair about Sly Stone [another famously reclusive rocker]. But that also fed into some other stuff I'd been thinking about – mainly about how the internet has allowed people like Duncan to spend all day talking to one another" (Hornby, "Nick Hornby interview").

High Fidelity, along with Hornby's autobiographical *Fever Pitch*, and his third book, *About a Boy*, pushed him to the forefront of a genre called lad lit, which Elaine Showalter describes as "romantic, comic, popular male confessional literature". All three books share the same theme, of men whose lifestyle does not rhyme with the conventional lives of their contemporaries. *Juliet, Naked* shares many of the sentiments of the lad lit genre with one large exception; the main character is a woman. The book depicts a similar suspect male behaviour as in *High Fidelity* but with the added female perspective. Despite what literary genre these books belong to, Hornby has written human stories that appeal to men and women alike, albeit not for the same reason according John Crace, "Male readers love him because he writes to their condition; women like him because he confirms what they've always suspected about the limitations of the male mind".

The similarities between *High Fidelity* and *Juliet, Naked* did not escape the critics upon the release of the latter. Laurence Phelan says, "Being about relationships, male emotional retardation and obsessive musical fandom, *Juliet, Naked* will appeal to those Hornby readers who still consider *High Fidelity* his funniest and finest novel". Phelan goes on comparing the novels by using a cultural reference in the style of Hornby himself, "But it's a more mature work, about older people with a greater inertial force acting upon them, and more keenly felt regrets: the Blood on the Tracks to *High Fidelity*'s Freewheelin' Bob Dylan.

It is also very much in a minor key”. Niall Stange from the *Wall Street Journal* is convinced that *Juliet, Naked* falls nicely into place with Hornby’s previous books: “‘Juliet, Naked’ will neither win over his detractors nor disappoint his admirers”. Like Phelan, Stange draws comparison between *Juliet, Naked* and *High Fidelity*, “‘Juliet, Naked’ is solid but lacks the punch of the superb ‘High Fidelity’”. Traci McNamara does not share Stange’s opinion stating, “*Juliet, Naked* will delight Nick Hornby’s loyal fans, and it’s sure to attract a new following”. Further, Janet Maslin writes in *The New York Times*, “In maneuvering and manipulating these characters, Mr. Hornby, the author of ‘High Fidelity,’ is on safe and inviting terrain. He knows all about the get-a-life pop-cultural obsessive who can devote himself to the study of someone else’s career and declare himself a ‘world expert’ on the subject”. Hornby’s fellow writer Julie Myerson seconds Maslin’s opinion stating, “No one writes about music, and the emotional space it takes up, like Hornby”. However, Hornby’s decision to tackle familiar topics does not please all critics, Ron Charles writes, “Still, I can’t help feeling a little disappointed that this immensely talented writer isn’t willing to move outside his comfort zone. So much of this new novel recalls his earlier work, including a tendency toward cloying moralizing, and 400 pages is a lot to balance on the back of one’s charm”. While the reviews might influence the potential reader of Hornby’s books, they do not seem to bother Hornby:

The thing is, I don’t get a lot of pleasure from good reviews while bad ones can hurt. And they all tend to be much the same, don’t they? A 300-word synopsis, 300 words recapping your career and 300 words saying you’re either an a??? or you’re not. People claim you can learn a lot from reading reviews, but I’m not sure if that’s true. I mean, I’ve spent a lot more time thinking about the book than they have. (Hornby, “Nick Hornby interview”)

Hornby's most distinct writing characteristic is his simple style; he does not rely on difficult words and complicated metaphors to convey his message. Hornby's charm comes from his humorous observations about everyday life. Fellow writer Chris Savage King has described Hornby as "a relaxed and natural writer" and compared him to "a nice squashy sofa into which you can settle in comfort, knowing you won't be bored or disappointed". *The Guardian* calls Hornby's style "fluent, informal, no fancy stuff" (Hornby, "Laughing"). Mark Jolly reviewing *High Fidelity* for *The New York Times* states: "Plain and simple language -- Mr. Hornby's trademark -- is supposed to wrestle the truth from all literary artifice. But as with pop music itself, beneath the simplicity lies a multitude of nuances". However, according to Phelan, Hornby's simplistic style may not always work in his favour, "If his prose wasn't so refreshingly transparent and conversational, and his subject matter so seemingly prosaic, the sophistication of his enquiries into human nature would be recognised more often". What Phelan seems to be suggesting, is that Hornby's unpretentious style of writing diminishes the rich meaning of his text; it is not enough to tell an interesting story since the writer is expected to simultaneously dazzle readers with his linguistic abilities. Hornby does not share that opinion: "I do not wish to produce prose that draws attention to itself, rather than the world it describes" (as qtd. in Hornby, "Middle"). Hornby's decision to write a readable text originates in an idea that nobody is excluded from reading his books:

I think part of the reason I became a writer I became is because of teaching in a school, and you're always looking for this stuff that is really intelligent but really simple and everyone can understand it. I always thought *Of Mice And Men* was such a perfect book because there's nothing not to understand, but it's still really clever and moving and complicated, but everybody understands the complication. It doesn't leave anybody out. I think that's what books should be like. (Hornby, "Laughing")

3. Obsession

Both *High Fidelity* and *Juliet, Naked*, feature men who are obsessed with pop culture and live their lives through music, movies and books. These men do not define themselves by class, wealth or employment, but by their taste in popular culture: impeccable taste, at least in their own judgement. They then use this taste level to judge the character of other people by inspecting their cultural preferences. More often than not, these views are voiced to the person with the offending taste since these men find it their duty to educate the less fortunate.

In *Juliet, Naked*, Duncan bases his views on other people on their taste in culture and it is his long-time girlfriend, Annie, who is the main subject of his judgemental outbursts. When Annie voices her disappointment with Tucker Crowe's album, *Juliet, Naked*, Duncan judges her harshly "...I'm so disappointed in you, Annie. I thought you were better than that" (*JN* 30). And later in the same argument he says to his girlfriend, "I didn't say you were a moron. I said you were a moron if you can't hear anything in this" (*JN* 30). Having read Annie's review of *Juliet, Naked*, Duncan contemplates, "How had she ever managed to read or see or listen to anything and come to the right conclusion about its merits?" (*JN* 41). When Duncan meets a young fellow fan named Elliot in San Francisco, he quickly decides how inferior the young man is compared to himself. With great self-importance Duncan thinks, "Elliot has surely never written about Crowe - or, if he had, the work would almost certainly have been unpublishable" (*JN* 30). Such is Duncan's arrogance that he diminishes Annie's confidence in her own musical preferences, "Listening to music was something that she did, too, frequently and with great enjoyment, and Duncan somehow managed to spoil it, partly by making her feel that she was no good at it" (*JN* 36).

However, it is not just Duncan who is guilty of cultural snobbery, since Tucker Crowe does not think highly of those who like his *Juliet* album. When Annie and Tucker argue about the merits of the original *Juliet* album Tucker says, "See ...It's like I'm a chef, and you're

eating in my restaurant, and you're telling me how great my food is. But I know I pissed all over it before I served it up. So, you know, your opinion is valid, but ...” (JN 203). It is an interesting angle that Hornby offers on cultural snobbery, showing a musician's distaste for the people who like his work. Tucker's negative feelings towards his own album are based on his own actions that make the lyrics on the album less true for him. Consequently, Tucker has little regard for people who find emotional depth in art that is based on a lie. Annie, meanwhile, is able to separate the artist from the art, telling Tucker, “You know that bad people can make great art, don't you?” (JN 203), and soon after adds, “It doesn't matter how it came about. You think it was all accidental. But like or not, believe it or not, the music that Julie inspired was wonderful” (JN 203).

In *High Fidelity*, the male characters show the same pattern of behaviour as they do in *Juliet, Naked*. Rob and his two employees find their self-esteem in their vast knowledge of pop music, and they have limited patience for people who do not share their enthusiasm. When a customer asks Barry why he cannot have the Stevie Wonder record he is seeking, Barry answers, “Because it's sentimental, tacky crap, that's why not. Do we look like the sort of shop that sells fucking ‘I Just Called to Say I Love You,’ eh? Now, be off with you, and don't waste our time” (HF 53). Barry later adds about the customer, “He offended me with his terrible taste” (HF 54). Barry uses his most valuable skill, his self-proclaimed superior cultural knowledge, to demonstrate his worth in the world. The three co-workers have even established criteria to measure a person's seriousness; if one's record collection counts fewer than five hundred records the same person fails to constitute as a serious person (HF 209). Rob, Barry and Dick have become so isolated in their world of pop culture that they had “agreed that what really matters is what you like, not what you are like” (HF 117). Rob might be aware of how isolated from normal life he has become in his obsession, but he feels that he is relatively normal compared to his quirky employees as evidenced by the following:

Both Dick and Barry were employed to work part-time, three days each, but shortly after I'd taken them on they both started to turn up every day, including Saturdays. I didn't know what to do about it - if they really had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do, I didn't want to, you know, draw attention to it, in case it prompted some sort of spiritual crisis-so I upped their money a bit and left it at that (*HF* 41).

Rob makes a further claim for his normalcy in the lonely world of music obsession during a visit to a club with Barry and Dick, "There are a lot single men here - not single as in unmarried but single as in no friends" (*HF* 60).

Rob, Barry and Dick have a different and simpler way of expressing their thoughts on music than Duncan has with his online Tucker congregation. For Rob and his two employees the preferred way of measuring the merit of music and perhaps everything else in life is the top 5 list. The top five does not require arguments of one's opinion, a person will be judged on the quality of the list in question. Rob is as guilty as his employees in coming up with endless streams of top five lists, but Barry is the real instigator of the practice, as evidenced by Rob's words: "But his conversation is simply enumeration: if he has seen a good film, he will not describe the plot, or how it made him feel, but where it ranks in his best-of-year list- he thinks and talks in tens and fives, and as a consequence, Dick and I do too" (*HF* 42).

Duncan, meanwhile, considers himself a scholar, and the aspirations for the Tucker website are high: "The bulk of the content, though, consisted of essays analysing lyrics, or discussing influences, or conjecturing, apparently inexhaustibly, about the silence" (*JN* 6). Late in the story he claims to be "a serious scholar" (*JN* 220), a statement that seems to have little merit in the minds of Annie and Tucker, although Duncan's status on the website is undisputed. The sensible Annie harbours judgement that appears to have eluded the self-professed Tucker scholars: "Annie had never really understood how Duncan and his fellow fans could be quite so certain about tiny private tumults that took place decades ago, but they were" (*JN* 9), and

later Tucker's own thoughts establish how wrong these people really are (*JN* 53). The top five lists of Rob, Barry and Dick may not be deep or clever, but they are a way for them to state their preferences, and have none of the consequences that the ill-informed writings of Duncan and his peers have.

The question of proper taste in popular culture is a concern for the men in their romantic relationships. The termination of Annie's and Duncan's relationship can be traced to their different views on the *Juliet, Naked* album; Annie finally realizing how different she and Duncan really are. Just as Duncan had always tried to influence Annie with his opinions, Rob and Dick treat their girlfriends with the same condescension. Dick treats newfound girlfriend, Anna, to endless lectures on what constitutes as good music so she will become the person he wants her to be, rather than person she really is. When Dick shares that "Anna's a Simple Minds fan" (*HF* 160), he is quick to add, "But I think she's beginning to understand why she shouldn't be. Aren't you?" (*HF* 160). Rob, though perhaps less dysfunctional than Dick, demonstrates the same suspecting behaviour towards Laura as is evidenced after their break-up. Rob tries to return records to Laura which he assumes are hers but she says, "They're not really, though, are they? I know you bought them for me, and that was really sweet of you, but that was when you were trying to turn me into you" (*HF* 211). Duncan, Rob and Dick desperately want to bring their partners up on the same level of pop cultural expertise that they have claimed to have reached, despite the women's own preferences. The ideal woman for the obsessed man is one who does not disappoint him with her inferior taste.

Duncan has different motives for trying to change Annie into a Tucker enthusiast than Rob and Dick have for their behaviour towards their girlfriends. Duncan, living in a small town with few if any kindred spirits, desperately wants Annie to be his pop culture companion. He harbours no passionate feelings, be they sexual or romantic, towards Annie, so Duncan seeks to turn Annie into a person that he can share his most important interest with,

Tucker Crowe. Rob and Barry, meanwhile, don't want their girlfriends to be an embarrassment to them in their little, snobby popular cultural world. They follow an agenda of changing their girlfriends into people with cultural preferences that are acceptable to their peers. Rob and Barry prejudicially determine people's character on the merit of their taste, and they know that those around them do the same. Therefore, their girlfriends must be brought up to their unquestionable level of good taste.

According to Hornby, the world of music obsession is inhabited only by men. In the cult of Tucker there are certainly no women; obsession is a man's sport. When a co-worker asks Annie if she frequents the Tucker Crowe website, she answers, "No. There are no women who bother" (*JN* 37). Annie uses art and more to the point Tucker's music to enrich rather than let it become her life. Hornby mocks this male obsession even further when Duncan sends *Juliet, Naked* to the other Tucker fanatics, "Tomorrow morning, a handful of middle-aged men would be regretting that they had gone to bed much too late" (*JN* 32). There is a similar sentiment to Hornby's *High Fidelity* where the protagonist, Rob, states he is able to run his record store because of the "young men, always young men" who do business with him (*HF* 37). The isolated world of music fanaticism is one of no compromise; Rob, Barry, Dick and Duncan see it as their quest to bring people into their world rather than forsake their pride and lead more conventional lives.

Both books contain instances where the male characters find themselves in situations where they believe the best person to provide help in their predicaments is their favourite musician. Many years too late, Rob realizes that Charlie, who he once thought was the love of his life, is in fact not the person he thought she was. After listing her faults, he thinks, "What would Bruce Springsteen make of Charlie?" (*HF* 193). Duncan finds himself in a situation where advice is needed, preferably from his idol. Taking the consequences of the affair with Gina, Duncan is moving out of his former home but has trouble deciding what he should take

with him. “Not for the first time, Duncan wished that he knew Tucker personally. He would very much like to ask him what he took with him when he moved out of one life and into another” (*JN* 91). Duncan sees Tucker as an expert concerning the aftermath of break-ups since he has written an album about heartbreak and its consequences. Similarly, Rob thinks Bruce Springsteen would be an appropriate person to seek advice from, as Springsteen is famous for writing songs about everyday people facing familiar problems. Hornby does, however, write about the danger of taking song lyrics too literally in *Juliet, Naked*, as Tucker talks about people who have moved to seaside towns “because they had failed to spot the romanticism and poetic licence in Bruce Springsteen’s early album [but] ... always came back appalled by the vulgarity, the malevolence and the drunkenness” (*JN* 199). People cannot make the mistake of taking art too literally; the world that the artist depicts is not necessarily an honest representation of normal life. That is precisely the trap that Duncan, among others, falls into, when he invests too heavily in the concept of Tucker’s album *Juliet*. Songs about true love gone wrong can make the listeners, who are unable to recognize fact from fiction, feel like they have not and may not experience that kind of passionate love. The mundane life of normal people which requires performing difficult tasks every day can seem unglamorous compared to the life of true love like it is often depicted in popular culture.

The subplots of *Juliet, Naked* feature men who compulsively follow their interests, much to the dismay of their wives. Annie’s attempt to meet a man in Gooleness results in her meeting with Barnesy, a man obsessed with northern soul dancing, a scene which is in its dying days. Barnesy, like the other fanatical men in Hornby’s books, receives little understanding from his wife, “She hates all-nighters. She hates Northern. She likes bloody ... I don’t know. Girls with big hair who’ve won them talent shows”, before adding, “We’ve nothing in common” (*JN* 138). Similarly obsessive is Terry, the man responsible for the idea of the museum putting on an exhibition dedicated to Gooleness in 1964, the year the Rolling

Stones visited the town. Terry, clearly trying to cling on to a happy period in his life, has a full room of memorabilia from that era. His wife, just like other women in relationships with obsessed men, does not appreciate Terry's collection.

For every one of the men, the reason for the preoccupation seems to stem from their reluctance to leave behind what once made them happy. They are frightened that they cannot find similar happiness in something else. Rob prides himself on not changing, that he still wears the same clothes as he did when he met Laura. The fact that Laura has changed is a sign of weakness, she is conforming to society's wishes; pressure Rob refuses to succumb to. However, the reality is that Rob secretly wishes that life had not changed from the time that they met, which was a great time for both of them. However, while she moves on, he cannot. Similarly, Barnesy and Terry are preoccupied with the periods in their lives when they were on top of the world. Letting go of this would be to admit that their best days are behind them.

4. Love

In both novels romantic love is portrayed as an uncertain entity rather than the storybook version when two individuals find true love in each other and live happily ever after. It could be claimed that for the characters in Hornby's books there is no such thing as true love; everybody doubts their relationships and has difficulty deciding whether they are with the right person. Certainly, there is attraction and love between people but there is always doubt about long-term commitment, about whether the person is the right one or not, or if the right person exists at all. Matters of the heart are what concern Hornby's characters the most, despite changes in time and technology.

In the case of Rob and Laura, their relationship was not founded on feelings of intense passion, as if they were meant to be together. Reminiscing about the beginnings of the relationship, Rob says, "I never had any wild crush on her, and that used to worry me about

the long-term future” (*HF* 90). Rob’s passive feelings towards Laura do not fit the Romeo and Juliet template of the undying love, but rather the contrary as evidenced by Rob’s words:

“There weren’t any sleepless nights or losses of appetite or agonizing waits for the phone to ring for either of us” (*HF* 91). The question Hornby poses is whether it is possible for a person to find something resembling real love, and whether people want romantic relationships to relieve boredom and loneliness; a problem that can be solved by finding a like-minded person to spend time with rather than being alone.

Hornby does not subscribe to the popular literary notion that two people are made for each other and are not interested in anyone else. For Rob and Laura there is always uncertainty whether they think they are right for each other. Discussing the nature of the relationship, they both admit having thoughts of meeting a new partner (*HF* 100). Rob’s main problem is his vanity; he can cope with a break-up as long as the other individual still wants him. He is not sure if he wants to spend his life with Laura, but if somebody has to leave, Rob would prefer it to be him: “I could see her losing interest in me, so I worked like mad to get that interest back, and when I got it back, I lost interest in her all over again” (*HF* 102). And Rob’s wounded pride is further evidenced by his musings, “When I saw Laura outside the shop I knew absolutely, without any question at all, that I wanted her again. But that’s probably because she’s the one doing the rejecting” (*HF* 110). Rob’s self-esteem is connected to his fear of being rebuffed by Laura and is evidenced by the expression of his feelings, “In other words, I’m unhappy because she doesn’t want me; if I can convince myself that she does want me a bit, then I’ll be OK again, because then I won’t want her, and I can get on with looking for someone else” (*HF* 110). Rob’s way of thinking regarding the other sex has put him in a situation where the possibility of a normal, balanced relationship cannot be reached. If someone loves him back and wants to be with him, he loses interest but if the same individual shows signs of disinterest, he desperately wants to cling on to her. Rob’s whole

problem with the other sex may be traced to his doubts about his own self. His way of dealing with that insecurity is winning the affection of a woman that seems disinterested in him, and if he succeeds in his quest, he no longer needs the woman in question. The insecurity that requires him to seek unattainable women might be the reason why he abandons them when they show interest; if they like him, a self-proclaimed average man, they are probably not that special in the first place.

As in Rob and Laura's case, the relationship between Annie and Duncan was not initiated on passionate feelings and has never since been characterized by those terms. In the beginning they had started to see each other for the sole reason of being with someone rather than being alone; two new arrivals in a small town, who shared interests but were never in love. In Annie's opinion the reason they stuck together was "their contempt for the town they lived in, and the people they lived with" (*JN* 115). After fifteen years of being together there were few signs of progression in their relationship. "And they had stayed like that for ever, stuck in a perpetual postgraduate world where gigs and books and films mattered more to them than they did to other people of their age" (*JN* 7). Duncan's interest in Tucker escalates over the fifteen year period, to the point that the musician has become a significant presence in their lives. Annie is co-dependent with Duncan in his over-eager interest in Tucker, and it is only when she withdraws her support that their relationship starts to crack.

Annie and Duncan's strange relationship is difficult to define because it does not have any of the attributes that make people want to be together. There is no romantic love between them, although it bothers Annie more than it does Duncan. Contemplating the idea of having a child, Annie thinks, "She wanted to feel unconditional love, rather than the faint conditional love affection she could scrape together for Duncan every now and again; she wanted to be held by someone who would never question the embrace, the why or the who or the how long" (*JN* 7). Judging by her feelings, there does not seem to be any logical reason why Annie

should still be with her partner. Duncan, likewise, has few passionate feelings towards Annie; however, it does not seem to bother him: “It was OK, Duncan thought, that he and Annie had never been in love. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, and it had functioned perfectly well: friends had matched up their interests and temperaments carefully, and they’d got it right” (*JN* 73). For Duncan it was enough to have someone to share his interests with rather than finding passionate love. Duncan does harbour some passion, but he is more comfortable experiencing it from the popular culture he consumes instead of wanting it from real life (*JN* 73-74). Annie and Duncan’s growing incompatibility is illustrated in Annie’s thoughts: “Annie could imagine herself as a mother, but Duncan was nobody’s idea of a father, and anyway, neither of them would have felt comfortable applying cement to the relationship in that way” (*JN* 7). Many modern couples delay having children in order to establish a career first, but that is not the reason in Annie and Duncan’s case. In fact, “The decision not to have children had never been taken, and nor had there been any discussion resulting in a postponement of the decision” (*JN* 7). Annie increasingly wishes to have a child, but their relationship is not one to base a family on and never was. The only reason they stayed together for so long is because of Annie’s apathy, and because Duncan was relatively happy to have a friend instead of a lover.

Love is not the only important factor lost in Annie and Duncan’s relationship; there is little if any sexual attraction between the two and it has been that way from the beginning. The lack of chemistry between Annie and Duncan is obvious, even to complete strangers. On their vacation in America they both enter a men’s toilet in a bar for an innocent reason connected with the history of Tucker, but catch the attention of the bartender who is suspicious of their behaviour. However, the barman clearly thought they were not a couple who would initiate a sexual encounter in there (*JN* 2). Contemplating her strange relationship, Annie wonders, “If Tucker was the husband, then Annie should somehow have become the

mistress, but of course that wasn't right – the word was much too exotic and implied a level of sexual activity that would horrify them both nowadays. It would have daunted them even in the early days of their relationship” (*JN* 6). The uneventful sex life of Duncan and Annie cannot be blamed on Annie's disinterest, as evidenced by her revaluation of their fifteen-year-long relationship, “They had never been the most highly sexed couple, but whoever kept score of these things would say he'd turned down her overtures more than she'd turned down his” (*JN* 125).

At the end of both books the main characters find themselves in romantic relationships, either with new partners or reunited with former lovers. Though it is hinted that these relationships might last, no certainty is offered. Rob and Laura end up having resumed their relationship and Rob seems to have matured, though he has a difficult time keeping his mind from wandering. Annie, however, decides to take a chance on Tucker, a man with a questionable record where relationships are concerned. Though Hornby does not show it explicitly, the very end of the book offers great hope for Tucker and Annie; posts from the message board of Tucker's website tell that Tucker has released a new album which contains songs of happiness, much to the dismay of the fans of the *Juliet* album. It could be maintained that Tucker's new album is the opposite of his most famous work, and a likely interpretation is that he and Annie are happy together and in her he has found a reason to start writing songs again. Duncan's affair with Gina is left unresolved, they are still together when the book ends but a glimpse into the mind of Duncan shows that he feels he acted with too much haste when he decided to sleep with her (*JN* 213). However, because Gina is enthusiastic both about Duncan and Tucker's music, he might feel that time is better spent with her than being alone. She could replace Annie in a passive relationship functioning as protection against boredom and the inferior people of Gooleness.

5. Technology

In the years that have passed between the publications of *High Fidelity* and *Juliet, Naked*, the world has seen significant changes in technology, especially in ways of communication. These changes may have altered certain aspects of modern life, but they do not provide answer for the characters' most vital questions, concerning love and happiness. *High Fidelity* is written and takes place just before the Internet became commonplace. *Juliet, Naked*, however, is a contemporary story where the characters use computers as a place where people share and seek information, communicate, and find and listen to music. The book uses certain aspects of the Internet to introduce information to the reader. Hornby writes a realistic Wikipedia entry for the fictional Tucker Crowe, which features both correct and incorrect information about its subject. Also, Tucker and Annie's initial relationship is depicted through their e-mail correspondence. Furthermore, the book cleverly ends with forum posts that show that Tucker Crowe has released a new album not favoured by once loyal fans.

The different ways in which Rob and Duncan consume music illustrate the changes that have taken place in the music industry in the time between the two books. While the CD format was taking over the market in the time of *High Fidelity*, it is still vinyl and the cassette Rob and his contemporaries prefer. Fast forward to 2009 and music in digital format has become the choice of the market, even CDs have given way to computers and MP3 players. Annie likes the technology that modern life has brought her as evidenced by her thoughts: "She wasn't, she liked to think, a nostalgic, or a Luddite. She preferred her iPod to Duncan's old vinyl, she enjoyed having hundreds of TV channels to choose from, and she loved her digital camera" (JN 20). Similarly, Duncan welcomes the changes in the way music can be delivered:

Because it meant that recorded music wasn't, as he previously always understood, a thing at all – a CD, a piece of plastic, a spool of tape. You could

reduce to its essence, and its essence was literally intangible. This made the music better, more beautiful, more mysterious, as far he was concerned. People who knew of his relationship with Tucker expected him to be a vinyl nostalgic, but the new technology had made his passions more romantic, not less. (*JN* 26)

Rob, however, is not just emotionally attached to the music, as the records themselves also play a big part in his enthusiasm. “Is it so wrong, wanting to be at home with your record collection?” (*HF* 83), muses Rob at one point, illustrating how intense his interest is. He is able to connect his albums to a certain period in his life and at one time reorganizes his collection in the order he acquired them (*HF* 54). Rob, Barry and Dick’s interest is not merely exhausting for the time it takes for them to listen to the music, but also all the extra-curricular activities that are associated with it, organizing the collection, taping albums and, of course, making mix-tapes. Today’s technology has made these tasks either obsolete, or at least much less time consuming. It is interesting to consider whether Rob and his co-workers would have liked this progress or if they would prefer music in a physical format with a certain smell and touch, as well as the accompanying artwork.

Another aspect that has been lost with music being bought and downloaded online is the human interaction that happens between people at the record store. Although Hornby depicts the music fans as lonely and sometimes strange men, they at least come in direct human contact when seeking new music at the record store. Of course, people can seek like-minded individuals on the Internet but it also puts a certain limit on the communication. It lacks the direct confrontation of when people meet in person, not to mention the certainty of knowing that people are who they say they are. As Rob describes his employees it is easy to see what has been lost with the digitalization of music. “Dick is as patient and as enthusiastic and as gentle as a primary school teacher: he sells people records they didn’t know they wanted because he knows intuitively what they should be” (*HF* 97). “Barry, meanwhile,

simply bulldozes customers into submission” (*HF* 97). It is difficult to imagine that a record store, such as Championship Vinyl, could have survived the technological revolution of the Internet, and consequently, what men like Rob, Barry and Dick would do in the aftermath. With their vast knowledge of pop music, perhaps the only outlet for their wisdom would be the Internet.

That is indeed the case in *Juliet, Naked* when Duncan creates a website dedicated to Tucker Crowe. There, Duncan and the other Crowe fanatics exchange information, theories and other thoughts on the music and the life of their idol, resulting in them having more in common with each other rather than the people they share their real lives with. The internet dramatically changes Duncan’s fascination with Crowe. Before he would sporadically meet fellow fans but “now the nearest fans lived in Duncan’s laptop, and there were hundreds of them, from all around the world, and Duncan spoke to them all the time” (*JN* 6). However, it is not only the time they spend online, but also the effort they have put into coming up with their theories, prompting Annie to tell Duncan: “I know ‘Get a life’ is a cliché. But if these people actually had anything to do all day, they wouldn’t have time to write his lyrics out backwards to see if there were any hidden messages in them” (*JN* 106).

For Duncan, the internet serves both as source of liberation and isolation. On his website he gets in touch with people who share his admiration of Tucker Crowe. There Duncan is able to act as a big fish in a really small pond, but as his attention increasingly turns towards Tucker to prove his worth on the website, his ability to connect to those around him diminishes. As he digs further and further into Tucker’s life and work, the only people he is able to converse with are other specialists on the same subject. Duncan prefers to interact with people on the Internet for it does not require as much from him as regular friendship. There he can control the closeness of the relationships he has with the people he meets. In real life Duncan is reluctant to meet new people in case he would put himself in a situation beyond his

control: “Duncan and Annie had never made any friends on holiday: Duncan was always terrified of speaking to anybody, in case they should ‘get stuck’” (JN 21). This does not apply only to holidays but his everyday life. Communicating with other Tucker fans on the website gives him a chance to express himself without the possibility of allowing people to get too close to him, but at the same time it decreases his skills in having functional relationships with other people in real life. His priorities are evidenced by his actions; he makes sure that his iPod is fully charged while the mobile phone’s empty battery is a later inconvenience (JN 22). Listening to music is more important than being available for those who may want to reach him. The iPod provides Duncan with further shelter from people who might want to approach him, while the mobile phone does the exact opposite; it decreases Duncan’s control over his communication with other people.

Juliet, Naked also touches on the questionable authenticity of some on the information on the web. Though the fans frequenting the Tucker Crowe fansite take themselves very seriously and write earnest essays about Tucker’s music, their knowledge about his personal life is very limited as evidenced by Tucker’s own thoughts: “And just about every single scrap of the biographical trivia about him that floated around the internet like so much space-junk was all untrue, as far as he could tell” (JN 53). The measures the fans take to gain the information they crave go well beyond what can be considered normal and are more similar to the ways of the paparazzi and the tabloids; showing that although the fans claim to seriously value Tucker’s art, they are still incapable of separating their fascination with his art from their worship of him. What increases the fans’ interest in Tucker is the uncertainty surrounding his retirement and his life ever since. Tucker, with his reluctance to share information about his life, has gained a mythical status amongst his followers and an image that has nothing in common with the real man.

However, Hornby's story also shows the Internet's positive features. The relationship between Annie and Tucker is initiated online and illustrates that through the Internet, two like-minded people from different continents are able to find each other, although it is by pure chance. For Annie, meeting a potential lover in her small town with an aging population is quite difficult as her efforts have proven and therefore the Internet proves useful to her. Ironically, Annie and Tucker meet through Tucker's fansite, a webpage that Tucker dislikes as much as the people that contribute to it. Still, Tucker finds the time to read the content of the website. Strangely he does not use this technology to keep in touch with his children, who are scattered around the world, calling into question his priorities in life.

6. Women

The female characters in Hornby's books are figures of responsibility, especially compared to the immature and careless men. Both Laura and Annie want grown-up lives, while their partners are stuck searching for a dream that eluded them a long time ago. This friction creates a gap in their relationships as the males are unable to find the maturity to seek the opportunities which are there for the taking, if only they could be bothered. While the men may not be happy with their lives, they lack the ability to find courage to seek alternative ways of happiness. Although Rob, Duncan and Tucker often gain the sympathy of the reader it is often difficult to understand why their partners are attracted to them.

High Fidelity demonstrates the difference between the males and the females; the women are able to change their course in life while their spouses idly watch as life passes by. Rob's inability to change, rather than Laura's success, is the reason the two have split up in the beginning of the novel. Laura tries to open Rob's eyes to the fact that he has become stuck in a rut and that only he can make the necessary changes: "I'm just trying to wake you up. I'm just trying to show that you've lived half your life, but all you've got to show for it you might

as well be nineteen, and I'm not talking about money or property or furniture" (*HF* 267).

However, she does not only draw attention to what is wrong, she also shows how easily he could improve himself: "You have all the basic ingredients. You're really very likable, when you put your mind to it. You make people laugh, when you can be bothered, and you're kind, and when you decide you like someone then that person feels as though she's the center of the whole world, and that's a very sexy feeling. It's just that most of the time you can't be bothered" (*HF* 265).

Later, Laura adds Rob should be more proactive, saying "Something more than waiting for life to change and keeping your options open" (*HF* 266). Rob finds the fact that he stayed the same a mark of respect while the others who changed have somehow sold out. Talking to Laura he mentions that they used be the same people but are not anymore: "You were the sort of person that came to the Groucho and I was the sort of person that played the records. You wore leather jackets and T-shirts, and so did I. And I still do, and you don't" (*HF* 270). Laura has made the necessary changes to meet the demands of the law profession and Rob finds it difficult to accept that people have to conform to certain professional demands to prosper in adult life. This friction between Rob and Laura is not diminished by the fact that Laura is a successful lawyer earning good money while Rob is struggling with his record shop, and has accepted money from Laura to make ends meet. Hornby illustrates here the progress that has been made in the equality of the sexes. No longer can the man expect to be more successful professionally than the woman. For men of Rob's generation that is a big change, as they grew up with the idea that the man was supposed to provide for the family. Unlike their fathers, Rob and his generation do not have a concrete notion of what their role is as males in modern society, which can explain their refusal to grow up.

The same sentiments about the rationality of women are repeated in *Juliet, Naked*. Annie's vision of the world is much broader than that of Duncan, whose views become

narrower as he sinks deeper into his Tucker obsession. On their vacation in the United States, Duncan is only interested in things connected with Tucker while Annie wants to visit more conventional landmarks. This reflects their differences. Annie wants her life to progress as she is unhappy with current conditions, but Duncan is still living the life of the college student. The status he has on the Tucker website and living in a small town where he feels superior to everyone else has led Duncan to overestimate his intelligence. “He knew nothing about anything, and she’d never really allowed herself to notice until now” (JN 36), are Annie’s thoughts after she and Duncan fight about the merits of *Juliet, Naked*. And she continues with her critique of Duncan, “She’d always thought that his passionate interest in music and film and books indicated intelligence, but of course it didn’t have to indicate anything of the sort, if he constantly got the wrong end of the stick” (JN 36). Duncan does, however, swallow his pride with regard to his view on *Juliet, Naked*, and later receives a further blow when his new lover, Gina, challenges him on the meaning of Tucker’s lyrics which causes him to think, “Maybe he’d spent too long translating something that had been written in English all the time” (JN 192). This sentence could apply to the way Duncan has been living his life, though he is only thinking it in terms of Tucker’s art. Duncan’s arrogance has made him believe that he is an all-knowing authority on Tucker Crowe, and while he has encyclopaedic knowledge of his idol, he lacks the insight that most others seem to have. His view, both on Tucker and life in general, has become so narrow that he is unable to see the big picture. It is telling that Hornby lets a woman challenge Duncan on his lyric interpretation rather than one of the men from the website, because both Annie and Gina have critical skills that have escaped Duncan.

Tucker, just like his biggest fan, is a man with many faults and is fully dependent on the many women in his life. His life is very complicated as he has five children with four different women, three of whom have raised four of his children without much help from him. Only to his youngest child, Jackson, has he been a real father, but then again Jackson’s

mother, Cat, is left with the responsibility of providing for the family: “Cat, like your average American dad, hadn’t seen much of Jackson since the first six months of his life. She’d been too busy keeping food on the table” (*JN* 94). Without employment since he retired from the music business and suffering from alcoholism for most of that time, Tucker has not been the ideal partner for the women in his life.

The women in these two novels by Hornby differ from the men in the way they understand the surrounding world. They know that compromises have to be made, and growing up means discarding the youthful ideals the men want to cling to forever. It could be claimed that both Anna and Laura have relationships with men who are not good enough for them, and that this is the women’s biggest weakness. Both Rob and Duncan arrogantly try to change their partners into a female version of themselves and it is only when the women leave them that they are able to see the error of their ways. However, the women do somehow see the potential in these flawed men as proven by Laura and Rob’s reunion and Annie’s falling in love with Tucker, a man with a questionable past regarding relationships. Despite the imperfection of the male characters, they still manage to capture the reader’s empathy and Lucy Kellway articulates the reason behind this: “This is the thing about Hornby. He fixes on people who don’t get, and possibly don’t even deserve, much sympathy and then he sympathises with them. This is where much of the genius in his writing lies: to be funny and nasty is easy; to be funny and nice is much harder”. It might surprise many that Hornby, a lad lit writer, shows women in more favourable light than men. Furthermore, what causes the women’s unhappiness in their relationships is the men’s inability to act as adults and take responsibility. Rob, Duncan and Tucker are all at a less than desirable place when they are introduced, but all of them show signs of changing for the better, and as the stories come to an end there is hope for them all.

7. Conclusion

Nick Hornby's novels, *High Fidelity* and *Juliet, Naked*, illustrate that the Internet has had impact on modern life, but it has not changed basic human behaviour and desires. These two novels can be used as documents on life before and after the Internet because of the similarity of their themes; a similarity highlighted by critics upon the publication of *Juliet, Naked*. The same critics do not, however, agree on the merits of Hornby's simple style, which he uses in both novels. While some praise the lucid text provided by Hornby, others feel that it betrays the depth of the prose.

The novels' most notable denominator is the obsession which the male characters in both stories suffer from. Obsession is a recurring theme for Hornby, and he shows how both Rob and Duncan become isolated because of their ailment. The Internet allows Duncan to communicate with fellow enthusiasts while at the same time it separates him from his loved ones. While Hornby is eager to show how the Internet can further isolate the obsessed, he does not shy away from revealing its positive features as highlighted by Annie and Tucker's inter-continental relationship which was instigated on the Web.

The dream of love, happiness and living a good life is what concerns Hornby's characters the most and Hornby shows that the quest for these elusive goals is never straightforward. True love as portrayed in the story of Romeo and Juliet is not shown to be attainable in these two novels. In Hornby's world love is messy, complicated and full of uncertainties. What prevents people from succeeding in romantic relationships is the difference between men and women's level of maturity, as women take responsibility while men obsess over trivial things. It is interesting that despite Hornby's reputation as a lad lit writer, he paints women in a far more favourable light than men. The male characters are dependent on the women in their lives to make the necessary changes in order to get their lives back on track. Meanwhile, Hornby's condemnation of the obsessive male does not mean

that people should not have interests; what he is implying is that people should not let their hobbies take over their lives, and least of all lead their lives through their interests as Rob and Duncan do with music.

If there is a moral to *High Fidelity* and *Juliet, Naked* it is that people can never allow themselves to become complacent and that success requires hard work. Nothing ever happens unless people apply themselves, and that is especially true for love. Technology may change how people conduct their communication, but it does not change who they are.

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