“Turns out I was a single man, in his pants, sitting in his flat”

Finding a more fitting genre than Travel Writing for

Danny Wallace’s Yes Man
Abstract

In this essay I look at the issue of literary genre and style in relation to Danny Wallace’s *Yes Man*. I argue that this book is not travel literature as it has thus far been defined but that it in fact belongs to the genre of humour due to the evidence that proposes it is written in the style of a parody. I support this line of reasoning by firstly giving definitions of the terms ‘genre’ and ‘parody’ and by then introducing a background to the subject of genre in relation to the novel. This will consist of how genre is used in both sociological and commercial settings, as well as how readers use genre both knowingly and unknowingly. It is also noted whether writers consciously use genre as a foundation for their works or whether it emerges during the writing or publishing process. I then use this background to discuss how *Yes Man* came to be included with travel writing and what other genres it could possibly belong to. This paper concludes that all of these factors ultimately lead to the confirmation that *Yes Man* belongs to the genre of humorous literature.
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I. Introduction

Danny Wallace's *Yes Man* is classed by Waterstone’s, the UK’s biggest chain bookstore, as 'travel writing' (Waterstones.com). Yet the book itself furnishes the reader with very little travel information and simultaneously adopts so many aspects of so many other genres that it scarcely seems possible to accurately confine the book to one genre alone, particularly not that of travel writing. However, upon further analysis a means to categorise this problematic book does reveal itself. Each genre within literature is based on a number of indicators and a certain writing style. As this paper will reveal, *Yes Man* is written in the style of a parody and therefore belongs to the genre of humour. This paper uses glossaries of literary terms, critical works such as Edward Said’s *The World, the Text and the Critic* and sociological research within the field of literacy. With this, it explores the very definition of genre and how writing style is such a considerable part of this as well as just how *Yes Man* has been categorised. This paper also considers just how accurate this categorisation is, based on the book’s style, with the aim of proving that *Yes Man*, if it must be limited to one genre alone, belongs to the genre of humour.

There has been a considerable amount of research over the past two decades into how individuals develop from simply literate people into what researchers actually label ‘readers’.1 Such research has rarely been published outside of literary journals. Yet in their book, *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals About Reading, Libraries, and Community*, Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Lynne E. F. McKechnie and Paulette M. Rothbauer compile some of the most important research into a study of the reader and how we develop as readers from our earliest education. Through this and other related critical works we can identify just how important genre is to a book's identity as it allows us to determine its 'personality', make recommendations and locate it in bookshops and libraries. Ross writes, “The most frequently mentioned ‘quick identifiers’ are the cover, the blurb on the back, and the sample page” (204), all of which are derived from or based upon features of the book in question’s content and style.

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1 This paper is primarily concerned with the sociological aspects of genre and reading, such as how readers make the choices of what to read. Although I am aware of the reader-response theory, it is not relevant enough to be explored in depth for this particular essay.
Derived from a book’s style is the genre. It is a large element of understanding any novel yet we, as readers, are largely unaware of this influence on our book selections. Publishers use this method of branding in countless ways: “[it] is second only to the author in providing clues as to the kind of experience the reader can expect from a book” (Ross 204). However not all books fit comfortably into just one genre, not all can be categorised so easily and Yes Man is just such a novel.

II. Defining Genre and Style

The term ‘genre’ that we use today in modern literature and literary study is often misunderstood or even misused; it comes from “the French term for a type, species, or class of composition,” yet specifically within literature it is defined as “a recognisable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind” (Chris Baldick 90). The conventions, or margins, that define each genre are widely recognised and rarely questioned as they serve their commercial purpose well, allowing bookshops and libraries to guide their customers effectively, linked closely as they are to publishers who truly hold the power to moulding and defining each genre.

Although aspects of the work itself are extracted by the publishers to define the genre, writers too may have a predefined genre in mind for their work as “prior knowledge can, by diverse routes, give rise to the identification and control of genres” (John M. Swales 91). Writers are notoriously secretive about the details of the actual process of their writing but in his article ‘Forget Ideas, Mr. Author. What Kind of Pen Do You Use?’ Stephen Fry reveals how one of his novels began: “I had planned it out in my head, which is about as much planning as I ever do, not being an index-card, scenario or flow-chart sort of a person” (51). From this we can suppose that the genre of a work emerges throughout composition, rather than being applied as part of the planning process.

Yet as novels vary so must writers and thus we cannot accept one example as a model for all. Just as a poet may use the known form of a sonnet as a template for his/her next poetical work, many writers write for one genre alone and do so consciously, using the genre limitations as a template for their work. Stephen King is just such an example as he has found huge success as a horror-fiction writer and has become famous for being so but holds little or no success in any other field (“SK”
However others, such as Roald Dahl who has written children’s fiction, short stories and horror, have found success writing in a number of genres (“RD” Britannica.com). With the absence of a pattern amongst the composition process between writers, it is almost impossible for a critic to distinguish just where the genre of a book appears. Further to this there is nothing with which to prove if the allocated genre is predefined or even intended by the author.

Authors are often complimented for originality but if a work were entirely original, there would be no features with which to link it to other books. Were this so, genres could not exist. It is accepted that “authors are individuals who, by their intellectual and imaginative powers, purposefully create from their experience and reading a literary work which is distinctively their own” (M. H. Abrams 15). Originality is actually a relatively influential aspect of genre definition. If all authors are inescapably influenced by other literary works, how can it possibly be distinguished as their own? The subject of originality has always been of interest to critics. Said argues that one valuable consideration within this subject is “the sheer number of subsidiary insinuations of originality into our thinking about literature” (126). He continues:

Not only does one speak of a book as original, of a writer as possessing greater or lesser originality than another, but also of original uses of such and such a form, type, character, structure; moreover, specialized versions of originality are found in all thinking about literary origins, novelty, radicalism, innovation, influence, tradition, conventions, and periods. (126)

As Said writes, originality, even as a branch of genre study, has many connotations of its own. The perception of originality is, like the boundaries surrounding each genre, a key factor in the process of book selection by readers. However, some may argue that this perception of originality is a little misguided. After all, “when did any of us last read an original story?” (Fry 52) Indeed, if every new novel was entirely original we would not be able to divide them into genres for no two would have anything in common. Fry argues that it is not originality that makes a novel but “treatment is all” (52). Essentially it is impossible to produce a novel that is entirely different from all previous works. It is these similarities that allow us to compare texts and identify
what groups them together. Whilst these groups are what we know to be genres, the similarities could also be called the style.

Parody is one example of style; it is a variety of high burlesque, burlesque being “succinctly defined as ‘an incongruous imitation’; that is, it imitates the manner (the form and style) or else the subject matter of a serious literary work or a literary genre […] but it makes the imitation amusing by a ridiculous disparity between the manner and the matter” (Abrams 27). Parody is based on the imitation of other works or, more specifically, certain features of other works:

The serious manner and characteristics of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and [parody] deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically appropriate subject. (Abrams 27)

However, it is to be distinguished from the mock-epic or mock-heroic variety of burlesque, “which imitates, in a sustained way, both the elaborate form and ceremonious style of the epic genre” (Abrams 28). Although the mock-epic more commonly takes the form of poetry, in a broader sense its mocking of a genre consistently throughout the text could fit any number of novels, particularly those from the humour genre. Parody and all related styles are rapidly increasing in popularity in modern literature.

Swales argues that “good parody is often applied to subject matter that is only slightly or subtly inappropriate. As a result, ‘content’ and ‘form’ may not reveal the fact that parody is being attempted” (Swales 47), countless examples of which can be found in *Yes Man*, some of which are given and discussed in a later chapter of this paper. Parody draws attention to genre conventions by breaking them but often by doing so in a comedic manner so as to appear as though humour is the only intention. However it is an interesting paradox that without the existence of the rules that it breaks, parody itself could not exist. The important point here is that parody is not always ostentatious in its mockery; often it can be used as a subtle style of humour that is intended more to entertain than to draw attention to the inferiorities of other works, genres or styles of literature. The appreciation and full understanding of a
parody by a reader relies upon the reader already having knowledge of the
conventions of other styles and genres.

We have learnt to recognise the style of a prospective read from various
indicators that arise from conventions within groups of literature, as dictated by the
trading side of the industry:

The rules [...] serve as a kind of assumed contract between author and
reader – they specify the grounds on which the intended reading should
take place. They are, of course, socially constructed – and they can vary
with genre, culture, history, and text. (Rabinowitz 43)

This social construction of patterns within literature has gradually developed into a
relatively small number of large groups, or genres, with very strong stock-characters.
For instance, the romance novel will be designed to appeal to feminine readers by
displaying bright and pastel colours on the cover of the book whilst inside holding a
story of romantic ideals upheld by characters that are the very personification of the
stereotyped genders. Whilst variation from the expected construction is not only
expected but encouraged, if a novel strays too far from the confines of its genre, it
may just stray into another genre altogether. With genre both as a term and as tool
now explained and understood, we can better understand how to use this form of
normalisation where specific instances are concerned.

III. Choosing a Book

An area under discussion that is integral to the success of any book is exactly how
readers choose which books to read and the part genre plays in this. Yes Man and
other books that do not fit into one genre so easily could be lost from the ‘literary
radar’ if they were put on the shelf of an ill-fitting genre. This is probably a common
occurrence in countless bookstores and libraries; many readers may be unknowingly
overlooking great works of literature or books of reference, simply because the book
in question cannot be found. At this point it would be an obvious choice to discuss
the workings of publishing firms, bookstores and libraries. However, the reader plays
an integral part here too. Therefore it is important to understand the sociological
aspects of how a person becomes a ‘reader’ and why the psychology of their relationships with books is significant.

There has been a considerable amount of research by psychologists and critics alike into the development of readers from children to adults, how literature can be seen to develop with them to fit the different stages of literacy through the readers’ development and ultimately how the readers reach their own style, pace and preferences of reading and reading matter. To sell, a book must first be found by potential readers; that is, it must become one of the available choices in order to be chosen:

Choices are of course constrained by gatekeeping decisions made all along the line by authors who decide what to write, by publishers who pick which books get published, and by booksellers and librarians who pick which books are available in bookstores and libraries. (Ross 197)

However, each stage of this ‘gatekeeping’ process seems to be mutually exclusive from the others. For example, many writers write novels that do not get published and whilst an author may be fortunate enough to have their work published, that cannot guarantee that a store or library will be willing to stock it. All of these obstacles must be overcome before a book can even be made available to the public. Furthermore, for a book to be chosen it must be attractive to readers, whatever type of reader it may be aiming for:

Although readers often say they will ‘read anything,’ this statement cannot be taken literally [...] Men said they wouldn’t read romantic fiction. Many, especially women, said they would not read non-fiction. Others said they would not read war stories or anything too violent. (Ross 197)

The list of exclusions could potentially continue without end. These findings come from Reading the Situation, a study which reported that “all of the readers in the qualitative part of the study qualified their ‘read anything’ claim by specifying various categories they would not read” (Ross 197). In a sense this is a somewhat negative method of book selection and furthermore seems to be quite contradictory as a reader
who claims they will “read anything” can only prove this by contradicting themselves. Perhaps a point from this study that would be more useful at this stage is that it demonstrates that readers choose by a method of deduction, eliminating that which they do not wish to read in order to see what is left for them to choose from. This is notable at this stage because it helps us further define the boundaries that surround each genre. Readers may not always be aware of how clearly they know what defines each genre but that a study such as this can bring it to the foreground for inspection is useful to any study of genre.

Another important factor in understanding genre is to understand how a genre is born and how a book finds itself as part of one genre and not another. This may seem to be an easy enough question to answer, especially if one considers the stereotyped genre discussed above. Yet in his work *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* Mark William Roche questions why we have learnt to simplify such a complex topic; “[...] such terms as ‘art’ and ‘literature’ tend to be [...] whatever a certain group deems it to be. To suggest otherwise is to risk being viewed as a censor of others’ perspectives” (17). Here Roche could be asserting that genre itself is a type of censorship, exiling books that do not fit certain expectations and predefined categories. This only serves to reinforce the ‘gatekeeping’ strategy mentioned above, which is in itself, though possibly not intentionally, a variety of censorship.

It is without doubt that the widespread notions of what defines each genre from another are created sociologically; less easy to distinguish is whether the common reader created the common genre or vice versa. That is, did the margins of each genre adjust to fit the demands of readers or have readers in fact adjusted their expectations to fit existing genres? It may not be respected by all critics (Roche 17) but the fact remains that for a novel to reach the readers that are required for it to exist commercially, its style must be sufficiently defined for it to be adopted by a fitting genre.

On a survey of readers and their processes of book selection, one researcher concluded that “people who want to promote a particular book choice can either increase the reader's expectation of pleasure from a book or decrease the work needed for the reader to acquire the book” (Ross 205). Furthermore, a book without genre is not only difficult to find but difficult to analyse as it will have no ‘sibling’ books with which to compare.
IV. Introducing *Yes Man*

The above two definitions, that is genre and parody, are important when considering the location of *Yes Man* in a bookstore or library as, depending on your view, style and genre can affect this quite dramatically. There is clearly a formula of sorts that links each book to its given genre and it is possible that Wallace considered at least the style if not the genre of his novel during its composition; being a man of the media industry he should be aware that style and all of its connotations have a huge influence over popular culture.

The largest and most commonly sought after genres are those that are most popular; that is, the most popular genres are usually noticeable by their demanding larger stocks and spaces in bookstores and from being more widely discussed amongst readers. “As he readily admits, Danny Wallace is no Hollywood mogul. He does, though, have a firm grasp of how the film industry works” (Richard Wilson, para. 1) and he should, having spent the majority of his working life in various forms of media for the British Broadcasting Company, or the BBC as it is more commonly known (Zoe Williams, para. 13). Having moved from newspaper publications to radio production to television presenting and ultimately to movie production, as well as writing several books, Wallace should know very well the type of media that is most popular with the public and how to translate this to a book that will sell commercially just as well as any televised equivalent: “In the books, he presents himself as slightly gauche […] but the real Danny Wallace is more complex, with a keen eye for opportunity and a sharp understanding of the media world” (Wilson, para. 4). It is perhaps this great media knowledge that led him to write a book so ambiguous, at least to readers, of literary genre.

Readers tend to use genre as a preconception of a book; most readers know the type of book they enjoy to read and simplified categories help them to recognise books and make recommendations to others. In this sense, genre can also apply commercially as bookstores display books according to their genre. For example biographies are separated from fiction yet fiction itself also has many sub-categories such as romance, fantasy and crime writing. Genre is not to be confused with style; whilst a book may fit into a specific genre, it is its style that allows us to see how this is best done yet one does not necessarily denote the other. One very relevant form of style here is parody, which has perhaps been previously overlooked where *Yes Man* is
concerned, classed as it is as travel writing. Using the background information above, *Yes Man* should now be considered in context and thus in the chapters below there is a more in depth analysis of how and why *Yes Man* can be considered to be in the style of a parody and how this affects the book’s designated genre.

**V. Finding *Yes Man* in a Store**

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper, *Yes Man* can be found in the ‘Travel Writing’ section of a book store. However, without reading it in depth, it is difficult to see how the book came to be shelved so. Although *Yes Man* does contain a degree of travel and in some parts appears to even genuinely adopt the style of travel literature, this element of the book is relatively slight. That is, it is slight compared to other, greater aspects that should, were we looking to shelve the book in a store, cause it to belong to a different category altogether. It is vital for any reader to be able to locate their desired book in a store or library. If books are shelved according to genre and genre is appointed based on various indictors from the book, to what extent does *Yes Man* indicate that it should be shelved with travel books? Considering this point, a further line of reasoning is raised that considers if this is the only genre to which the book could possibly belong.

A book without genre can be seen in the same light as a book without an author that must be named 'Anonymous' in order to be published. So if a book such as *Yes Man* cannot be applied to one classification, does it cease to exist in the eyes of the distributer and thus the consumer? Furthermore, can it have a successful commercial life or is a new, more fitting genre altogether created? From what we know of genre theory, the impression is given that it would be quite unlikely for a new genre to be created in order to fit one problematic book. This is because genre is mostly used in a commercial sense, where financial success is of a higher priority that literary respect. So although genre is a fundamental aspect of literary production from both a critical and a commercial point of view, it is often the case that readers, as consumers, are more highly influenced by a book’s distributers than its critics. However, it is worth noting that if, for whatever reason, a book does not make it through the ‘gatekeeping’ path that leads from the writing to the selling of books, it may be lost to consumers forever.
The genre of travel writing implies, quite obviously, travel; yet in *Yes Man* Wallace does not leave London until chapter eight and that in itself seems more for comedic purposes than for a cultural report. He travels to Holland for only 24 hours and delivers his audience with very little of the culture or what the city of Amsterdam has to offer, “I returned to London, satisfied that – thanks to my dealings with Albert Heijn and the world of the Mindbomb – saying yes had taught me two vital lessons. Three, if you count the fact that no man should ever walk a cat” (150). On the other hand, Bill Bryson is a renowned travel writer and his writings on the same city appear quite detailed by comparison: “Arriving at Amsterdam’s Centraal Station is a strange experience. It’s in the middle of a town on a sunny plaza at the foot of the main street, the Damrak [...] It was beautiful, it was friendly, it had excellent bars and legal dope” (100). However, this raises the question of purpose; whilst Bryson is a travel writer and that alone, writing for the purpose of experiencing and describing different cultures, Wallace does not travel with the intent of writing but simply as ‘Yes’ dictates. As discussed above, it is possible, if not common, that authors have predefined ideas of the genre of their books and thus write accordingly. Bryson may be just such an author which would explain his prolonged success for writing within the travel genre but, as is apparent from their differing writing styles, it seems unlikely that Wallace is the same.

For the majority of the remainder of the book Wallace remains in or around London:

> I was walking slowly [...] noticing things I'd never noticed about London before. Just little things. Like the statue of Charlie Chaplin in the centre of Leicester Square. Or the telephone boxes in Chinatown that have been crafted into little pagodas. Or the tiny dance put on by the little wooden peasants hidden inside the clock on the Swiss Centre, which they perform faithfully once an hour, on the hour, to the delight of tourists and tourists alone. (Wallace 69)

Although it may seem that to stay in one’s home city could be nothing but the reverse of travel, much travel literature is based in just one city, informing its reader of the culture within that city and what it has to offer those that may be visiting. Logic supposes that there can be no better city guide than a long-term resident of that very
city. Further to this, many cultures can be found within one city and it is not always necessary to travel a great distance in order to feel as though you have. Wallace’s reference to Chinatown is just one of many passing references to the rich and varied multiculturalism of London and the surrounding area. So concentrated and mounting is this multiculturalism, many are now of the opinion that London, although the nation’s capital, is losing its British identity:

London is where the processes of global change that now appear to be subverting the integrity of the nation have their most intense and dynamic existence. What is significant […] is that London has generally been left out of discussions of the national culture and identity – as if London were not properly, or purely enough, or manageably enough, British. (Robins 486-487)

Although this is a significant part of another debate, it is notable that London is often considered to be of another culture entirely than Britain. Like any culture, London has its own stereotype and its own representative imagery that is considered to be quintessentially London amongst those that are foreign to the city; such things as the London Underground, a red London bus or the countless monuments and examples of architecture for which London is renowned could not possibly be associated with any other area of Britain. London contains many cultures from around the world, Chinatown being but one example, yet it also has its own distinct culture and in this sense it could certainly be agreed that Wallace travels as much as is required to gather enough research for a travel book.

Further to the claim that one does not need to actually travel in order to write for the genre of travel literature, Wallace mentions numerous place names throughout the book and although he rarely elaborates, this could feasibly be considered enough to class it as travel writing. Places such as Australia, Thailand, Tokyo, Wales and Scotland, amongst others, are mentioned either in passing reference or as places visited by people Wallace knows, if not by Wallace himself. These small factors together could total evidence enough to support the assertion that Yes Man is a travel book.

One large and complete factor to support Yes Man as travel writing is the chapter in which Wallace goes to Singapore and although apparently he is there for
“no reason” (Wallace 341), the chapter consists very much of what we would expect a chapter from a travel book to be:

I stepped off the bumboat onto a long, wooden pier. […] On first sight, the place was virtually untouched. A sandy beach, with lush green trees and bushes, and just a few rickety wooden piers leading from small, neat houses to tiny, barely seaworthy fishing boats. I walked towards the island […]. (Wallace 346-347)

This is typical of the travel genre and follows several pages describing the culture and strict laws within the area. Furthermore, the style seems to be genuine and not of that humorous, mocking style of parody that is used so frequently throughout the remainder of the book. However, alone amongst chapters of other genres, this one chapter of genuine travel writing does not seem sufficient to define the whole book as such, just as the collection of very small references to travel do not seem strong enough to support such an argument as the classification of this book as travel writing.

VI. The Potential Genres of Yes Man

Most reviewers, at least those reviewers whose opinion is respected enough to be published in major British newspapers and journals, seem to agree that Yes Man is a comedy:

I believe the umbrella term for all this would be "gentle humour". I've always been with the person (not so closely that I can remember who it was) who said that gentle humour is a contradiction in terms, like "gentle sex" and "gently pound the garlic into the rosemary". But in fact - and with his new book, Yes Man, especially - Wallace is walking and constantly talking disproof of that. (Williams, para. 11)

Here, Williams has classified the genre of humour as an ‘umbrella term’ which seems to be quite fitting as the name of every genre is really just an umbrella term for a group of books which have certain characteristics in common. However, she does
make the term more specific by calling it ‘gentle’ rather than a general type of humour. Whilst this confirms that Wallace writes in a very British way, it is not entirely void of a humour that can reach other nationalities. His humour is subtle enough to meet the popularity of parody, as discussed above, and this in turn reflects his nationality; that is, the British are renowned for having a very subtle and dry sense of humour, almost the antithesis of the reputation of American humour.

In their article “‘First, They’re Foreigners”: The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the Limits of Dissident Laughter’, Michael L. Ross and Lorraine York discuss how the show, as a typical example of modern comedy in America, seeks to mock non-Americans in order to entertain its easily entertained American audience:

Nowhere is the interface between comedy and ideology more problematic than in the show’s treatment of foreign subjects – those non-American regions and peoples that America: The Book, a print spin-off, cheerfully identifies as an “International House of Horrors”. On the most basic level, the show repeatedly draws on a fund of ethnic and national stereotypes to elicit automatic laughter from its audience. (5)

Ross and York seek to prove that, not only does the show mock non-Americans, but it mocks Americans, too. It assumes that Americans have a very base sense of humour and the success of a show that entertains such people only proves this point; thus the show mocks its own audience by entertaining them. Wallace adopts a similarly ‘base’ technique but from a different angle; he writes to entertain, knowing that his style of humour is at times childish and that it often entertains the ‘child within’ rather than anything on a more sophisticated level, much as American humorists do. Also like The Daily Show, Yes Man has its foundations in fact.

The plot of the book is, to an extent, a true account of events as “the real story did take me to some strange places, meeting some strange people, doing some strange things” (Wallace viii). Moreover Wallace himself is the narrator so, in theory, automatically all genres within fiction should be eliminated. Wallace gives an honest account of a series of events from a small period of his life: “I wrote this book after keeping a diary. Some of the diary I have written more on than other bits, some I didn’t include at all, and some has made it in word for word. I recommend keeping a
late in the seventeenth century, John Dryden defined biography neatly as “the history of particular men’s lives.” the name now connotes a relatively full account of a particular person’s life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject’s activities and experiences. (Abrams 22)

Although Wallace is writing about himself, his own life and his own experiences, it is not quite a full enough account to be classed as autobiography. We learn nothing of his heritage, his family, his childhood or indeed any of the events leading up to the subject of the novel. Although the parts of the novel that counterpart the genre of biography are clear, it is not to be confused with the memoir, a genre whose boundaries seem to surround Yes Man a little more accurately:

[Autobiography] is to be distinguished from the memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author’s developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private diary or journal, which is a day-to-day record of the events in one’s life, written for personal use, with little or no thought of publication. (Abrams 22-23)

Wallace certainly writes in the manner of someone who is aware of how his audience may perceive him. “In the books, he presents himself as slightly gauche, a man who has yet to leave behind the guilty pleasures of playing computer games all day” and although this could be linked to teen fiction and the need of the reader to have someone with which to relate, “the real Danny Wallace is more complex, with a keen eye for opportunity and a sharp understanding of the media world” (Wilson, para. 4). It is important to note that the personality we get from the book may not be an exact match of that of the author, as a man. It may seem that this detail takes us away from the biography genre yet it is likely that this conscious effort to portray certain aspects of one’s personality whilst masking others in an autobiography is quite common; the fact is that we, as readers, can never truly know. Memoirs often contain a moral or a
lesson that the author wants to convey to his/her audience; this is usually something that they learned from one part of their life, the part about which they are writing. *Yes Man* does this too. However, if the moral is particularly strong or conveyed in a particularly philosophical way, it can then move the book into the genre of philosophy or even spiritualism and theology.

There is a great deal of theology in *Yes Man* as well as a constant discussion of spiritualism which could be linked to the genre of self help and lifestyle. Several chapters are devoted to the exploration of the possibility that Wallace met Jesus/Buddha/the Maitreya (or some other spiritual figure) in a man he sat next to on the bus: “I wish I could claim that he was some kind of shaman, or some kind of spiritual figure, sent into my life at that time to push me over the edge. As much as I’d like to believe that, the fact is, he was probably just a bloke on a bus […] But chatty. And wise.” (10) Just as he is ambiguous about the power of this man on the bus, Wallace also speaks of the power of Yes as though it were a god or many gods guiding him. In this sense it is very pagan and this is supported by Wallace venturing to Stonehenge. In another instance, he meets Buddhist monks and discusses spirituality with them. Unlike travel, theology is a theme that runs consistently throughout the book. From this it can again be linked to self-help as the two often combine.

Wallace, as the narrator, addresses his readers directly, asking if they have bought the book as a self-help manual and adjusts his style of writing accordingly, giving what he pronounces to be the five levels of ‘Yes’:

There are, in fact, several levels of Yes. Perhaps you yourself have unwittingly been at the mercy of one of them today. Perhaps that's how you ended up at the shops, or treated yourself to that elaborate coffee – maybe even how you ended up holding this book. The Yes levels (yevels) are everywhere (yeverywhere), and they do their best to help us along in our everyday lives. And if, as I suspect is the case, you have bought this book as some kind of rudimentary self-help manual, you may wish to take note of the following: THE FIVE LEVELS OF YES. (111)

Wallace then goes on to list and explain these five levels, much in the manner of a self-help manual that gives its reader steps to follow in order to achieve a personal
goal. This is a key example of the parodying style that Wallace adopts throughout the novel as he mimics various genres and authors in order to amuse and entertain his audience.

Similar to self-help and books of theology in their intentions to emotionally help or guide their readers in some way is bildungsroman. Bildungsroman is “a novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity” (Baldick 24) and is perhaps not the most obvious genre in which to place Yes Man. In his mid-twenties at the time of writing, it could be said that Wallace was too old for this teen-development style of narrative, yet his ‘journey’ has many similarities and the plot does ultimately lead to the ‘discovery’ of himself and the marriage to his wife: “I probably shouldn’t talk about it. And I’m not sure I really want to either. For now. Just for now. Sorry” (303). Wallace begins the narrative by describing himself very much as a child; he may be physically a fully grown man yet psychologically he has all the traits of the troubled and depressed teenager: “It was my friends who’d noticed it first. They’d noticed I’d changed, or that I just wasn’t around as much as I used to be, or that I was just saying ‘no’ a lot more. […] I just felt like being alone” (5). It could be said that it only becomes problematic to class Yes Man as travel writing if we assume that the travel is literal. Aside from the places to which Wallace physically travels to and comments on, he also takes a metaphorical journey from his ‘old’ self to his ‘new’, enlightened self. In the book he admits to having taken a spiritual journey of sorts, that his life was changed by saying ‘yes’: “The fact is, saying Yes hadn’t been a pointless exercise at all. It had been pointful. It had the power to change lives and set people free” (Wallace 394). This, being a major theme throughout the book, could arguably be enough to class it as travel literature. However, embarking upon a spiritual journey and recording one’s personal thoughts and emotions is not something that can be a very reliable guide to a reader searching for a proficient form of guidance; particularly not a reader who is probably browsing the travel section of a bookstore with literal travel in mind.

A reader interested in spiritualism and metaphorical guidance may especially consider one incident in the book - in which Wallace meets a blind man at the tube station - as part of a succession of events that ultimately led to personal gain. Thus the subject of ethical reasoning and ultimately the genre of philosophy come into question:
I noticed a man with a white stick and a slightly concerned look on his face. He wasn’t really moving, just standing there, and I wondered for a second what the etiquette was in a situation like this. […] But then I thought…what if this was an opportunity? […] In the end, I took a breath, and took the plunge. (Wallace 45)

There are similar events throughout the book in which Wallace attempts to make an ethical choice but finally reasons that each event, no matter how difficult to perform, may eventually lead to another that could be of personal gain to him. Whilst the book does not directly discuss these subjects in a philosophical sense, the subject matter is still present and would not be out of place amongst other philosophical works. Many philosophers write through novels, disguising their philosophies with a plot and characters in order to reach a more mainstream market.

The ethical aspects of Yes Man in conjunction with the subjects of philosophy and ethics pose the question: Is there any such thing as a selfless act? Furthermore, does Wallace use ‘Yes’ to replace ethical reasoning? Many would contend that this is the case yet deciding to say ‘Yes’ in the first place could be considered an ethical decision itself. Wallace asks a hypnotist friend of his to hypnotise him so that he will have no choice but to say yes to any opportunity offered, much as a soldier may feel he does not control his actions but his commanding officer does. “Was there a way of making this easier? Of wiping out nervousness, or regret, or fear, and just making Yes seem like the only sensible option?” (270) He continues: “I explained everything […] and eventually, he smiled, and a moment later he spoke. 'It sounds like you've found your path to enlightenment’” (318). He writes in such a way as to make us believe that he is not considering the effect of his actions on a particularly deep or advanced level. He makes the subject appear trivial as he discusses philosophy in a light-hearted manner, quite clearly mimicking whilst also mocking the serious and self-analysing style for which the genre of philosophy is known. Unlike other philosophical works, Wallace does not try to transfer his own philosophies to others in an attempt to standardise his theory; he experiences this conflict alone, with no other people involved but those who offer advice.

An inner conflict first makes us think of Bildungsroman but the subject of the conflict points to ethical reasoning and philosophy whilst the advice he seeks more
often is of a religious or spiritual persuasion. There are clearly indicators of numerous genres within *Yes Man* yet that they are all written in the same comedic style of parody lets us know that this book is a comedy.

A comedy is “written chiefly to amuse its audience” (Baldick 40) and the reviews published by critics since the book’s release seem to prove the point that *Yes Man* does the same. Among readers who are choosing a new book to read, the genre chosen by the editors, publishers, sellers or libraries does not impact their choices even a fraction as much as recommendations from reviewers and other readers. A book is a nonentity without its audience. With this in mind and considering what the readers of *Yes Man* have written about it, *Yes Man* can belong to no other genre than humour.

**VII. Conclusion**

Since its first publication in 2005 *Yes Man* has been classified as ‘travel writing’. However, from a very shallow reading alone it becomes quite clear that the book does not fit this genre comfortably at all. Although admittedly upon a more in-depth reading there do appear to be aspects of the book that justify labelling it as travel writing, they are by no means robust enough to defend against criticism. In fact *Yes Man* contains aspects of numerous different genres but each makes only sporadic appearances and Wallace writes in a parodying style in almost all instances. As a result of the unclear indicators toward travel writing and the consistent parodying style, *Yes Man* should no longer be classed as travel writing. Rather, the book should be classed as humorous literature as it is the only genre that fits the book without fail.

To the field of literary criticism and particularly that surrounding genre theory, very little, if indeed any academic criticism has been written concerning any of Wallace’s books as they are very modern and that which has been written is quite inaccessible. This paper is intended to represent that which appears to have thus far been overlooked. It also incorporates, quite deliberately, subject matter that would not normally be associated with a discussion of genre and style. Such subjects include originality, sociology, reader development, book choice and factors of commercial success. The book itself has perhaps been overlooked due to its light-hearted quality and its lack of academic status. It can also be considered to be quite a problematic book as is proven here with supporting research around genre theory.
However, where genre theory is concerned, problematic books are often the most interesting because they challenge the theory and thus strengthen it. This essay has not only discussed that which seems to have been overlooked but is also intended to be a serious contribution to the study of genre theory as well as the sociological issues surrounding it.

By no means can one study of a problematic book close the discussion altogether. There always exists the prospect of future research. Although, in this essay, the reader-response theory was only touched upon, this is a theory that could be explored further with Wallace’s literary works as an aid. There is a lot to be explored with the relationships between readers and books. Moreover, to just what extent are readers and critics aware of the influence genre has over them and the way they read? With regard to genre theory, there are many questions that could be answered in far greater depth than has been possible here. Could style ever replace genre as a more accurate and inclusive way of normalising books? How are new genres appearing to accommodate new trends of modern literature? Is there or can there truly be any such thing as an ‘original’ book? Wallace is an excellent example of a modern writer who is not only considered to be original by critics but also appeals to a modern, media-occupied audience. He may not write with particularly academic intentions but he certainly proves that this is not always necessary in order to spark an academic claim.
VIII. Bibliography


