



“The Cruft of Fiction is a major contribution to the study of post–World War II fiction, as well as a striking new account of how novels—in particular so-called ‘big novels’—work. It is a truly pathbreaking account of contemporary fiction that will appeal to formalist, historicist, and other varieties of critic alike.”—Andrew Hoberek, professor of twentieth-century American literature and literary and cultural theory at the University of Missouri and the author of *Considering “Watchmen”*: Poetics, Property, Politics

THE CRUFT OF FICTION

Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention

DAVID LETZLER

What is the strange appeal of big books? The mega-novel, a genre of erudite tomes with encyclopedic scope, has attracted wildly varied responses, from fanatical devotion to trenchant criticism. Looking at intimidating mega-novel masterpieces from *The Making of Americans* to 2666, David Letzler explores reader responses to all the seemingly random, irrelevant, pointless, and derailing elements that comprise these mega-novels, elements that he labels “cruft” after the computer science term for junk code. In *The Cruft of Fiction*, Letzler suggests that these books are useful tools to help us understand the relationship between reading and attention.

While mega-novel text is often intricately meaningful or experimental, sometimes it is just excessive and pointless. On the other hand, mega-novels also contain text that, though appearing to be cruft, turns out to be quite important. Letzler posits that this cruft requires readers to develop a sophisticated method of attentional modulation, allowing one to subtly distinguish between text requiring focused attention and text that must be skimmed or even skipped to avoid processing failures.

The Cruft of Fiction shows how the attentional maturation prompted by reading mega-novels can help manage the information overload that increasingly characterizes contemporary life.

DAVID LETZLER is an independent scholar. His essays have been published in *Contemporary Literature*, *Studies in the Novel*, the *Wallace Stevens Journal*, and the *African American Review*.

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