

# WSJ Print Edition

## Brevity: Or, the Soul of Wit

By Brenda Cronin

‘James,’ ‘Held,’ ‘Orbital.’ The name of a celebrity’s newborn? No, those are the oneword titles of novels, all nominees for the Booker literary prize. The other three contenders are the twoword “Creation Lake” and “The Safekeep” and the hefty three-worner “Stone Yard Devotional.”

Succinct titles aren’t only for books. Load up Netflix for “Outlast” and “Heels” and the films “Outlaw,” “Uglies” and “Boxer.” On Amazon Prime you can stream “Cuckoo,” “Afraid” and “Slingshot” as well as a film called “1992.”

This concision may be a result of our shorter attention spans thanks to television, smartphones and social media. But there have been concise thinkers and writers for ages. Shakespeare clearly knew what he was up to: “Macbeth,” “Othello,” “Richard III.” In “Hamlet,” his slightly doltish— and long-winded—character Polonius, gets the line: “Brevity is the soul of wit.” \*

There is nary an excess word in the title or chapters of “Persuasion” or “Emma” by Jane Austen (1775-1817). The same can’t be said for Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), whose windy epistolary novels have one-word titles and unwieldy subtitles: “Clarissa: Or, the History of a Young Lady,” and “Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded.” Those clunkers brace readers for Richardson’s prose, such as this: “Dear Mother, For the last Letter was to my Father, in Answer to his Letter; and so I will now write to you; tho’ I have nothing to say,”

But what if the barrage of choices our devices spew—on food, clothes, entertainment—has trained us to be, as George W. Bush might put it, “the decider”? Has this gusher of options honed our ability to discern promptly what we want? And the more succinct the label, the better because time is still money. So who needs “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil” or “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” or the “Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” when one word will do? \*

Like hemlines and trends everywhere, from food to fashion, labels are cyclical. Just as there are phases in the design of book covers and movie posters, there are phases in the very titles both are meant to promote. But who am I kidding? I’ve already gone on for almost 400 words. You probably stopped reading at “ literary prize.”

*Ms. Cronin is an associate editorial features editor at the Journal.*

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