Nick Hornby and the Plight of Generation X

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by

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts January 2007

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The “Voice of a Generation” moniker is overused, to be sure. Its overuse, however, should not detract from the fact that, every so often, a writer, artist or musician comes along for whom there is no more appropriate label. Labeling generations, after all, is a way of categorizing people, putting them into neat, clearly defined groups that may help us identify, relate to – or sell to – large fractions of the population. It is natural, then, that in attempting to properly understand a population that we have grouped together as a specific “generation,” we often look for individuals to serve as representatives for the overall group. When these representatives create lasting art, it is difficult not to anoint them as spokespeople.

This is a practice that involves a fair amount of oversimplification: surely, even the most popular figure from a given time period does not speak for everyone, or even everyone of a certain age group, within that period. But it may be enough that he or she speaks for a significant portion of the population in question. While generational voices from Bob Dylan onward have been reluctant to accept the title, the fact remains that the 60s are a time, and its young adults a people, better comprehended by the rest of us because of Dylan’s contributions.

The “voice of a generation” characterization has also been applied to a myriad of figures from or representing the demographic known as Generation X, an expected state of affairs given the profusion of new media in the nineties. From musicians such as Kurt Cobain to directors like Quentin Tarantino, it seems that critics and commentators, well-practiced in the art of attaching labels since the sixties, left no stone unturned in searching for a representative for the nineties
young adult. The search was intensified when the “Generation X” moniker gained prominence. Magazines from *Time* to *Rolling Stone* have examined the phenomenon, and as the labeling of the generation became standard practice, the need to locate a mouthpiece through which the larger group could properly be digested became more and more essential.

Nick Hornby – although technically not a member of Generation X – has emerged as this mouthpiece. More specifically, Hornby has become the spokesman for the Gen-X male. His work, from his memoir *Fever Pitch* and debut novel *High Fidelity* to his recent *A Long Way Down*, captures the essence of Gen-X – that of a people seemingly stuck in an extended or even infinite adolescence – in a manner that is both insightful and credible. Hornby’s connection with Gen-X is twofold: his protagonists embody the demographic of the Gen-X male, and his works delve into issues necessarily associated with the time period, such as divorce, depression and suicide.

As a result of Hornby’s success, he has come to occupy a significant place in the literary landscape. His name is mentioned in virtually every review of any book that falls into the subgenre that has come to be known as the “male confessional.” Authors such as Jonathan Tropper and John O’Farrell are read (or at least reviewed), seemingly, in the context of Nick Hornby. In short, Hornby has become the standard. There is a significant element of transnationalism in Hornby’s work as well: his prominence in his native England has been duplicated here in the States, an interesting turn of events considering Hornby’s own fascination with American culture.
Hornby uses his status as Gen-X’s authoritative figure to frame what is, as seen through his work, the definitive nineties dilemma: that of accepting or rejecting the idea of growing up. We can see through his characters and work the concept, prevalent in nineties culture, of extended adolescence. Hornby’s male protagonists are often trapped in a stunted period between childhood and adulthood—usually of their own making. While Generation X is certainly not the first group to struggle with the aging process, what the nineties seemed to say is that there is another alternative to maturation: death. More specifically, Gen-X had a certain fascination with suicide—best seen in its most recognizable icon, Kurt Cobain—and the taking of one’s own life can be seen as rebellion against adulthood and maturity. This, perhaps, is ultimately the signature contribution of Hornby’s work: the navigation of the divide between becoming an adult and giving up, Gen-X’s most critical question.

**Hornby’s Life**

Nick Hornby was born in 1957, so he isn’t, by most standards, a member of Generation X. His fascination with popular culture, though—specifically the culture of the young adult—has been a running theme throughout his life and his work.

In 1968, Hornby’s parents divorced, and he describes the time as, “I suppose, the most traumatic year of my life” (*Fever Pitch* 17). This event was likely the beginning of the depression that would come to shape most of Hornby’s adolescent years, and most of his early fiction as well. It’s probable that writing became his outlet for allowing his sadness to take form: “I don’t think I was very
happy, and the problem with being a thirteen-year-old depressive is that when the rest of life is so uproarious, which it invariably is, there is no suitable context for the gloom. How can you express misery when people keep making you snigger all the time?” (Fever Pitch 43) That misery would – years later, of course – be expressed through his novels.

It was in his eleventh year, as well, that Hornby became a football (soccer) fan, an event that would come to shape the rest of his life. His father began taking him to games after the separation, and thus Hornby’s lifetime relationship with the football club Arsenal – the focus of the book that first endeared him to readers – was born. Hornby’s attachment to Arsenal would grow to be so great that in his early thirties he would move to North London – another defining moment for his future writing – to be closer to the team’s stadium and fan base.

Hornby, by his own definition, is an obsessive. His memoir, Fever Pitch, is a chronicle of his obsession with football, and the ways in which the sport took over his life. In many ways, his debut novel High Fidelity is a similar journal of obsession: while Hornby has repeatedly denied that Rob is an autobiographical protagonist, it seems indisputable that Rob’s all-consuming love of music is born of Hornby’s. Rob, perhaps, is Hornby’s way of explaining this side of himself to the world, just as Fever Pitch served the same purpose for his football habit. Hornby’s third object of obsession – books – is dealt with in his Guardian columns, which were collected in the book The Polysyllabic Spree.

Hornby describes his upbringing as “privileged middle class” (Fever Pitch 41), and acknowledges that this has produced a degree of guilt over his bouts with
depression. In his writing, he has largely stuck with what he knows; most of his protagonists, particularly in his earlier novels, are middle-class white males. In declaring Hornby’s work representative of Generation X or the 1990s western male, in may be necessary to qualify that description: he is really representing the 90s middle-class white male.

Hornby’s Works

Hornby decided to pursue a writing career in his mid-twenties, to which point he had worked primarily as a teacher: “I had no ambitions for myself whatsoever before I was twenty-six or twenty-seven, when I decided that I could and would write for a living, packed my job in and waited around for publishers and/or Hollywood producers to call me up and ask me to do something sight unseen” (Fever Pitch 111). He began by writing book reviews for publications such as The Listener and Sunday Correspondent. His first published work of fiction appeared in BBC Radio Four’s “Morning Story” in 1989.

As I’ll be frequently referring to Hornby’s books and the characters contained within, what follows is a brief description of his major works:

Fever Pitch, 1992

Hornby’s first mass-published book was a memoir chronicling his obsession with European football (soccer to Americans). It delved deeply into the mind of the overzealous sports fan, but in many ways it is more about masculinity and obsession – and the relationship between the two – than it is about sports. It
achieved massive success in England, selling 300,000 copies and winning the William Hill Sports Book of the Year award. *Fever Pitch* first established Hornby as a revealer of the male psyche, a status which would become far more pronounced later in his career. It has twice been adapted to film; a British version in 1997 was followed in 2005 by a less-faithful American adaptation, a romantic comedy wherein football was replaced by baseball. The film, interestingly, was directed by Peter and Bobby Farrelly, who were responsible for some of the biggest hits associated with Generation X.

**High Fidelity, 1995**

*High Fidelity* is the book that established Hornby as a novelist and his prominence in America. Obsession is again at the forefront, as the novel is narrated by 36-year-old protagonist Rob Fleming, an unlucky-in-love bachelor with a strange sense of pessimistic fatalism. He defines himself by his relationships with women and others by their musical taste.

The novel opens with Rob’s soliloquy to his departing girlfriend Laura, and a subsequent recounting of his most significant failed relationships from the past. We learn that Rob puts so much emphasis on his love life because he has little else that makes him happy. He owns a failing record store that allows him to indulge in his one true passion: music.

The novel’s humor value is provided by Rob’s two friends/employees, Barry (abrasive, obnoxious, and crass) and Dick (shy, introverted, and geeky), each a terrible influence on Rob who helps him remain in his cocoon, making top-five lists
of music's best and worst while avoiding the real world of proper jobs and meaningful relationships. If Rob is somewhat uncomfortable talking about his emotions, Barry and Dick are full-fledged emotional cripples.

High Fidelity sold over a million copies in the U.S. It was successfully adapted to the screen in 2000, with John Cusack starring as Rob (and co-writing the screenplay), and Jack Black in a breakout role as Barry.

**About a Boy, 1998**

In 1998, Hornby followed up High Fidelity with About a Boy, which tells the tales of twelve-year-old Marcus and 36-year-old Will, who share the protagonist role; the book’s third-person narration alternates between Marcus’s and Will’s points of view. Marcus and Will share one defining characteristic: neither of them fits into his own age group. Marcus talks and acts like someone three times his age, while Will, as he nears 40, is still very much a “boy” at heart. Marcus is forced to behave like an adult because his mother, a suicidal depressive, needs to be cared for as if she were a child. Will faces the opposite dilemma: there’s no one to make him act his age. About a Boy is the story, then, of two boys, each growing up in his own way.

Like High Fidelity, About a Boy was soon made into a moderately successful film in 2002, with Hugh Grant taking on the role of Will.

**How to Be Good, 2001**
For his third novel, Hornby diverged from the comfort of the “male confessional” recipe that had so far made him a success. In *How to Be Good*, he wrote from the perspective of a female protagonist. Written from the point of view of Katie, a 40-year-old married mother-of-two, the book looks into deeper issues than did its predecessors. It makes some attempt to answer, or at least seriously debate, the question posed in its title. Katie’s midlife crisis comes when she realizes that she no longer wants to be with her husband David, a miserable, angry man, and wishes he could be someone else. In a “be careful what you wish for” twist, David undergoes a spiritual conversion, becoming obsessed, with the help of a guru named GoodNews, with his charitable endeavors, while risking the health of his own family. Katie finds herself wondering how she can still be a good person while resenting her husband’s attempts to do the same.

**A Long Way Down, 2005**

Hornby’s most recent work is a novel written from the perspectives of four separate characters, who take turns narrating their story. The foursome has come together under inauspicious circumstances: they have each come to the top of a famous building, on New Year’s Eve, with the intention of jumping off. The four characters are from entirely different demographics, of course, and have various reasons for their suicidal desires. Martin is a disgraced daytime TV host, a British Regis Philbin type. After getting caught sleeping with a 15-year-old-girl, he has gone to jail, faced public shame and scorn, and lost his job, wife and children. Maureen is a 50-something-year-old, churchgoing single mother whose life
revolves around caring for her disabled son, Matty. She lives no life outside of her home, and her son’s state is such that he probably does not even recognize her. Jess is an 18-year-old girl seemingly hell-bent on self-destruction. Her decision to end her life is more spontaneous than those of the others, and is rooted in her obsession with a boy who wants nothing more (perhaps understandably) than to get as far away from her as possible. Finally, there’s JJ, a twentysomething man who has lost the two things that mattered to him most: his band and his girlfriend. An American, he now finds himself stranded in England, delivering pizza for a living.

The film rights to A Long Way Down were purchased by Johnny Depp, and an adaptation is currently in production.

Other Works

Hornby has put out three other books. Speaking with the Angel, a collection of short stories by some of the most prominent modern day writers, was released in 2000. Among the authors included are some of Generation X’s preeminent voices: Irvine Welsh, Helen Fielding, Dave Eggers and Zadie Smith. Hornby’s own selection, “NippleJesus,” is about a security guard hired to guard a controversial painting; critic Joanne Knowles suggests that the story functions as a criticism of highbrow art.

Songbook, a series of essays about and inspired by some of Hornby’s favorite songs, came out in 2003. Finally, The Polysyllabic Spree, a collection of Hornby’s columns from the Guardian, was released in 2004. He has also co-written
a screenplay (with Emma Thompson) that was sold but to date has not been put into production.

**Defining Generation X**

There is much debate as to the birth years that actually make up Generation X, but the term is generally understood to refer to those born from the early to mid-sixties to the early eighties. The term was taken from a late-seventies punk band fronted by Billy Idol and popularized by Douglas Coupland’s 1991 book of the same name. The label was adopted by the media and has since come to be a universally understood term for the nineties teenager or young adult.

Gen-Xers have also been referred to as the “slacker generation” or “the MTV generation,” giving the term a somewhat negative connotation. Gen-Xers have frequently contended that the term is limiting and offensive. A *Time Magazine* cover story documenting the achievements of Gen-Xers even softened the media’s stance on the nature of the demographic, with a front cover that blared, "You called us slackers. You dismissed us as Generation X. Well, move over. We're not what you thought."¹ The “slacker” characterization lost much of its credibility when Gen-Xers were largely credited with jumpstarting the dotcom boom of the late nineties.

Rob Owen, author of the book *Gen X TV: The Brady Bunch to Melrose Place*, writes, “Generation X is not synonymous with "slacker," but to many people these words have come to mean the same thing” (Owen). However, Owens contends, the working definition of Generation X should allow for more flexibility: “Not every Baby Boomer went to the original Woodstock and not every Xer attends

Lollapalooza" (Owen). The reference to Lollapalooza – a massive annual summer concert tour that began in the early nineties and featured a slate of popular alternative artists from several genres – helps make Owen’s point: the eclecticism of the tour’s acts reflected that of its audience. Owens acknowledges that Generation X is comprehended as an overly narrow population: “The media stereotype is white, middle-class kids who grew up in suburbia, went to college and are searching for a career, but end up working at The Gap” (Owen). He argues that this characterization isn’t entirely accurate, but it works well in terms of an explanation of Hornby’s work.

Owens describes the stereotypical Gen-X personality as “cynical, ironic, sarcastic,” and the characterization has merit. The time period’s signature musical movement was grunge, which depended on a healthy amount of cynicism and sarcasm, while restoring to popular music a sense of authenticity that had recently been lacking. A *Time Magazine* cover expose on grunge, published in 1992, featured a cover photo of Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder and the accompanying title, “All the Rage: Angry young rockers like Pearl Jam give voice to the passions and fears of a generation.”2 Movies such as “Reality Bites” (1994) and “Singles” (1992) were representative of the Gen-X culture, each featuring an ensemble cast of twentysomethings who were in large part defined by the same characteristics. Ethan Hawke’s “Reality Bites” character, Troy, was the stereotypical Gen-X male: he was indeed sarcastic and cynical, he was lazy and uninspired, but underneath it all, he was also brilliant and complex. If this wasn’t the accurate portrait of the Gen-X

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male, it was at the very least a composite of the media's stereotype and the generation's self-image.

Defining Adolescence

Erik Erikson, in his landmark work *Identity and the Life Cycle*, asserts that "...society consists of individuals in the process of developing from children into parents" (Erikson 17). An individual, Erikson notes, must go through certain phases of development in order to reach adulthood, fulfilling certain tasks along the way. When he reaches adulthood, he takes his place in society. But the individual, along the way, encounters periods of delay that thwart his progress. The first such period is in infancy; the second is adolescence:

Here the sexually matured individual is more or less retarded in his psychosexual capacity for intimacy and in the psychosocial readiness for parenthood. This period can be viewed as a *psychosocial moratorium* during which the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him. In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he *was* as a child and what he is *about to become*, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community's recognition of him. (Erikson 119)

Thus adolescence, he says, "is the last and the concluding stage of childhood. The adolescent process, however, is conclusively complete only when the individual has subordinated his childhood identifications to a new kind of identification, achieved
in absorbing sociability and in competitive apprenticeship with and among his age-mates” (Erikson 199).

At the time of Erikson’s writing, the stage of adolescence was thought to conclude during one’s late teenage years, and transitioned directly into the period of “young adulthood.” In the nineties, though, a gradual shift in societal expectations and understanding of what Erikson considered life’s stages resulted in an adolescent period which extended well into one’s twenties. Erikson’s “Young Adult,” perhaps, was being passed over altogether as adolescence continued on until the individual, now approaching actual adulthood, was forced to reexamine his direction.

**Adulthood and Generation X**

One of the significant characteristics of Generation X is its redefinition of adulthood. Gen-Xers of both sexes (but males in particular) have managed to put off vestiges and rites of passage traditionally associated with adulthood – which are consistent with Erikson’s requirements for one to pass through adolescence\(^3\) and “take his place in society” and in the process live in an extended adolescence (Erikson 118). Gen-Xers, statistics show, will marry, have children, buy their first house, and settle into a career at a later age than any previous generation. Consider:

- In 2002, nearly 40% of young adults between the ages of 25 to 34 had never been married. The numbers were even more startling for men between 30 and 34, with 34% never having wed.

\(^3\) “Man, to take his place in society, must acquire a ‘conflict-free,’ habitual use of a dominant faculty, to be elaborated in an occupation; a limitless resource, a feedback, as it were, from the immediate exercise of this occupation, from the companionship it provides, and from its tradition; and finally, an intelligible theory of the processes of life which the old atheist, eager to shock to the last, calls a religion” (Erikson 118).
• From 1960 to 2002, the birth rate among women aged 25 to 29 fell sharply, from 197 births per 1,000 women to just 117. In 1960, in fact, the age bracket with the highest birth rate was the 25 to 29 group.

• Only one-fourth of homeowners in 2002 were under the age of 40.

• One out of ten people between ages 25 and 34 were still enrolled in school in 2002. Furthermore, the number of young adults participating in adult education rose 19% from 1991 to 2001, with 56% of those between ages 25 and 34 still taking some sort of education.4

While the typical Gen-X male may or may not have accomplished any of these things by his thirtieth birthday, his father had likely done so as soon as his early twenties. At an age where previous generations were already settled in to the life they would lead until the kids moved out, Gen-Xers were taking time to “find themselves” – perhaps little more than a euphemism for growing up – or, as Erikson might say, seek a greater understanding of their own identity.

Hornby’s early novels explore at great length the concept of adulthood, and perhaps more significantly, the nineties aversion to it. Part, if not the overwhelmingly definitive part, of the plight of both Rob from High Fidelity and Will from About a Boy is their struggle with maturity. Both are boys trapped in men’s bodies, permanently stuck in adolescence and terrified of the harsh realities of adult life.

Of the two, Rob is far more conscious of his state; High Fidelity is filled with confessions of this nature. Rob, as first-person narrator, is among the most

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self-conscious of protagonists, and the novel is in many ways the story of his transition, at long last, into adulthood, a transition that he makes kicking and (often literally) screaming. In the beginning of the novel, Rob can hardly even see the difference between his current situation and that of his 13-year-old self. He tells the story of his first breakup, the betrayal of a girl he had spent three days with at 13, only to find her, on the fourth day, with another boy. He says,

It would be nice to think that as I’ve got older times have changed, relationships have become more sophisticated, females less cruel, skins thicker, reactions sharper, instincts more developed. But there still seems to be an element of that evening in everything that has happened to me since; all of my other romantic stories seem to be a scrambled version of that first one. (9)

The incident was painful enough to make Rob’s list of his “desert island, all-time, top five most memorable split-ups.” His inability to get over it is consistent with his belief that, since that time, little has changed, and neither, perhaps, has he, at least not as much as could be expected in 23 years. If it is true that relationships between prepubescent boys and girls bear striking resemblance to those between adults (as Rob asserts), then it is also true that Rob has not evolved much from the typical 13-year-old castoff. He deals with his broken-heartedness in much the same way as he always has.

The top five breakup list opens the novel, and Rob proceeds to detail each of them, insistent that the greater meaning is that he is perpetually destined to be left. His sense of fatalism is one of the guiding forces of the book; the other is his
grappling with age. Throughout the rest of the novel, Rob makes reference to his not feeling or behaving the way he believes an adult should. The very act of making a list of one’s most destructive breakups may be evidence of his accuracy. Rob is constantly consumed by his maturity complex: “I feel as though I have been having conversations like this all my life. None of us is young anymore, but what has just taken place could have happened when I was sixteen, or twenty, or twenty-five. We got to adolescence and just stopped dead; we drew up the map and left the boundaries exactly as they were” (151). He may be immature, he might say, but at least he’s aware and ashamed of it.

Rob again displays his overriding belief in his own childishness when he discusses his most difficult period with Laura, the one where their relationship first nearly ended, he says, “And why had I stuck with it? Not for reasons as noble and as adult as that. (Is there anything more adult than sticking with a relationship that’s falling apart in the hope that you can put it right? I’ve never done that in my life.)” (101-2).

Rob’s awareness of his nature is accurate and insightful, as throughout the novel he indeed behaves like a child who has been punished. When Laura hurts him, he tries to hurt her back. In the midst of a fight with her, post-breakup, he continually insists that she explain to him what chance, exactly, they have of getting back together. “I know how unbelievably and pathetically childish it is to push and push like this for some degree of probability,” he says, “but it’s the only thing I can do to grab any sort of control back from her” (110).
He is in need of constant assurance and acceptance, not only from Laura, but from Marie, Dick, and Barry, and even, to his surprise, from his parents. When he has nowhere else to turn, he goes to his parents’ house, and is shocked to find that even they have made changes in their lives and are not as stagnant as he.

Like Rob, About a Boy’s Will is trapped in an awkward state somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, and, also similar to Rob, it is largely in his own mind that this crisis originates. In addition to being immature, he is depressed and unfulfilled. These feelings stem largely from the fact that Will has no vocation; he lives off of the royalties from a famous Christmas song that his father wrote. Without the impetus of financial insecurity, he has never been sufficiently motivated to get a job. This is consistent with the stereotypical view of Gen-Xers as having an intense aversion to entering the workforce.

Will’s visit to his friends John and Christine’s house, early in the novel, is a prime example of his inability (or refusal) to function in an adult situation. He has come to their house to meet their newborn child, and this is not a visit he is excited about making. After Christine brings the baby into the room, Will is utterly bewildered: “What was he supposed to say next? He knew there was something, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember what it was. ‘She’s…’ No. It had gone” (About a Boy 8). Even more revealing is Will’s reaction to Christine’s statement that she is “a bit washed out.” His replies would be likely be inappropriate even for someone of Marcus’s age, but for Will to react the way he does allows us tremendous insight into just how immature he actually is:

“But burning the candle at both ends?”
“No. Just had a baby.”

“Oh. Right.” Everything came back to the sodding baby.

“That would make you pretty tired, I guess.” He’d deliberately waited a week so that he wouldn’t have had to talk about this sort of thing, but it hadn’t done him any good. They were talking about it anyway.

John came in with a tray and three mugs of tea.

“Barney’s gone to his grandma’s today,” he said, for no reason at all that Will could see.

“How is Barney?” Barney was two, that was how Barney was, and therefore of no interest to anyone apart from his parents, but, again, for reasons he would never fathom, some comment seemed to be required of him. (9)

Later in the afternoon, John and Christine ask Will to be the baby’s godfather. His reply — fraught with terror over the prospect of having some responsibility — is the line that is really meant to properly introduce us to Will as a character: “...I can’t think of anything worse. Seriously. It’s just not my sort of thing.” (11)

The beginning of Will’s maturation process comes when Marcus enters his life, giving Will, for the first time, someone besides himself to account for. Will’s inability to function on the appropriate plain for someone his age, however, proves beneficial for Marcus. Since Marcus is completely unaware of the things a 12-year-old boy should be wearing, listening to, or watching, Will’s areas of expertise
become essential in Marcus’s development. It is through Will that Marcus finally learns to – somewhat, at least – fit in. When Marcus thinks Kurt Cobain is a football player rather than a rock star, it is Will who sets him straight.

Will is not quite as conscious of his problem as is Rob, but he likewise does not think of himself as an adult. When he takes Marcus shopping for sneakers, it never occurs to him that people might take him for Marcus’s father: “Will caught sight of the pair of them in a mirror, and was shocked to see that they could easily pass for father and son; he had somehow imagined himself as Marcus’s elder brother, but the reflection threw age and youth into sharp relief…” (124).

Like High Fidelity, About a Boy culminates when its protagonist finally decides that it is time to grow up. Just as Rob eventually decides that fantasy can never truly live up to reality, Will realizes that he can’t shut out adulthood forever and still lead a satisfying existence. When responsibility is forced upon Will in the shape of Marcus, he finds himself unable to control his grown-up impulses. This climaxes when he meets Rachel, and acknowledges that he would like to be in an adult relationship with her.

Rob’s and Will’s preoccupation with age and maturity is clearly born of Hornby’s own such insecurities, as demonstrated in Fever Pitch. The book is a manifesto on obsession, more specifically, Hornby’s obsession with Arsenal. Hornby is, he explains, a slave to his fascination. He goes to every home game, and cannot be pressured to miss one for anything, including weddings and funerals. He’s understanding of the frustration this causes his family and friends, but he’s
also unapologetic. He seems to believe that this is simply who he is, and that anyone who wants to be in his life will eventually have to accept that.

Hornby is not, however, blind to the nature of obsessives; on the contrary, he spends a good deal of *Fever Pitch* explaining it. Obsessives, he says, “are denied any kind of perspective on their own passion” (10). He acknowledges, also, that this type of behavior is immature. It is acceptable for a 13-year-old to insist that life revolve around the schedule of his favorite sports team; in adulthood, such behavior is viewed as a refusal to live in the so-called real world. In several revelatory passages, Hornby struggles with the same issues – fear of growing up/growing old, inability to function on an adult plane, refusal to concede to the adult world – that his characters do.

In the book’s opening chapter, Hornby describes a post-coital moment with a girlfriend in which she asks him what’s he’s thinking. His response tells us much of what we will need to know as we read through the rest of the book:

At this point I lie. I wasn’t thinking about Martin Amis or Gerard Depardieu or the Labour Party at all. But then, obsessives have no choice; they have to lie on occasions like this. If we told the truth every time, then we wouldn’t be able to maintain relationships with anyone from the real world. We would be left to rot with our Arsenal programmes or our collection of original blue-label Stax records or our King Charles spaniels, and our two-minute daydreams would become longer and longer until we lost our jobs and stopped bathing and shaving and eating, and we would lie on the floor in our own filth rewinding the video again and again in an attempt to
memorise by heart the whole of the commentary, including David Pleat’s expert analysis, for the night of 26th of May 1989. (You think I had to look the date up? Ha!) The truth is this: For alarmingly large chunks of the day, I am a moron. (10)

The passage reveals Hornby’s insecurity in what he realizes to be a childish aspect of his personality that is not acceptable in the so-called real world. It also sets the groundwork for the character of Rob, whom Hornby would craft in the years following Fever Pitch’s publication. Rob’s obsession is with music, not sports, and while Fever Pitch deals specifically with the latter, Hornby is no less overzealous when it comes to music: “I have always been accused of taking the things I love – football, of course, but also books and records – much too seriously, and I do feel a kind of anger when I hear a bad record, or when someone is lukewarm about a book that means a lot to me” (Fever Pitch 21).

Fever Pitch does, eventually, elucidate Hornby’s true feelings on the nature of adulthood and maturity, and the explanation is revealing. It shows us that he is conscious of the idea that everyone is faced with the decision of whether or not to grow up and enter adulthood or remain stunted in an earlier stage:

I used to believe, although I don’t now, that growing and growing up are analogous, that both are inevitable and uncontrollable processes. Now it seems to me that growing up is governed by the will, that one can choose to become an adult, but only at given moments. These moments come along fairly frequently – during crises in relationships, for example, or when one
has been given the chance to start afresh somewhere – and one can ignore them or seize them. (99)

It’s also clear that Hornby and Rob have chosen both options at certain moments. Eventually, Hornby tells us, he was forced to grow up and make the kinds of life decisions associated with adulthood:

These are some of the things that have happened to me in my thirties: I have become a mortgage holder; I have stopped buying New Musical Express and the Face, and, inextricably, I have started keeping back copies of Q Magazine under a shelf in my living room; I have become an uncle; I have bought a CD player; I have registered with an accountant; I have noticed that certain types of music – hip-hop, indie guitar pop, thrash metal – all sound the same, and have no tune; I have come to prefer restaurants to clubs, and dinners with friends to parties; I have developed an aversion to the feeling that a bellyful of beer gives you, even though I still enjoy a pint; I have started to covet items of furniture; I have bought one of those cork boards you put up in the kitchen; I have started to develop certain views – on the squatters who live in my street, for example, and about unreasonably loud parties – which are not altogether consistent with the attitudes I held when I was younger. . . . These details do not tell the whole story of how I got old, but they tell some of it. (Fever Pitch 232)

Interviews have produced other revelatory moments in regards to Hornby’s feelings on the nature of adulthood and maturity. “I think it’s really hard to find people you meet who you think, ‘That person is 100% adult,’” he has said. “I don’t
really know a whole lot of people like that—more women than men, though” (salon.com). This comment reveals Hornby’s belief that this extended adolescence is a universal phenomenon within men of his peer group. It also tells us a good deal about his views on the differences between the sexes.

To Hornby, then, adulthood/maturity entails the following:

- a vocation that is personally satisfying and financially stable (or, as Hornby characters often refer to it, a “proper job”)
- acceptance of responsibility and succumbing to aspects of adult life (such as the aforementioned mortgage and accountant)
- a willingness to change and grow personally
- perhaps most importantly, participating in a romantic relationship that involves compromise, and, symbiotically, a leaving behind of childhood/adolescent fantasies of sex and romance.5

Hornby and the Opposite Sex

Generation X’s image as a “slacker” generation, like its tendency to avoid adulthood and the responsibilities that come with it, is largely exclusive to the male sex. Women, on the contrary, made significant strides during the nineties in terms of equality, or perhaps more accurately, perceived equality. Images of women in the media shifted sharply, with some of the most definitive female characters in

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5 At the end of High Fidelity, Rob proposes to Laura, telling her, “See, I’ve always been afraid of marriage because of, you know, ball and chain, I want my freedom, all that. But when I was thinking about that stupid girl I suddenly saw it was the opposite: that if you got married to someone you know you love, and you sort yourself out, it frees you up to think of other things. I know you don’t know how you feel about me, but I do know how I feel about you. I know I want to stay with you and I keep pretending otherwise…” (318).
movies, books, and television series portrayed as representing strength and confidence.

The nineties were also the most prolific time for female artists in the history of popular music. An explosion of female or female-led acts rose to mainstream success during this time, with Fiona Apple, Jewel, Sarah McLaughlan, the Indigo Girls, No Doubt, and most notably Alanis Morissette among the more prominent examples. Several of these acts converged on the all-female Lilith Fair, a highly successful concert tour that also spawned a double CD compilation. Morissette’s *Jagged Little Pill* became the highest-selling debut album of all-time, and her incisive, biting first single, “You Oughta Know” became an anthem for scorned girls and women. It also redefined the rules, in a way. Previously, few, if any female artists had achieved such widespread success by being as overtly confrontational, and at times crass, as Morissette. The shift in musical trends was representative of the larger societal shift in the way women were perceived, and Hornby’s novels were no exception.

This crisis of maturity, in the world of Hornby’s work, is a definitively male issue. The women in Hornby’s novels do not suffer from the same stunted growth as do the men. Says Joanne Knowles, “*High Fidelity* is a novel full of active and initiative-taking women…” (Knowles 36). Laura and Liz may represent two opposing female viewpoints – they have something of a good cop-bad cop dynamic in their relation to Rob – but they are both grown women who behave like grown women, all the while encouraging Rob to grow up himself. Laura is often responsible for Rob’s decision-making; she is unequivocally the stronger force in
their relationship. “It is Laura who not only becomes the catalyst for action but who acts while Rob makes decisions in the wake of hers. She is the one who pushes for progress and development in life and in their relationship while Rob remains static” (Knowles 25). She is also the one who finally allows Rob to realize that his life isn’t as terrible as he believes it to be. When she reads his list of his top five dream jobs, she helps him to see that his current position as record store owner should actually come in at number five on the list. Far from being caught in an inescapable quagmire of a working environment, Rob is actually living out one of his dreams by owning his own shop, and it is Laura who forces - and forces is not too strong a word – him to see this. Says Knowles, “it is Laura who saves Rob, who acts to give him the mature life he now aspires to and deserves” (Knowles 28-9).

In About a Boy, the female characters can be seen as representing both sides of the Gen-X debate. While most of the women in Will’s life are mature – Christine tries in vain to get Will to see the error of his ways and behave as she believes an adult should, while Suzie has nothing more to do with him when she learns of his childish scheming – Fiona’s suicide attempt shows Will what lies at the opposite end of the spectrum. Part of the arc of the novel is Will’s development from “boy” to man, and Fiona’s episode looms as what might happen if he doesn’t complete the journey.

When Will meets Rachel, his Ideal Woman, he makes his decision and ends his period of extended adolescence; it is his desire – and acknowledgment of this desire – to enter into a mature relationship with Rachel that finally inspires him to change. Women, in Hornby’s work, then, can be seen to represent adulthood and
maturity. It is only when the protagonist grows up that he is truly worthy of the mate he desires; the journey into maturity can be seen as the obstacle that the protagonist must overcome in order to reach his desired end.

In How to be Good, Katie considers herself the adult in the family — the first Hornby protagonist to be allowed such a role (and, incidentally, the first female Hornby protagonist). While she works long hours and is the family’s breadwinner (she uses this term more than once), David is free to behave as he likes. His job, before his spiritual conversion, is to write a column that is little more than a list of complaints. When he decides to stop writing his column and his novel and spend his days with GoodNews, committing nothing to the family’s income — he is free to do so because Katie, the adult, is working and making money.

**Depression**

Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation was such a significant portrait of Generation X that Rolling Stone included its publication in a timeline of the defining events of the nineties. The book hit home because of the appropriateness of its title. The nineties was the time when depression became, in the public consciousness, more than an emotion; instead it was a clinical disorder that could be, and with a growing frequently was, treated by medication.

“Depression,” writes Simon Castles, “has seemingly followed in X’s shadow” (Castles). By any measure, he says, depression and mental illness are inexorably linked with the nineties and Gen-Xers:
Countless studies have found rising rates of mental illness in generation X. These findings range from the conservative (a 1996 British study that pointed to the rate of depression for twentysomethings doubling in the space of 12 years) to the extreme (US psychologist Jean Twenge found that the average American child of the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s). (Castles)

_Prozac Nation_, considered a memoir of depression, reflected that reality with a chilling candor. The book recounts Wurtzel’s lifelong battle with depression that began in her pre-teen years and has continued into adulthood (she would write further on the subject later in her career). It succeeded in bringing the issue of clinical depression into the national consciousness. As a Harvard-educated, award-winning journalist, Wurtzel might not seem a prime suspect for the type of crippling depression she had endured, but the book is frightening in its description of her self-destructive behavior. Its legacy lies not only in the strength of Wurtzel’s writing, but in its being the definitive chronicle of an issue that will forever be associated with Generation X.

In _Fever Pitch_, Hornby reveals that he had struggled with depression for much of his life. His depression may have stemmed from his parents’ divorce and his inability (before finding football) to fit in at school. But coming from a middle-class background that he describes as “privileged,” Hornby (like Wurtzel) felt guilt over his state of mind: “Like most depressions that plague people who have been more fortunate than most, I was ashamed of mine because there appeared to be no
convincing cause for it; I just felt as though I had come off the rails somewhere” (177).

Hornby’s characters, representative of their time period, almost all struggle with depression in some manner. In portraying a time period with which depression has become synonymous, Hornby shows us the difference between a temporary depression based on circumstance – much like his own – and the type of illness experienced by Wurtzel and countless Gen-Xers like her. Rob, having been left by Laura, recedes into a sadness that he must deal with and eventually overcome in the end of the novel. His depression is more of a crutch than a legitimate illness: “It’s brilliant, being depressed; you can behave as badly as you like,” he says. (High Fidelity 83). Will, likewise, feels empty – and for good reason. As Will has nothing meaningful in his life, his sadness is appropriate, and also proves to be temporary.

Clinical depression is portrayed much more seriously through the character of Fiona, Marcus’s mother, who often, Marcus observes, “cried a lot now, more than she did before they moved to London.” Marcus, at 12-years-old, cannot see why his mother is sad: “If it wasn’t boyfriends, though, he didn’t know what it could be, apart from something bad” (About a Boy 3).

Fiona’s behavior – somewhat analogous to Wurtzel’s in Prozac Nation – intensifies in the first act of the novel:

One Monday morning his mother started crying before breakfast, and it frightened him. Morning crying was something new, and it was a bad, bad sign. It meant that it could now happen at any hour of the day without warning; there was no safe time. Up until today the mornings had been OK;
she seemed to wake up with the hope that whatever was making her unhappy would somehow have vanished overnight, in her sleep, the way colds and upset stomachs did….But here she was, already at it, slumped over the kitchen table in her dressing gown, a half-eaten piece of toast on her plate, her face all puffed-up, snot pouring out of her nose. (About a Boy 28)

Fiona’s depression culminates in her attempted suicide, an act which sets into motion the series of events leading Marcus to a permanent place in Will’s life. We are never given an actual explanation for Fiona’s sadness; this is a realistic and representative decision on Hornby’s part, and it’s what separates Fiona’s depression from Rob’s or Will’s. Fiona is Hornby’s exploration of clinical depression as a sickness, which requires no rhyme or reason.

Depression, and its connections with and possible result in suicide, would be approached more comprehensively in Hornby’s next novel.

Suicide

The problem of being stuck in adolescence when one should be further along in the life cycle was likely a major cause of the widespread depression that plagued Gen-Xers and their time. Hornby’s novels are representative not only in depicting this state, but in examining its possible solutions as well. The obvious answer was simply to grow up, and Hornby has established his belief that maturity is a decision that one can choose to make. He makes that decision, to an extent, in
Fever Pitch, just as Rob and Will eventually do as well. Both characters decide to leave their periods of stagnant growth and accept the natural life functions—commitment, maturity, responsibility—that they had thus far tried to avoid.

However, Hornby draws attention to a seemingly obvious widening of the debate that took place in the nineties. Rather than choose between remaining in the cocoon of extended adolescence and making the decision to accept adulthood, Hornby asserts that there is a third option. If depression was Generation X’s signature issue, its offshoot was suicide, and Hornby remains consistent with the themes of Gen-X by presenting suicide as this alternate option. Generation X has the highest suicide rates on record, and has even been dubbed “the Suicide Generation” by Simon Castles, who notes that “by 1990, the suicide rate among males aged 15 to 19 had more than tripled in 30 years in several countries, including…the US” (Castles).

Hornby approached the issue of suicide in About a Boy with Fiona’s overdose attempt and the death of Kurt Cobain. But he explored it comprehensively in his fourth and most recent novel, A Long Way Down. As might be expected, each character in the novel has his or her own distinct take on suicide. Martin, for instance, reduces the decision to one of logic:

I’d spent the previous couple of months looking up suicide inquests on the Internet, just out of curiosity. And nearly every single time, the coroner says the same thing: ‘He took his own life while the balance of his mind was disturbed.’ And then you read the story about the poor bastard: His wife was sleeping with his best friend, he’d lost his job, his daughter had been killed
in a road accident some months before...Hello, Mr. Coroner? Anyone at home? I’m sorry, but there’s no disturbed mental balance here, my friend. I’d say he got it just right. Bad thing upon bad thing until you can’t take any more, and then it’s off to the nearest multistory car park in the family hatchback with a length of rubber tubing. Surely that’s fair enough? Surely the coroner’s report should read, “He took his own life after sober and careful contemplation of the fucking shambles it had become.” (8-9)

He is equally pragmatic when he tells his own tale of woe, saying, “Wanting to kill myself was an appropriate and reasonable response to a whole series of unfortunate events that had rendered life unlivable” (10).

JJ⁶, however, has an entirely different take, and one far more representative of his Gen-X age bracket. He considers suicide to be hip: “Suicide wasn’t invented for people like this. It was invented for people like Virginia Woolf and Nick Drake. And me. Suicide was supposed to be cool” (32).

The assertion that suicide is “cool” is one that may appear foreign to those unfamiliar with Gen-X values. Maureen, for instance, identifies with Drake’s music because it captures what she feels. But unlike JJ, she believes that suicide – and depression and despair – are expected to be hidden from public view: “This is how I feel, every day, and people don’t want to know that. They want to know that I’m feeling what Tom Jones makes you feel. Or that Australian girl who used to be in

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⁶ It’s worth noting here that JJ, an American Gen-Xer, is the character with whom Hornby most associates himself. He is music-obsessed, and many of his rants about music are similar to those that Hornby has written in his autobiographical works. JJ is also extremely literary, and suggests that the foursome start a book group. The idea fails miserably because nobody but JJ himself appreciates books.
Neighbors [Kylie Minogue]. But I feel like this, and they won’t play what I feel on the radio, because people that are sad don’t fit in.” (196)

Maureen speaks for her generation, but Cobain’s nineties was a time when depression – and to some degree, suicide as well – were mainstream. The musical climate reflected this, as did the literary one. Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation was one of several books or films to broach the issue, and its title was a solid indictment of the time period and its youth. Jeffrey Eugenides’s The Virgin Suicides was another highly popular book that was made into a motion picture. Songs (and their accompanying videos) like Pearl Jam’s “Jeremy” brought the issue to MTV.

A Long Way Down, though, turns suicide into a topic that can be laughed at; some reviewers thought this damaged the book’s credibility: “…suicide – or thoughts of it – shouldn’t be this painless” (Harris). But it’s noteworthy that Hornby tackles the topic five years after the end of the nineties, more than a decade after Prozac Nation. The novel has its serious moments – most notably in relation to Maureen – but Hornby, true to his style, keeps the laughs coming as well. The lightheartedness, in a way, allows us to examine the topic objectively.

This isn’t to imply that Hornby does not take the topic of suicide seriously. On the contrary, part of the point of A Long Way Down is to examine the extent to which taking one’s life is in actuality an answer to one’s depression. The foursome realize that they are never actually going to kill themselves when they literally watch someone else do so, jumping off the same building they had contemplated earlier. Cobain’s suicide is a similar moment in About a Boy, providing a shocking contrast to Fiona’s earlier attempt. Hornby may not want to kill off his characters,
but he always reminds us that people do kill themselves, and the subject hence retains some of its gravity.

Furthermore, *A Long Way Down* sheds light on the way suicide has become more likely for latter generations. While Martin and Maureen have the most legitimate reasons for their suicidal desires (as Martins says, his life had become “unlivable,” and the other three characters agree that Maureen’s plight is the worst), it is Jess, the youngest (not even Gen-X but post-Gen-X), who comes closest to going through with it. Her spontaneous decision to jump off the building is foiled only when Martin and Maureen physically restrain her. The man who actually does jump is presumably from the Gen-X period, as JJ says he’s about his age.

**Kurt Cobain**

No discourse on Hornby can exclude his relationship with music; his obsession is as paramount in his fiction as it is in his life. His characters, inevitably, seem to have a musical accompaniment to their stories. The most obvious of these is *High Fidelity*’s Rob, who not only owns a record store, but spends much of his workday making top five lists with Dick and Barry, discussing and debating the merits of their musical choices and preferences.

This persistent reference to music serves more of a purpose than merely to make Hornby feel at home. It is through this lens, again, that we can examine his relationship with Generation X and its inherent issues and problems. Specifically, Hornby’s novels seem to consistently expose his fascination with Gen-X’s most
infamous icon: Kurt Cobain. Furthermore, the issues of depression, suicide, and their relation to Generation X culminate in Cobain’s story.

Cobain and his band, Nirvana, emerged in the early 90s; at a time when rock n’ roll was ruled by artists like Poison and Warrant, so-called “hair bands” who offered little substance yet plenty of flare, Nirvana was a shock to the musical system. Their first album, Bleach, had been largely unnoticed outside of their native Seattle, but when their major label debut, 1991’s Nevermind, was released, music and pop culture were altered seemingly overnight. Nevermind’s lead single, “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” instantly became a generational anthem. Gone were the days where rock music preached that “Nothing but a Good Time” (to reference one of Poison’s biggest hits) was important. Instead, Cobain sang of despair, alienation, and pain. “Teen Spirit” was a scathing attack on the “in-crowd,” on conformity, and, in one sense, on teenage rebellion as well. The rest of the album had similar themes, dealing with suicide, addiction, and neglect; it was the polar opposite of the “hair band” model. The music itself reflected this shift as well: dramatic guitar solos and over-polished production were replaced by a more raw approach that favored emotion over technical prowess.

The grunge movement had thus begun. Following Nirvana to mainstream success were Seattle bands like Pearl Jam, Soundgarden and Alice in Chains. Each offered its own variation on the Cobain model, and had songs dealing with Gen-X issues like depression and suicide: Pearl Jam’s most successful single would be “Jeremy,” a song about a boy who, as its video elucidated to a greater extent than the song’s lyrics, shoots himself in front of his classmates.
With the musical shift came, as it often does, a cultural one. Flannel shirts replaced leather jackets; hairspray was out and unkempt scruffiness was in. If the 80s had been about excess, grunge seemed to mean that the 90s would be about sarcastic or ironic understatement.

Cobain (and to a lesser extent Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder) was appointed as Gen-X’s leading spokesperson. Here was a new kind of teen idol: he scowled when others might smile, covered his face with his bangs, and often seemed to be intoxicated at public appearances. His legend would grow throughout the early to mid 90s as he married and had a child with Courtney Love, singer for another of Seattle’s scene, a band called Hole. Suicide was a persistent theme of his life and work; when he wrote a song called, “I Hate Myself and Want to Die,” it was understood that he wasn’t being facetious. Cobain, as his legions of die-hard fans knew, suffered from miserable bouts of depression that were worsened by the perils of fame.

In the spring of 1994, Cobain took a shotgun to his head, leaving behind his wife and daughter, a suicide note, and millions of devastated fans. With his suicide, Cobain also ensured his legacy: he had joined the ranks of rock’s tragic icons, burning out rather than fading away; his death at age 27 meant that he would forever be associated with the likes of Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

Cobain’s legacy has been further cemented by nineties authors who have referenced him in their works; perhaps none as often, or as significantly, as Hornby. In High Fidelity, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” makes Rob’s top five list of “side one, track ones.” In A Long Way Down, Jess offers this as evidence of Maureen’s
tragically unhip state: “Maureen had never heard of Kurt Cobain, can you believe it?” (190). But it is in About a Boy that Cobain becomes essential. In fact, Hornby makes Cobain a key component of the book’s plot. Marcus’s salvation at school beings when he meets Ellie, a rebellious 15-year-old whom he meets at the headmistress’s office. Their first conversation involves Ellie’s sweatshirt, which she refuses to take off, hence defying school rules and leading her to the headmistress’s office. The shirt in question has a picture of Cobain, and it is here that Hornby establishes the great difference between Marcus and other kids: while Ellie, as a nineties girl in the throes of teenage rebellion, worships Cobain, Marcus has no idea who he is.

Ellie toys with him, explaining that “Kirk O’Bane,” as Marcus calls him, plays football for Manchester United. Marcus, incapable of comprehending sarcasm, naturally believes her, and later, this also shows us the backwards polarization between Marcus and Will. When Marcus is relating his meeting with Ellie to Will later that day, he is still under the impression that Kirk O’Bane is a footballer. But Will – at 36, far more in touch with what kids are listening to than Marcus – recognizes that Marcus must be talking about Cobain, and sets him straight.

It is later Cobain’s suicide that sparks the book’s climax. The series of events leading to Marcus’s realization that his feelings for Ellie are platonic, his eruption at his father, and his mother’s melodramatic eulogy at the police station, is set in motion by Ellie’s anger over the news of Cobain’s death.
Why has Hornby chosen this event as the climactic turning point of the novel? Perhaps because to people of that generation, it is a defining moment. If Kurt Cobain is Gen-X’s John Lennon, then surely, Gen-Xers will always remember where they were when they learned of his death. Here, Hornby connects himself again with Cobain, furthering his status as an authoritative voice for the nineties.

But the main literary purpose of Cobain’s suicide in About a Boy might be the emphasis it places on the Gen-X question of maturity. While Will eventually decides to accept the position of responsibility he has assumed in Marcus’s life and to commit himself to Rachel (and Fiona never does reattempt to kill herself), Hornby again shows us the other side of the debate in the form of Cobain. He uses the suicide of Generation X’s most prominent musical figure to remind us, again, of the role that suicide played in this time period and with this demographic.

Transnational Appeal

Hornby’s prominence is enhanced – or, perhaps, made possible – by the fact that his appeal in the U.K. has been duplicated here in the U.S. In fact, while there is a decidedly British element – and voice – to his writing, there is also something about his work that resonates in America. Entertainment Weekly has described him as a “Yank-friendly Brit” (Harris), and the label is appropriate. This has allowed him to be representative of the nineties more comprehensively, as many of defining elements of Generation X (grunge, Tarantino) were American entities.

Hornby concedes that he has always had a certain fascination with America. His tastes in both music and literature are largely American: his favorite novelist is
Anne Tyler, one of the authors examined in Hornby’s first published book, a work of criticism titled *Contemporary American Fiction*. When Hornby discusses his parents’ divorce in *Fever Pitch*, he cites an American writer, Andre Dubus, whose story “The Winter Father,” is “about a man whose divorce has separated him from his two children” (*Fever Pitch* 18). “Indeed,” says Knowles, “Hornby himself has repeatedly talked about his admiration for American writers and his own strong preference for contemporary American literature over British” (Knowles 71).

Hornby’s musical preferences, although extraordinarily eclectic, also lean toward the American. He is an unabashed Bruce Springsteen fanatic (The Boss is a frequent point of reference, and makes a cameo in the film adaptation of *High Fidelity*), and we’ve already discussed his fascination with Kurt Cobain. He obviously has great respect for American soul artists like Aretha Franklin, Solomon Burke, and Marvin Gaye. American artists are well represented in *Songbook*, which contains essays about 21 of Hornby’s favorite songs; included are quintessentially American voices such as Bob Dylan and Jackson Browne (and, of course, Springsteen).

Obviously, Hornby is far from the first British novelist to be fascinated with American culture. What Malcolm Bradbury called the “Grand Alliance” or “special relationship” between the U.S. and Britain has long been a subject of allure for prominent writers on both sides of the divide. In the early 1800s, it was commonplace for a British writer to travel, with great fanfare, to America; upon his return it was a given that he would write about his adventures abroad and his impressions of the country. Dickens, whom Hornby considers the greatest novelist
of all-time, embarked on perhaps the most significant of these transatlantic journeys, although he was largely disenchanted by the time he returned home. Bradbury notes that, from Dickens onward, “It is notable that many British novelists, past and present, writing about America have been comic novelists” (110). Although Hornby has not written about America per se (save for random short passages), he has written novels that are easily translatable to the States and have found great success with American readers. This is in keeping with Bradbury’s point about comic writers; Hornby’s humor is the element of his work that makes it easily adaptable.

Perhaps the best evidence of the Americanized nature of Hornby’s work can be found in the decision to move High Fidelity from London to Chicago for the film version – and how seamlessly the transition was made. John Cusack, who in addition to starring as Rob co-wrote and co-produced the film, says he and his team decided on Chicago because of their knowledge of the area and its intricacies. Director Stephen Frears, who is British, was at first skeptical about the location switch, but says he was convinced that the overall theme was maintained after reading the script, eventually even coming to see it as a positive. Says Cusack, “People said, ‘how can you change the local from London to Chicago?’ And I thought that was probably the simplest part of the whole process” (DVD commentary). Most reviewers agreed that little, if anything, was lost with the switch.

Comparisons
Hornby has emerged as the preeminent example of the genre that has come to be known as “lad-lit,” with all others seemingly being viewed only in the context of Hornby. If a reviewer mentions Hornby’s name while reviewing another novel, that has come to represent a confirmation that the writer is worthy of inclusion. Hornby is used as a source of familiarity as well; in reviewing an unknown author, the reviewer can present something familiar by invoking Hornby’s name. It is considered a given that when someone says a particular book or author is “like Nick Hornby,” the reader will understand.

Typical is a quote from Publisher’s Weekly on the back cover of John O’Farrell’s The Best a Man Can Get: “O’Farrell succeeds in creating a hit single for the Nick Hornby crowd.” The “Nick Hornby crowd” I understood to mean those who enjoy the “male confessional style,” a novel that has a male protagonist searching for happiness and/or love, or trying to (or not to) grow up. O’Farrell, who contributes a story to Speaking with the Angel, has had considerable success in England that has not yet been duplicated in the States. The comparisons to Hornby may hurt more than they help: if Hornby is the “maestro” of the genre, American readers are apt to dismiss others like O’Farrell is mere imitators. O’Farrell himself has acknowledged (and made light of) Hornby’s influence when discussing the setting of his novels in South London:

I usually like to set my books in South London. There’s a very strict demarcation between novelists in London. Nick Hornby has North London….In my first novel, “The Best A Man Can Get” I went North of the River accidentally and some heavies of Nick Hornby’s came round and said,
“I hear you have been using metaphors and imagery on my Manor.

Wouldn’t want one of your characters to die in one of my Novels now would we!

If a book also contains a focus on music, the comparison is far more inevitable. Mark Linquist’s Never Mind Nirvana, another tale of a lost male protagonist set in the 90s, was set against the backdrop of the Seattle music scene, as evidenced by the title. Hornby comparisons were common: "A well-written novel that's part John Grisham and part Nick Hornby....Much like Hornby's High Fidelity, this book scores most of its points with wry observations about sex and dating, clever metaphors, in-depth knowledge of American rock music and great dialog...." (Wittmershaus). Again, we can see the negative effects of the association; Wittmershaus begins his review by asking, “Do we need yet another book about a thirtysomething white male struggling to find deeper meaning in life?” (Wittmershaus).

Even female authors are not safe. No longer content to compare every comic female novelist to Helen Fielding, one reviewer said of Jessica Adams’s Tom, Dick, and Debbie Harry, “She gives Nick Hornby and Helen Fielding a damn good run for their money” (Daily Telegraph). Another noted that the book “ends up like a Nick Hornby novel” (Marie Claire).

Entertainment Weekly even used Hornby when discussing the CBS (now VH1) series Love Monkey, which is based on a novel. “So who better to anchor this new CBS series, based on Kyle Smith’s witty, High Fidelity-style book about an affable, smart, decent Manhattanite and his bumpy search for love?” (Flynn).
The pervasiveness of Hornby comparisons is revealing; it is his status as the “go-to guy” in the lad-lit genre that has allowed him to become an authority – if not the authority – on matters pertaining to Generation X. Thus, it is Hornby who can properly elucidate the plight of the Gen-X male.

Kurt Cobain chose suicide, but Hornby’s protagonists never do. On the contrary, while the foursome in *A Long Way Down* opts for life, it is back to Hornby’s earlier works that we must turn for a true elucidation of his own beliefs. Rob and Will – just like Hornby himself – eventually come to the conclusion that adolescence need not be permanent. Through the example of his own life and those of his characters, Hornby’s answer to the eternal question of Generation X is simple: grow up.
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