

The sense of an ending

Diana Evans

The end of a novel is a tricky thing. It's a big responsibility, the tying of a very large knot, of flailing loose ends. The enormous conclusiveness of it is terrifying. What do we want our reader to take away from these pages? If the novel was a party, and the party had a farewell bag, the kind you take away with you into your life and explore at random for keepsakes, souvenirs, useful objects, maybe cake, what would we put in that bag? What mood? What memory? Should it be a moral (though I have never liked endings with morals), or a pointing towards something else, something next?

Such questions I ask myself in building angst as I approach the final page. I think this angst is more than simply the desire to get it right, perfect in fact, like choosing the precise finishing touch to an outfit assembled over months for an important event, or indeed a cake, requiring a classy and meaningful pinnacle. It's also to do with an approaching loneliness, a casting out of the writer from the cave of the novel's workroom. Unemployment, actually. You've spent years in this place, in this one sometimes maddening, sometimes thrilling job, all by yourself, and now you are going to be sacked, made redundant, by yourself, because after all you are no longer your own boss. Although you may not be aware of this

underlying reason for your angst, it is nevertheless real. After the great relief of completion will come listlessness and longing.

When I start reading a novel, I read the last page first and the first page second. I am not worried about spoilers. It's almost impossible, I have found, to predict what happens in a story by reading the very end of it, because the substance of the end comes sooner than that. It's different from the last word. What I am more interested in is the colour of the horizon. Is it blue, pink, orange, silver? If I were sitting before an ocean, and was about to get into a boat and sail across that ocean, I would want to see the horizon before I started out, to see what I am heading towards, where I am going. Then, when I get to that last page, it's satisfying to assess how that ending, previously read, sits in its position, how it carries and renders itself.

The last novel I wrote, *Ordinary People*, had two possible endings: a couple in silhouette against a sparkling river, or a bag of chips. One was romantic, wistful, and the other was salty. As I was approaching the end of this story in my boat, I tipped this way and that upon the waves, leaning towards the romance, the beauty of it, and then towards the salt. The salt won, because I could taste it. The river was too wet and this story was about the end of romance. When you get to the end, you always know, deep down, if you listen hard enough, what's right.

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Diana Evans is the author of the novels *A House for Alice*, *Ordinary People*, *The Wonder* and *26a*, which was the inaugural winner of the

Orange Award for New Writers. *Ordinary People* won the 2019 South Bank Sky Arts Award for Literature and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, the Rathbones Folio Prize and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction. She also publishes short stories, essays and literary criticism, which have appeared in among others *Time Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *The New York Review of Books* and on BBC Radio 4. She is an associate lecturer in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. www.diana-evans.com

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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