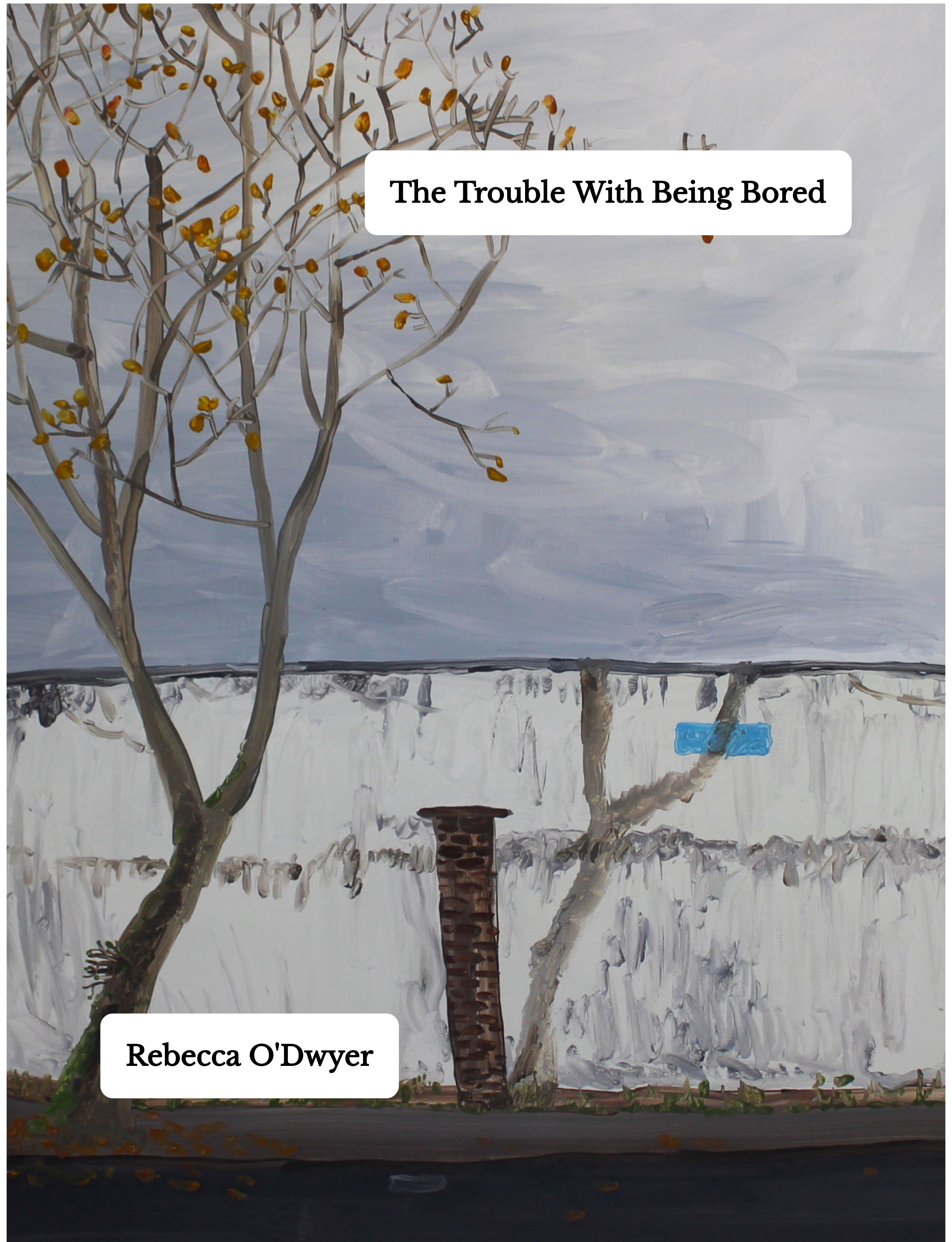

The Trouble With Being Bored
Rebecca O'Dwyer

> *An invented horror can be quite overwhelming. . . But there is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it. . . or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.*[1]

In her 1962 essay 'The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer,' Susan Sontag writes that: 'For two thousand years, among Christians and Jews, it has been spiritually fashionable to be in pain'.[2] Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) is almost slavishly du jour. It contains ridiculous, almost baroque levels of suffering, with the central character - the similarly hyperbolically-named Jude St. Francis - bearing its brunt. Described even by her editor as a 'misrerabilist epic,'[3] I came across many fevered accounts of the compulsive

hold it exerted over readers, a page-turner, albeit one liberally interspersed with paedophilia, gratuitous violence, and gang rape. Certainly this book, as Sontag wrote of something else altogether, is 'an exercise in shamelessness'[4]; its sadism towards its protagonist not unlike to that of lingchi, the ritualistic "death of a thousand cuts". Yanagihara revels in its excess: it came as no surprise to learn that she believes reading, in turn, should always involve getting upset.[5] Instead, I chipped away at its purgatorial eight-hundred-and-sixteen pages for nigh-on a month, more out of obstinance than anything else.

A Little Life was generally well-received, though it has frequently been said that the book would have benefited from a vigorous edit. It was one critical review that made me want to read it: Daniel Mendelsohn's curiously-titled 'A Striptease Among Pals,' in The New

York Review of Books.[6] Mendelsohn takes issue with a lot of elements to the book, including: its superfluity - both word count and content; its laboured style; its dearth of character development and sense of racial 'tokenism'; its implausibility, and so on. What was most intriguing to me though was his suggestion that this grim novel functioned as a source of comfort for its readers, providing 'the guilty pleasures. . . of a teenage rap session, that adolescent social ritual par excellence, in which the same crises and hurts are constantly rehearsed'.[7] According to Mendelsohn, *A Little Life* works precisely by flouting the constraints of the traditional Bildungsroman: there is no comfort here, no redemption, and no hope whatsoever. (If she could have, I'd wager the author would have continued to make Jude suffer after he killed himself.) Mendelsohn goes on to suggest that:

> *In a culture where victimhood has become a claim to status, how could Yanagihara's*

> *book — with its unending parade of aesthetically gratuitous scenes of punitive and humiliating violence — not provide a kind of comfort? To such readers, the ugliness of this author's subject must bring a kind of pleasure, confirming their preexisting view of the world as a site of victimization and little else.*[8]

Here, I think, Mendelsohn's argument gets a little shaky, mostly because his argument hinges on a theme of "declining student resilience,"[9] and so on an all-too familiar account of millennial cluelessness. In his view, we the "millennials" bear a basically schizophrenic relation to the world - it being 'out to get us'; this view is then reinforced by the dreadful arc of *A Little Life*. For me, the book did nothing like this. I actively despised it and, stranger still, was bored throughout. However, what interested me in reading the book was precisely this boredom: how to justify it? How to read page after page of suffering, and feel nothing? Did that make me somehow, cautiously, optimistic?

Like most people, I have lived through boredom. Even in an era of incessant availability and receptivity, it seems to endure - though perhaps more on an existential, than literal, level. Practically speaking though, boredom is usually something to be admonished: Kierkegaard called it the root of all evil; my father, if ever I complained of boredom, advised I should go outside and chase cars. And so rather than view it in a positive light as some philosophers have, boredom is treated as something to be eliminated, as a waste of time. As an adult, it is invariably related to anxiety or dread, the unavoidable subtext being that I should always be doing something, anything, productive. This particular coupling - anxiety and boredom - as the theorist Lars Svendsen writes in *A Philosophy of Boredom* (2005) is one result of romanticism, with its prioritisation of self-fulfilment.[10] It's likely, too, that this coupling is deepened with

consumerism, as a result of the self interminably focusing its energies outside of itself, towards an object or a self-to-come. In whatever case, boredom exists. Like insomnia, it places the subject momentarily outside of time, capable of tuning in to its dreadful and merciless accrual. In boredom, I understand time: as a result, I want it to end.

Olivia Laing, writing about loneliness, describes it as: 'such a shameful experience, so counter to the lives we are supposed to lead, that it becomes increasingly inadmissible, a taboo state whose confession seems destined to cause others to turn and flee'.[11] This is equally applicable, I think, to an adult expression of boredom. Indeed, much like the person suffering from loneliness, their bored kissing-cousin is little fun to be around; there is after all little more infantilising (or infuriating) than a fully-grown declaration of

boredom. We could think about boredom, though, as a 'meaning withdrawal… as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied'.[12] The Romans, and in particular Seneca, had a name for this - *tedium vitae*, or tiredness of life. Doubtless this sense could easily be integrated within a conceptualisation of the wan contemporary moment, wherein the sense is one of 'having, by accident of birth, missed the end of everything' - as the artist Liam Gillick put it.[13]

But the question is: can this particular weariness, ennui, or boredom, ever be responsible for anything meaningful in and of itself? Or is it simply what is passed on the way there? Mindfulness, for example, is basically sitting around and thinking, and yet at the same time is being heralded as a deeply useful tool in grappling with the strains of contemporary life. Should boredom be

framed similarly, or would that do it a disservice? Certainly this was the philosopher E.M. Cioran's opinion: 'To the friend who tells me he is bored because he is unable to work, I reply that boredom is a superior state, and that it is debasing to connect it with the notion of work'.[14] Mindfulness could be thought of in precisely this associative light: as a tool of pseudo-boredom now wheeled out primarily at the service of work. As spaces allotted to it encroach into workspaces, it appears even the functionless function of boredom is under attack. Interestingly, however, I read an article[15] recently that dealt with negative and deeply traumatic, even dangerous, experiences with mindfulness, reminding us that its proper and possibly untameable purpose is to occasion us with our own facticity, our smallness and insignificance. Such awareness is of course wholly unproductive, or at least within any traditional understanding of productivity. Mindfulness may indeed

help us to “lean in,” but its also holds the possibility of irreversible existential collapse.

This more transformative understanding of mindfulness is reminiscent of the line of thought expressed by Siegfried Kracauer in his 1924 essay ‘Boredom’. Kracauer talks in particular about a ‘radical boredom’ that reawakens the subject to the limitations of the contemporary world. As a result of this boredom, one enlivens to personal and societal deficiencies, becoming enjoined to do something about them. To achieve this state of nirvana, he makes a bizarre recommendation: ‘On a sunny afternoon when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about in the train station or, better yet, stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender to one’s boredom on the sofa’.[16] There, the world becomes de-naturalised, with the offshoot that there is no necessity in the

way things presently are. Change appears possible, if only for an instant. Perhaps the problem with *A Little Life*, then, is that it's not boring enough. Extended to its logical conclusion - unadulterated tedium - perhaps it would make better and more awakened subjects of us.

Still, there's something not quite right about so much boredom in the face of so much pain. Sontag, (again) in her 1992 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, studies image after image of human suffering. She describes a specifically modern strain of such photography, which consists of: 'uglifying, showing something at its worst . . . didactic, it invites an active response'.[17] Of course, a book is not a photo: it does not lay claim to reality in the same way that a photo implicitly does, however illusory that might prove to be. Notwithstanding this, Yanagihara shows everything at its unbridled worst: the one glimmer of

happiness evaporates with the death of Jude’s partner Willem in a car crash along with - bringing desolation to its logical conclusion here - another two of his close friends. The most strange thing, though, is that the book's traumatic events do not invite sympathy, a feeling described by Sontag as reliant on a comfortable and blameless distance from the suffering at hand.[18] Fiction offers a means of comfortable detachment that demands no sympathy: we can be moved by it, or not. At the same time, the violence in *A Little Life* real. Entering into fiction, as we read, is a momentary escape from ourselves; as ethical or even moral people. Perhaps we get bored of being so. The book’s lack of sympathy, and my corresponding boredom, could, then, be a signifier of complicity.

Boredom, for me, consists of serving tables at a local mid-range restaurant, which I do as little as financially possible. It has a well-regarded, affordable early-bird and, as a result, a lot of 6.45pm bookings. Irish people, at least from anywhere outside of Dublin, seem to abhor the idea of spending money. The restaurant itself has no discernible cuisine, coming under the vague umbrella of “modern” food. Most people plump for the steak, and you can spot the locals from the glimmer of confusion when I ask how they would like it cooked, as though there really was no question to be asked: a fillet should never be anything other than well-done. By contrast, tourists - typically from Dublin or Europe - can be detected by their hesitation in asking for their meat to be cooked medium rare, as though the chef is bound to an age-old rural oath of well-cooking all meat, all of the time.

I have spent close enough to ten years working in these places. Colleagues' faces meld and repeat across them, certain tropes remaining more or less constant: most people have children, most people have bad backs and dodgy wrists, most chefs have addiction problems, and most people seem unhappy to be there. At the same time, one of my colleagues, Tom, appears to be one of most genuinely happy people I have ever met. A labrador in a man's form, he has three kids under the age of seven. He shows me pictures and videos of them often, falling or saying silly things. Two boys and a girl. His unbridled enthusiasm is tiring at times, I guess much like a labrador would be. His smooth, baby-like skin is belied by the whisper of a backtracking hairline, the slight paunch to his belly. I think he's a year or two older than me and he's worked either as a waiter or a porter since he was sixteen, mostly for minimum wage. Despite my best efforts, I struggle when considering his

happiness. He also buried his mother a few months back.

'Existential boredom,' Svendsen writes, 'contains a longing for any desire at all'.[19] This kind of boredom can survive in extremes: either in the face of suffering, or in the face of nothing at all. What unites these seemingly polar triggers is repetition, that high-signifier of the postmodern. The theorist Mark Fisher talks about something called 'reflexive impotence,' the feeling that "I know it's bad but. . . "[20] Not exactly commensurate with apathy, this sensibility, he says, defines the disempowerment of the contemporary subject, and allows them to withstand the repetitive brutality of the milieu. Repetition, of course, is synonymous with extreme or existential boredom, the sense that nothing changes or even means anything. Repeated *ad infinitum*, even violence, even human suffering, becomes boring. Simone Weil went so

far as to claim that the person exposed to it became thing-like, a 'stone'.[21]

Perhaps as one result of this repetition, I have a very short fuse these days. Due to personal incompetence, there was a sense of novelty when I started working this job. Now I could likely do the work blindfolded, and the tedium of it saturates each and every encounter. I have stock phrases and responses, and I can basically predict what people will say. Customers' polite and nervous chit-chat, demurring to me as I take their orders, repeats itself over and over. Such repetition says a lot: people have no clue how to talk to waiters, the basic premise of it - ordering someone to bring you food - being basically uncomfortable. No new words can soften this. It could put you off your food, if you thought about it too much.

One way existential boredom can be countered, I think, is through art. I remember this when I consider the paintings of Kathy Tynan, which distill and transmute the everyday, recreating it, somehow, as more than the sum of its parts. This tendency has been apparent throughout her career, but perhaps most acutely in a recent two-person exhibition in Dublin.[22] In her canvasses, the banal and ostensibly boring becomes other: beautiful, certainly. In one, the curiously-titled *Grinding and Ingesting* (2015), a stretch of white wall, something's perimeter, bisects the canvas. Above it, damp grey sky with a bird in languid flight at its top right corner. In the foreground there is a deciduous tree, its scant leaves now the shade of rust. It is a scene caught from a car, or a bus, on the way to somewhere else. And yet Tynan hangs on, focusing her gaze on the city's architectural non-events: concrete walls, inner-city flats, enigmatic bits of graffiti, windows. The

eye of her paintings moves through boredom as a means to something else, but it's in no rush.

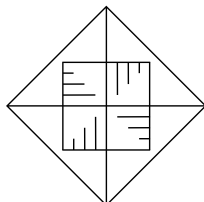
Another stretch of wall, maybe on Dublin's Cork Street, figures in a different work, *And Still You Shine For Me.* An iridescent sky, blues and golds, invites the eye upward, over the chimney pots. To the front, the road stretches out. The only person here is the artist, and she invites us to pause and to reconsider the scene - alongside our reaction to it. Perhaps these places we rush to get through - like boredom - should be reconsidered too.

The fiction of *A Little Life*, I think, does something else altogether: instant and toothless gratification. Its eight-hundred pages keep the reader hooked, but never quite satisfy. We are, instead, always hungry, wanting more. Desire is rendered hyperbolic and strangely rote. The thing is, this is precisely the

dominant cultural mode: with the touch of a button, a swipe right, almost every need can be met, satisfaction being determined by the nowness of accomplishment, rather than in the merit of pause or contemplation. Perhaps, then, Mendelsohn is right after all, but not in the way he thinks. It is not so much that *A Little Life's* content corresponds to an existential understanding of the world, but rather its speed and scale. All shading is eliminated, its characters are caricatures, like Twitter personas, and its world moves with the frenetic speed of contemporary life - only, interesting.

Boredom, then, might be the most appropriate response. Adam Philips describes it as ‘a defence against waiting, which is, at one remove, an acknowledgment of the possibility of desire’.[23] Being bored, the subject experiences desire *per se.* This desire is rudderless and without an object that

would satiate it, but its sense is still felt. Boredom is a kind of stance that helps us grapple with the problem of waiting for something, though this something remains ill-defined: only in its possession will we recognise it.



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The painting in the header of this piece is *Grinding & Ingesting* by Kathy Tynan, courtesy of the artist.