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Speaking the Unspoken: Reconsidering the Craft of Subtext in Fiction through Nafissa Thompson-Spires's Use of Palimptext in "Heads of the Colored People"

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Abstract: *This essay suggests new craft techniques in fiction are emerging, which act as a palimptext, a writing, erasure, and overwriting of subtext, establishing new relationships between writer and reader. Traditional uses of subtext rely on an unspoken relationship between writers and readers wherein writers "hide" thematic meaning in subtextual layers of fiction and readers "dig" for these deeper meanings. However, this essay shows reading practices have changed from deep reading to skimming and information-seeking practices. Further, subtext's need to give the unseen and unspoken a limited and veiled presence in a text has shifted. Current unspoken assumptions about the writer-reader relationship risk being both non-inclusive and inaccurate. I illustrate the shifting use of subtext as craft by examining two short stories, Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" and Nafissa Thompson-Spires's "Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology."*

Keywords: *subtext, palimptext, Hemingway, Spires-Thompson, craft, fiction, race, reading practices, publishing*

INTRODUCTION

In *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*, Charles Baxter calls subtext the "subterranean" level of a story and "the realm of what haunts the imagination: the implied, the half-visible, and the unspoken" (3). Of course, theorists and literary critics rightly maintain all texts, from nursery rhymes to face masks, graffiti tags to Twitter posts, news clips to TikTok dances, have subtextual layers, often layers authors don't intend (and in many cases may be horrified to see) in their work.

What I'm reconsidering here is different from these one-sided, reader-driven subtextual layers. I'm interested in subtext as a craft technique, which fiction writers consciously employ during story construction for specific and intentional effects that create and/or enhance the writer-reader relationship. Subtext as craft refers to writerly manipulations such as dramatic staging, hyper-detailing of character and of setting, dialogic miscommunication, and dynamic pacing, to name just a few of the techniques that are used to alternately conceal and reveal "the secret at the story's heart", as Catherine Brady refers to subtext in *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction* (17). She suggests that writers use subtext to "sustain the deliberate uncertainty of unresolved tension" (7).

"Story logic exploits silence," she asserts. "The writer leaves out in order to sustain the deliberate uncertainty of unresolved tension," and to "direct our curiosity toward buried associations" (7).

Hidden, buried, unspoken, secrets.

Writers, it would seem, are hoarders of treasures, pirate-like if you will, drawing cryptic maps, leaving clues, constructing scenarios. However, rather than amassing the treasure for themselves, writers hope readers will unearth their booty, which, if Baxter and Brady are to be believed, is deliberately ethereal, emotional and experiential, psychological and dreamlike, and as often as not, an elusive trove, ever open to visceral and emotional responses by those readers who are willing and able to put in the effort, to *really* read a text.

Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is a classic example of writerly exploitation of omission and silence intended to increase tension and to reveal through the unspoken. In a story less than 1500 words, which we might call flash fiction today, what Hemingway leaves out is as much a part of the story as what he puts in. He establishes his interest in creating tension by beginning with one of the tightest crucibles in fiction, constructed to squeeze every ounce of tension from the story's brief encounter. *Time crucible:* Two characters, Jig and "the American," are seated at a table outside a train station bar, with forty minutes before their train arrives, stops for two minutes, and goes on to Madrid. Neither character can leave for too long if they are to catch their train. Forced to wait for the train together, the return of the conflict already at play between the characters before the story's opening is inevitable. *Setting crucible:* "It was very hot," at the station located "between two lines of rails in the sun"; only a "curtain, made of bamboo beads, hung across the open door to the bar" (273). The two characters sit in the only shade available. The heat forces the two characters to stay at the table in the shade, and the proximity of those at the bar, separated only by a beaded curtain, forces the impending conversation about Jig's pregnancy to be veiled and the characters to contain their emotions throughout their discussion of abortion, illegal in Spain and most places at this time.

After some strained conversation, which suggests the discord already simmering between the couple, they discuss abortion without ever naming it directly but making clear the man wants Jigs to have an abortion while Jigs doesn't want it: "'It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig,' the man said. 'It's not really an operation at all'" (275). The omission of the word *abortion* feels organic to the story because of Hemingway's blocking. The couple cannot talk openly because the characters behind the beaded curtain may hear them discussing this criminal act. The blocking increases tension, but also, in 1927, when the story was first published, openly naming and discussing abortion would likely have kept the story from getting published, and if it did manage to get published, it would have gotten the story censored and perhaps gotten Hemingway and the publishers a whole heap of legal trouble, so he veils the term in the guise of a "simple operation ... just to let the air in" (275).

Censorship has often been a driving motive for intentional subtext in fiction, allowing writers to take up sexual and political subject matter that, if named directly, would be officially or unofficially repressed and that might well land the writer in jail. Readers were as aware of this as writers; the writer-reader relationship then acted as a sort of wink-wink, nudge-nudge relationship. Thus, Hemingway counts on the careful reader to scratch below the surface. He provides enough clues that the reader can *get* the subtext, the hidden meaning. His challenge though is to layer the surface narrative over the subtext with enough touch that it reads as neither heavy-handed nor so subtle that the reader can't pick up on the intended meaning, or as Baxter puts it, finding the "balance[e] between the concrete and unutterable" (18), or as Brady puts it, providing "puzzling gaps for the reader to fill in" (7).

Hemingway uses silence to this end. As the American barrels forward in his efforts to convince Jig to "let the air in," Jig remains silent, looking at the ground, at the beaded curtain, and at the white hills that to her look like white elephants and to the reader suggest the white elephant in the room that Hemingway can't name and that Jigs desperately wants not to talk about ("'Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?'" [277]).

While Hemingway uses subtext to address content he can't openly discuss, he also employs subtext in the story to thematic effect. Without being named as such, Jigs is the seer in the story, literally, as noted above, but figuratively too. She sees the image of *Anis del Toro*, on the beaded curtain, suggesting the high-times the couple have had in the past, but when tasted now, recall the absinthe the couple may have had before sex and conception. Jigs sees that whether or not she has the abortion, the couple's future has changed. They can no longer "have the whole world ... '‘And once they take it away, you never get it back'" (276).

While Jigs sees vistas for miles, viewing both "brown and dry" (273) hills and "fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro ... far away beyond the river ... and she saw the river through the trees" (276), the poor American remains blind: "He looked up the tracks but could not see the train" (277). He calls the potentially deadly procedure "perfectly simple" and can only see as far the "bags against the wall of the station" (277). He insists "'We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before'", both unable to see or acknowledge the "shadow of a cloud" that will forever sully their relationship should he convince Jig to have the abortion (275).

In such a spare story, each image works to reinforce the story's content and themes. Barren hills contrast verdant vistas. Heat presses as shade cools but does not relieve; train tracks run parallel and never meet. Each image suggests the hidden, buried, unspoken secrets of the story, which the reader must unearth both in order to have the most basic understanding of what the story is about and to get the *deeper* thematic reading.

When writers employ subtext, clues and cues are provided by the writer, who must imagine the detecting reader, who, in turn, expects and searches out these strata. "A work of fiction," writes Brady, "depends on [a reader's] ... ah! response of discovery and surprise" (7). Objective correlative provides a useful illustration. According to Brady, "The writer suppresses one partner to a comparison (the idea or emotion) but so arranges the other partner (literal element) that the reader will intuit and supply the 'silent' partner" (17). In other words, the unspoken collaboration that is subtext is created by the writer (as suppressor) and the reader (as the one intuiting and supplying). Without the intuiting and supplying reader, the writerly suppressions are dead-end effects with little to no payoff.

Many writers and critics, including both Baxter and Brady, contend that intentional subtext for the "discovery and surprise" payoff is what distinguishes literary fiction from genre fiction, the latter of which is, according to Baxter, "fully explicit about human nature" (16). In genre fiction, "everything that needs to be said can and will be said" (Baxter 16). Of course, not everyone agrees with Baxter's distinction. For example, Michael Kardos, in "The Literary/Genre Fiction Continuum," notes that "any attempt to describe, let alone define, genre fiction or literary fiction, or to distinguish one from the other, invites so many exceptions that the effort tends to fall apart" (220). Nevertheless, intentional subtext has remained a defining characteristic of those stories usually designated literary fiction. It's what makes literary fiction *deep,* as it were.

However, what if the writer-reader relationship breaks down? What if readers aren't able or willing to complete their end of the writer-reader exchange upon which subtext relies? What if reading habits have so changed that readers no longer intuit or supply? What if writers' unspoken assumptions of their readership are themselves exposed as, at the very least, incomplete?

Addressing readers' habits first, Kara Mercer Dalton, in "Their Brains on Google: How Digital Technologies Are Altering the Millennial Generation's Brain and Impacting Legal Education," writes,"

> Scholars from the University College London suggest we 'are in the midst of a sea change in the way we read and think'... The exposure to digital technologies makes us read in a 'skimming' way that can be characterized as 'power browsing'. This different way of reading leads to a different kind of thinking ... weakening our ability to read deeply, which in turn weakens our ability to interpret text and make rich mental connections. (14-5)

Similarly, Naomi S. Baron, in "Reading in a Digital Age," notes that her studies of reading habits in high-school students suggest that "when we go to read something substantive on a laptop or e-reader, tablet or mobile phone, our now-habitualized instincts tell us to move things along" (18). She posits that readers' mindsets are shifting to "an evolving sense that writing is for the here-and-now, not for the long haul," and that a "nexus of forces is making writing seem more ephemeral" (19). Further, she presents a valid question of future reading habits: "Since online technology is tailor-made for searching for information rather than analyzing complex ideas, will the meaning of 'reading' become 'finding information' rather than 'contemplating and understanding'" (19)?

More people read electronically than ever before. In "Three-in-ten Americans now read e-books" [sic], a 2021 Pew Research Center study conducted by Michelle Faverio and Andrew Perrin, finds the following: "The share of adults who have read print books in the last 12 months still outpaces the share using other forms, but 30% now say they have read an e-book in that time frame." The study also finds that while print and audio book "shares" have remained steady, only e-books have had an uptick in readership. Further, as noted, many people are now "reading" aurally rather than, or at least in addition to, reading visually, including those for whom audiobooks might once have been priced out of audio subscription services, such as Audible, but who now have a myriad of ways to access audiobooks, including public libraries and audio-web projects, such as Librivox. "The share of adults with an annual household income of less than $30,000 who have listened to an audiobook has increased 8 percentage points since 2019 (22% vs. 14%)" (Faverio and Perrin). Of course, with audio books, *reading* has become, or perhaps returned to being, an aural interaction with a text, often while the reader/listener is engaged in another activity, thus fragmenting readers'/listeners' attention spans further.

Secondly, and perhaps even more significant than this new way of reading, is a reckoning with previously unspoken assumptions of writers and the publishing industries about the readership that is supposed to be "intuit[ing] and supply[ing]" (Brady 17) meaning in collaboration with the writer. In fact, challenges are being made to publishers' long-held assumptions about who is

and/or should be writing and getting published at all. These challenges assert that such assumptions are elitist, racist, sexist, homocentric, and several other *–ists* and *-ics* that might collectively be called non-inclusive.

Hidden meanings are perhaps more suspect than ever because we are in an unprecedented era of exposure. Through Facebook/Instagram/Twitter/TikTok/Snapchat/etc., the unspoken is more than being spoken, it's being laid bare; *lives* are being laid bare. In the United States, *Me Too* declarations are made on Twitter, childhood sexual abuse is chronicled in *The New Yorker,* sexual preferences are announced on t-shirts, and political stands are being taken via face masks and lawn signs. Windows and front doors declare: *Queer Pride, Black Lives Matter, Blue/All Lives Matter, Me Too, Wear a Mask, I believe in Science.* Video footage exposes the murders of black people by police and reveals the vindictive wielding of racism by a white woman in Central Park to assert her entitlement. More and more, society is moving away from the secretive and unspoken and towards the exposed and declarative. "Putting it out there" is considered more than personal empowerment. It is considered necessary for making strides in nearly all areas of social justice.

Readers and writers alike are questioning who is telling a story, to whom, and by whom, and how this influences storytelling. In 2020, even before publication, Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* garnered criticism from Latinx writers, who have long felt shut-out of the publishing industry. This in/famously, seven-figure payout book (published by Flatiron Press, a division of MacMillan), tells the story of a Mexican woman's migration to the United States. Latinx writers criticized Cummins, who is neither Mexican nor an immigrant; the publishing industry; and Oprah Winfrey, who selected and promoted the book for her book club. Many Latinx writers suggest this was not Cummins' story to tell, and further, according to writer Julissa Arce, when Latinx writers want to tell their stories, they are asked to "whiten" them to make them more accessible to the white readership the publishing industry targets.

Similar outcry has been heard from other BIPOC groups, resulting in, among other things, Penguin Random House posting a web page in an effort to become more transparent about its own practices: "The page included PRH's workforce demographics," write Shelly Romero and Adriana M. Martínez Figueroa in "The Unbearable Whiteness of Publishing Revisited," as well as the company's diversity and inclusion plans and goals to improve not only its workforce but the 'number of books we publish, promote, and sell—by people of color.'" And one may well add *to people of color.*

It is not only BIPOC writers who suggest the rethinking of the writer-reader relationship is important. Forrest Wickman asserts the subtlety of subtext, perhaps in any art form, is no longer a virtue for which artists and writers should strive. In his performatively titled essay, "Against Subtlety: It Sucks," Wickman writes, "Let me be blunt: Subtlety sucks" (227). So noted. "When

artists don't muffle themselves in service of subtlety," writes Wickman, "... they kindle fervor and fire ... [and] we're rewarded with work that resonates in every seat in the theater, not just in the orchestra section" (232). Wickman does not worry that fiction with every-seat-in-the-theater, tell-it-all, say-everything-that-needs-to-be-said writing lacks skill, or as Baxter puts it, that writing that lacks subtexts risks "effectively shut[ting] down the imagination by doing all its work for it" (Baxter 17). Instead, Wickman suggests a new kind of writer-reader relationship is established, one that meets readers where they are: "When we stop fussing over what's too heavy-handed, ... we gain an emotional directness that is more in tune with the way people actually feel" (232).

Given all these considerations, the question confronting fiction writers, BIPOC and White alike, is how to tell stories that engage the imaginations of the multifarious, Google-at-their-thumb-tips, new-reading readers. A further question also confronts writers: how to tell stories that resist subtext but are still "a stimulant to the imagination" rather than just an antidote to it (Baxter 16-17)?

A Nafissa Thompson-Spires's story offers some insight. Her 2018 collection, *Heads of the Colored People*, while not genre fiction, is both popular and literary. The book has earned literary-fiction accolades, including the Pen Open Book Award, the LA Times Art Sidenbaum Award for First Fiction, the Hurston/Wright Award for Fiction, and an Audie Award for Best Short Stories; it was longlisted for the National Book Award and Aspen Words Literary Prize, and it is a Kirkus Prize finalist. It's also been featured on wide-interest, *Best Book* lists, such as Popsugar, Shondaland, Parade, and The Root. It's a cross-over book, both literary and popular, offered in print, e-book, and audio book formats.

If subtext is about the hidden and unsaid, the titular story of Thompson-Spires's collection, whose full title is "Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology," could be read as a post-subtext, or, what I call, a *palimptext* story. In it, Thompson-Spires *uses* the elements of subtext, erases them, and writes over them, effectively *subverting* them, by anticipating what "deep-reading" readers may intuit and telling them what to think before they can dip their heads below the surface, so to speak. Thompson-Spires doesn't hide-and-seek; against all writerly advice, she shows *and* tells, and at key moments, she pointedly refuses to do either, directing readers to "fill in the details for yourselves" (12).

As suggested by the title, the story is divided into six parts (four sketches and two chalk outlines). The events are presented by a writer-narrator whose strong presence is established early, increasing as the story progresses, ultimately becoming the story's protagonist. The fragmented narrative doesn't quite tell the story of two black men, Riley and Brother Man, whose tussle on the street, outside a cosplay event at the Los Angeles Convention Center, escalates, and ends with both men being shot dead by police. Rather, the narrative surrounds the event like the chalk outline in the title.

The writer-narrator opens the story by *writing* the subtext, with a hyper-detailing technique often used for subtextual character-building, a physical description of Riley: "Riley wore blue contact lenses and bleached his hair – which he worked with gel and a blow-dryer and a flatiron some mornings into Sonic the Hedgehog spikes so stiff you could prick your fingers on them" (1). This physical description works as much as a set-up for the story as Hemingway's train station does although not to increase tension but to immediately direct readerly attention to their own participation in the story through the *you,* the reader who might reach into the story and prick a finger on Riley's hair. Thus, a reader-writer connection is established through the narrative voice. There is a direct address to the reader, and invitation to participate in the story with the writer-narrator.

At this point, the reader may or may not assume from the story's title that Riley is black, but Thompson-Spires's writer-narrator, having presented these very specific details, doesn't leave interpretation to either "skimming" readers or "deep" readers, or to white or BIPOC readers, all of whom the writer-narrator suspects may make the wrong interpretations. Taking no chances, allowing for no mistaken identity, the writer-narrator sardonically announces, "And he was black" (1).

Riley's physical description is specific and evocative, but the details are not seeking Baxter's "balance[e] between the concrete and unutterable" (18), nor are they Brady's "puzzling gaps for the reader to fill in" (7). Before the reader can do more than take in the details, the writer-narrator asserts they know what you are thinking, tells you what, and then subverts it, essentially erasing the reader's opportunity for Brady's *ah!* of satisfaction by inferring that black character's artificially-obtained blue eyes and blond-dyed hair suggests a desire to be white: "But this wasn't any kind of self-hatred thing. He'd read the *Bluest Eye* and *Invisible Man* in school and even picked up *Disgruntled* at a book fair, and yes, they were good and there was some resonance in those books for him, but this story isn't about race" (1). Thompson-Spires writes the subtext through hyper-detailed description, erases it by announcing the association, then goes on to write over it as she describes Riley's love of cosplay.

However, it takes over a page for the writer-narrator to get to the overwriting because so much subtextual association gets in the way. As if hearing *you's* unspoken assertion that everything is about race, and isn't the narrator being sorta racist herself in saying otherwise, the writer-narrator again writes over this interpretation with a prolonged refutation aside. "And, yes, there are black people who have both of those things [blue eyes and blond hair] naturally, without the use of artificial accouterments, so *we* can move past the whole phenotypically this or biologically that discussion to the meat of things" (emphasis mine 1-2). The *we* reinforces the fact that there is a reader-writer/narrator relationship in the story. However, this relationship is, well, kind of annoying to the writer-narrator, who once again must immediately subvert *you's ah!* moment of classification of the story as metafiction by anticipating it, erasing it, and writing over it: "And if

there is something meta in this narrator's consciousness and self-consciousness or this overindulgent aside, it isn't meta for the sake of being meta" (2). At the end of the story, the writer-narrator reminds readers that what has come before isn't (just) a rehash of the metafiction of the eighties (an obvious insult to the narrator), "like that one guy in fiction workshop said" (14). *This ain't that,* the writer-narrator insists. "This narrator's consciousness is just letting you know about said consciousness up front, like a raised black fist, to get the close reading out of the way and make space for Riley" (2).

As we can see, and as *you* is told, "close reading" is something to be "gotten out of the way." Close reading is, in fact, more than discouraged; it is a giving away of power and must be dispensed with if the writer-narrator is going to "make space for Riley" (2).

This pattern continues as the writer-narrator provides more physical description of Riley, both using and mocking the details often used to describe non-white skin color in other texts, "comparisons to drinks from Starbucks or lyrics from 'Lady Marmalade' or chocolate bars, with nuts" (2). The tone is sardonic, but not without humor. The final comma in the sentence creates an emphatic pause that heightens the absurdity of the earlier details and provides precise comic timing for the ridiculous addition of *with nuts*. You want detail, the writer-narrator's tone emphasizes, you got it, *with nuts*. With each new detail, the writer-narrator writes over *you's* unwanted interpretation and associations, not just about race but about sexual-preference as well. "You would think with his blue contacts and unnaturally blond hair, set against dark chocolate mocha-choca-latte-yaya skin ... that Riley would date white or Asian women exclusively, or perhaps that he liked men ... But you'd be wrong on all counts." (2).

Again, *you* is directly addressed, reinforcing the reader-writer/narrator relationship, but it is certainly not the hide-and-seek collaboration Hemingway expects. Here, the writer-narrator judges *you* and not kindly: "And yes, there is some judgement in the use of 'you'" (2). Much to the writer-narrator's chagrin, *you* is making all the wrong associations and interpretations. Two pages in, and the writer-narrator is so caught in the bramble of *you's* cultural and literary assumptions, in the problematic practice of close reading, that narrative frustration erupts: "There is so much awareness in these two paragraphs that I have hardly made space for Riley" (2).

The narrator-writer's frustration increases as the violence in the story increases. Rather than relying only on this recursive erasure and overwriting technique, at key points, the writer-narrator refuses to provide any description at all, directing *you* to step up to the line and do it for *yourself:* "In the nineties [Paris] felt – you should fill in for yourself a kind of longing here – something melancholy, plaid, flannel, but not overwrought" (emphasis mine 11). This absence of detail is quite different from Hemingway's leaving out to increase dramatic tension. Thompson-Spires leaves out an

emotional detail early in the story to set up the later, more fraught, leaving out of police violence. Still, the writer-narrator can't fully trust *you's* filling in and does, indeed, write over the absence with concrete images for the abstract *kind of longing*, just in case – *plaid/flannel.*

Having established this pattern, later the narrator-writer refuses to describe the violence of a "cop shooting [which] is too melodramatic when the story was interesting on its own" (13). But the writer-narrator gives *you* parameters for how to fill in the blanks: "You should fill in for yourself the detail of that shooting as long as the constants (unarmed men, excessive force, another dead body, another dead body) are included in those details" (12). The writer-narrator makes clear such cop shootings are common enough that *we all* know about them, but you be sure to get the constants right. Because there's a good chance *you* won't get them right, the writer-narrator has to provide them.

"A few more points I should not leave to the imagination," says the narrator-writer, who goes on to erase the erroneous details of the shooting and victims from those the Associated Press and social media have made in the past. These media outlets are now included in an expanded *you* readership, which is now presented as rewriters of the story going forward. The writer-narrator goes on to over-write the erroneous details with corrected and/or more nuanced details, which would otherwise be left out by these inadequate readers/writers, such as the police chalk outline of Brother Man's body on the cement, which had "an additional rectangle above the outline of Richard's [Brother Man's] hand, where he might have held his comic books or a laminated mock-up" (13).

Another technique Thompson-Spires employs in place of the deep reading that subtext requires is to assume readers will go to their devices and Google whatever associations or meanings they can't readily identify. Therefore, throughout the story, Thompson-Spires drops a copious number of allusions, ranging from Lady Marmalade to the United Colors of Benetton; John Mayer to Fredrick Douglas; Dr. Who to Kise Ryouta, Naruto, and Super Saiyan; Neil deGrasse Tyson to Donika Kelly, to name only a few. The writer-narrator may not trust you to interpret details, but Thompson-Spires does trust *us* to reach for our phones and look up any unfamiliar allusions.

Still, the distrust of subtext and interpretation is the overwhelming tenor of the story, admitted by the narrator-writer, who says in the closing paragraph, "I concede that it might have been so much more readable as a gentle network narrative, with the cupcakes and the superheroes and the blue eyes and the nineties image-patterning" (14). However, the technique of subtext is simply not effective anymore. The stakes are too high. "I couldn't draw the bodies while the heads talked over me, and the mosaic formed in blood" (14).

Ultimately, neither Thompson-Spires, nor the narrator of this story, can trust readers enough to draw their own conclusions, to intuit, to hear the unutterable, or unearth the hidden; the stakes are too high: "How to end such a story," asks the narrator, "especially one that is this angry, like a big black

fist" (14)? The old way of telling a story no longer holds power. "I couldn't draw the bodies while the heads talked over me" (14). New techniques have to be found, have to be created, such as this "black network narrative [that] ... wad[es] through so much flesh trying to draw new conclusions" even while knowing "that wishing would not make them so" (14).

Despite the story's simultaneously hopeless and hopeful ending about the realities beyond the story, within the story, Thompson-Spires *has* managed to find new techniques that expose and meet readers where they are while at the same time engaging the imagination in complex ways, signaling perhaps not the death of subtext, but certainly that a rethinking of its use offers writers an opportunity, and a challenge, to look for new ways of crafting stories that keep fiction, literary or genre, vibrant and relevant.

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