

## One big yawn? The academics bewitched by boredom

Randy Malamud examines the fascination in a fringe academic topic

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### 3

In 1867 (the year of his death), the French poet Baudelaire wrote: “*Je m’ennuie!!! Elle m’ennuie!!!! Tout m’ennuie!!!!!!*” His lament – “I bore myself!!! She bores me!!!! Everything bores me!!!!!!” – rang in my ears as I sat through a conference in Poland last month. But my fellow academics were not dying of boredom: they were revelling in it.

A cohort of aficionados, few but fervent, at the University of Warsaw (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-warsaw>)’s third annual Boredom Conference did not reach consensus on exactly what boredom is: whether it is a boon or a bane. With more questions than answers, more hypotheses than conclusions, a spirit of Montaignian *essay*er displaced settled expertise. But inchoate ideas were balanced by an intellectually adventurous vigour that is, frankly, rare at mainstream cookie-cutter conferences, where the usual suspects roll out the usual rigmarole.

An interdisciplinary assembly – philosophers, psychologists, education specialists, sociologists, linguists and others – presented much good work. There were also, of course, a few turgid bits, but even those clunkers productively invited metacritical reflection on the nature and ramifications of tedium. Best of all, nobody droned on too long – every session ended promptly upon the waving of a toy giraffe (slow rocking at the five-minute mark, vigorous shaking at time’s up). For conference planners in any field, the boredom crowd have hit upon a winner here: it is impossible to continue prattling on in the face of a robustly oscillating stuffed animal. One cannot pretend not to notice, and the giraffe does not go still until the speaker goes shtum.

Although academics on the conference circuit may regard themselves as being intimately acquainted with boredom, the concept actually turns out to be a rather complicated shape-shifter. In one of the few classic texts in the field of boredom studies, 1995’s *Confessions of a Boredom Addict* by David S. Reardon connects the concept to the idea of “boredom as a form of resistance” and argues that it is a “yawning” response to “the boring” (1995, p. 10). Reardon connects the concept to the idea of “boredom as a form of resistance” and argues that it is a “yawning” response to “the boring” (1995, p. 10).

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(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-calgary>) classicist Peter Toohey's *Boredom: A Lively History* (2008) assembles a rich canon of aesthetic exemplars – from Ibsen and Chekhov to Edward Hopper and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* – and describes boredom as “a grab bag term covering emotions such as frustration, surfeit, depression, disgust, indifference, apathy, and that feeling of being trapped or confined”.

This smorgasbord of emotions and attitudes – which might also include nonchalance, laziness and anomie – prompts cultural, philosophical and etymological parsing. Different languages convey their own unique variants. *Ennui* – which strikes me as an onomatopoeic yawn – is the “more dignified cousin” of the English word and makes boredom seem comparatively trivial, Spacks writes. I'd say *mal de vivre* is even better, even Frencher.

The German *langeweile* (literally, *long while*) connotes boredom as interminably stretching time: more cerebral and less aggressively physical than the English *boring*, which is (probably) etymologically related to the bore of a drill, as if the “borer” bored out a hole, violently, displacing all the matter like so much sawdust and leaving nothing. The Polish word for boredom, *nuda*, is related to nausea (*nudności*), a connection Sartre may have had in mind as he depicted, in his novel of that name, the psychological and physiological distress of boredom. *Nuda* also evolved into *nudnik*, an epithet I remember my Polish-Yiddish aunt Rose using often to describe a nuisance or a pest.

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Before *boredom* entered our lexicon there was the ill-humour of Middle English *spleen* and the Italian *pococurante* (literally, *caring little*). The Latin *Acedia*, a precursor of sloth, was a spiritual weakness described by Aquinas. Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) describes *taedium vitae* as a state in which “time passes slowly and without enjoyment...At one time [sufferers] want to live, at another die...They declare life not worth living, discontent, disquieted.” Fourth-century Egyptian hermits detailed their encounters with the *daemon meridianus*, the “noonday devil”, which sapped their energies, reducing them to indolent lassitude. Classical Latin texts describe *tristitia* (sadness) and *horror loci*: a revulsion of where you are that is inescapable even if you run away to somewhere else.

The appearance of the English word *boredom* may have been a product of the Industrial Revolution, with its boring factory work. Or perhaps it reflects modern prosperity and the free time – possibly excessive – that allows us the luxury of getting bored instead of worrying about plague, starvation or getting attacked by wild boars.

In 2005's *A Philosophy of Boredom*, the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen asks: “What can possibly be more existentially disturbing than boredom?” Noting that it may be a gateway to substance misuse, eating and sleeping disorders, depression, aggression, risky behaviour and even suicide, Svendsen nonetheless finds a redemptive strain in Heidegger's belief that the “silent fog” of boredom motivates insight, innovation and creativity as it lights a fire under sufferers' bums (my own formulation, not Heidegger's), inspiring them to transcend tedium. Many conferees endorsed Heidegger's appreciation of boredom, especially pedagogy scholars who argued that schoolchildren (and perhaps university students?) need unprogrammed downtime to relax, process their lessons and, most importantly, learn to amuse themselves. “There is so much meaning around our students,” said Alberto Sánchez Rojo from Madrid's Antonio de Nebrija University. When everything means, nothing means. They are overstimulated. Boredom is their bodies telling them to take a break from the fatigue of the information-overload society.

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When I told colleagues that I was travelling 5,000 miles to attend a conference on boredom, the first reaction was, inevitably, a sardonic chuckle. But I also sensed that people felt on some level threatened or even scornful, channelling comeuppance on a group of scholars that they suspected might be trivial or trendy, or, even worse, flouting the taboo of *that which shall not be named* in our scholarly endeavours.

It's especially interesting to me, at the point where I have spent more years of my life as an academic than not, to think about how we do what we do. Why do we crowd like sheep on straight and narrow scholarly pathways, instead of venturing off somewhere less shopworn? We are supposed to be seekers of original and unique truths, creators of new knowledge, but we spend a lot of time writing the same books (or books so similar as to defy distinction) over and over. War, Shakespeare, race, gender, culture, sexuality, unemployment: there's nothing wrong with any of these topics, but, as Peggy Lee sang, "Is that all there is?" Shouldn't we be trying something new, something outside the box?

Of course, feminist criticism was once something new, as were cultural studies, new historicism, deconstruction and post-colonial studies. Certainly new things come along and take their place in the pantheon of "conventional" canonical approaches. Digital humanities, text mining and distant reading (understanding literature by analysing huge amounts of data about it) are cutting-edge methodologies destined to be prominent in the next new wave, yet they provoke resistance – perhaps especially from scholars who fear that their own expertise ("analogue humanities", as one of my colleagues ruefully describes his portfolio) will become obsolete. Unconventional subjects often generate a surprisingly reactionary opposition – although sometimes perhaps deservedly so: *Buffy studies? Really?*

Are idiosyncratic sallies such as Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt's book *On Bullshit* merely showy bids for ironic attention or shock value? Dutch urologist Mels van Driel has written *With the Hand*, a cultural history of masturbation, and *Manhood: The Rise and Fall of the Penis*. *Uncommon Grounds* is Mark Pendergrast's scholarly study of coffee and how it changed the world. I wish I had written historian John McMillian's *Beatles vs. Stones*. The fascinating new Bloomsbury book series called Object Lessons includes such provocatively banal, academically authored titles as *Refrigerator*, *Bookshelf*, *Remote Control*, *Password* and *Dust*. Is it that we've run out of new, smart things to say about Virginia Woolf and democracy? Or have we just got bored with them?

I roundly nominate boredom for the catalogue of *interesting new things for academics to study*, all the more enthusiastically for the paradox lurking therein. We have nothing to lose but our chains. Like coffee, masturbation and bullshit, boredom promises fresh terrain: untrammelled intellectual exploration. We might have termed it "virgin territory" before feminism problematised such sexist figurations. The myriad tropes and venues of boredom range from Nietzsche's "windless calm of the soul" to Beckett's claustrophobic infinite stuckness. The historian Jeffrey Auerbach, who presented at last year's Boredom Conference, is completing a monograph called *Imperial Boredom: Monotony and the British Empire*, about the bureaucracy, loneliness and disenchantment that accompanied England's exploitative world domination; it turns out imperial oppression wasn't that much fun after all.

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But it should surprise no one to learn that ground zero for boredom studies is our good academic selves. Mariusz Finkielsztajn, a Ph.D. student in sociology at the University of Warsaw (<https://www.univ.warsaw.pl/en/department-of-sociology/>), began exploring and anatomising aetiologies of boredom as he found himself getting

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“horrifyingly, stupefyingly bored” in his graduate classes, he tells me. “I was totally bored all the time. So I started thinking about boredom because I didn’t have anything else to do.”

Finkielsztein, who is writing a thesis *On the Significance of Boredom: the phenomenon of boredom in academia*, is the Boredom Conference’s founding co-director; his dissertation adviser, Izabela Wagner, is the other. “Students talk a lot about how bored they are,” he tells me. “You can’t stop them.” But professors are more reticent: “They won’t talk about it: at least not at first. They say: ‘I’m never bored; I’m never boring. Boredom is for stupid people.’” So Finkielsztein has stopped letting faculty know, at the beginning of interviews, that boredom is what he wants to talk about. But even when he meanders around to it, his interviewees will admit and discuss it only to the extent that it is framed as the fault of someone else: “the system”. His best material, as one would imagine, comes from administrative committees: his interviewees will acknowledge how densely boring these meetings are because they are so distant from the research and teaching that constitutes their central identities.

“Many scholars are bores,” Finkielsztein has discovered, “and much scholarship is boring.” (Can a scholar really say this and survive? I suppose I am saying it, too, but only second-hand.) It isn’t the subject matter itself that bores him, but the murky jargon and pretentious theoretical formulations that frame so many discussions. This is academia’s dirty secret: if your work is too straightforwardly interesting, there’s something wrong with you; we celebrate dullness and obscurity as brilliance.

Humbly brushing aside my suggestion that he is, even as a graduate student, well on his way to achieving eminence in this quirky field, Finkielsztein says that he created the conference simply because he wants a network of colleagues with whom to discuss boredom (he knows of five other Polish graduate students who have recently begun working on boredom). But he has gone so far as to coin a disciplinary descriptor, *nudologia* – “boredology” – which he doesn’t think anyone else has picked up on yet and which I promised him I would use.

As innovative a scholar as I have met in a *langeweile*, Finkielsztein confirms in the flesh Heidegger’s premise that boredom valuably clears away the cobwebs and facilitates the commencement of a journey towards authenticity. He also confirms that those eccentrics writing about what we might call fringe topics are definitely the sorts of academics next to whom one would hope to be seated on an aeroplane. And by the way, “airport studies” is a thing, too.

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