Hilary Mantel has written 8 novels including her epic on the French revolution, *A Place of Greater Safety* which won the *Sunday Express* Book of the Year Award, and *An Experiment in Love* which took out the Hawthornden Prize in 1996. She also writes radio drama and some of her short stories were recently published in *Learning to Talk* – which is a book of stories prompted by memories of childhood. Hilary’s most recent book is her award-winning memoir *Giving Up The Ghost*.

Hilary is well known for her erudite and finely wrought review essays that have been appearing in the *London Review of Books* (LRB) and the *New York Review of Books* over the last 15 years. Her work will appear in the LRB’s anthology of its best writing over the past 25 years, to be published later this year by Profile Books. Hilary was film critic of the *Spectator* for four years in the 1980s and reviews for papers in the United Kingdom, United States and Canada.

I’d like to pick up on some of those very good points, but also broaden the topic out a bit to talk about how it feels to me to write an essay – how the process feels to me, and what I think it should ideally be. I did wonder at first when I was drafted into this panel why I was here, because I don’t think of myself as an essay writer. But it is true that I do have the chance to write essay-length reviews, mainly for the *London Review of Books*, and the *New York Review of Books*, and over the years I’ve tended to take my review subject and try to push out the boundaries of these pieces a little more…use them to make more connections and discuss more texts. I’m always expecting to be called back by the editor and told ‘stick to the point’. Listening to what Amanda says about strictures on word length, I realise how very lucky I have been, because I used to say anxiously ‘oh how many words do you want?’ But now I’m in a position where editors are generous to me and say ‘take as many words as it takes’, which I realise is a privileged position. I have a certain amount of self-doubt about this. I’m a writer of fiction, I don’t feel a fiction writer has natural authority in any matter. But I think that’s okay – I think it’s okay in the essay form just as it is in fiction itself.

I hate that dictum that’s handed out to young writers: write what you know. Actually, write to *find out* what you know. And I think that’s true of fiction. It’s also true of the essay, because it isn’t the place for dogmatic assertion or pushing the line. And I think it doesn’t set out to educate the reader, so much as to stimulate the reader’s appetite, to point out connections that may not be immediately obvious. What you need, as an essay writer, is an orientation to the subject rather than a fixed viewpoint of authority. It’s a place where texts speak to texts. But the individuality of the essay writer is very important too. The mediating sensibility can be, and should be, that of the creative writer.

One of the essayists I most admire is Cynthia Ozick and I think its no accident that she’s a fine writer of fiction. Her short novel *The Shawl* is one of the most gut-wrenching and yet one of the most exquisite pieces of fiction I’ve ever read. I’ve become aware, you see, that the fiction writers’ sense of movement and structure and form can help you in writing an essay. When it’s done, the reader of the essay should
feel the natural authority of that text. It should appear to have fallen on the page in a satisfying shape.

Now, you know as the essay writer that there are probably six different ways that you could have done it and sorting out the best way is what costs the time and the anguish and what makes it a very ill paid form of work. But to the reader, there should seem there’s only one way and that’s the way it is. And, I feel that if you imagine that you’re writing the short story, where the stories flow and contra-flow, then you won’t go far wrong.

The problem is I don’t always obey my own advice because I tend to be over-cautious and I tend to be inclusive. It’s mainly because I don’t like to engage in those long letter writing wars that break out in the London Review of Books and New York Review of Books and elsewhere, because by the time the letters come in, you have done three other things and your mind is elsewhere, and you don’t necessarily want to be dragged back to that topic.

I think most people who write in the UK cobble together an income from books and various sorts of journalism. And in some ways, it’s these other forms of journalism that we have to be saved from. This is why we look to the essay. I know I’ve written most kinds of columns. And there was a time when all my opinions on any topic ran to eight hundred words. People would say, ‘What do you think of our chances in the test series?’ Eight hundred words. “Hilary, what time should we eat tonight?” Eight hundred words. And this is why we need the essay. To get us away from these pre-cut lengths of opinion and to deliver us from the trivia of the daily press. When I wrote an opinion column for a Sunday newspaper, I used to feel like some kind of licensed psychopath. You would predict, ‘bombs will rain down on such a city’ and then Saturday dinnertime will be coming, and people will be going to bed, and you’ll be thinking ‘come friendly bombs’. Conscience had gone out of the window - you just wanted to be right. And of course, opinion columns almost always suggest that the world is getting worse, and disaster is around the corner.

Why did I do it? Well, money, and prestige and just to find out if I could. I’ve never quite been reduced to that kind of column that has to make the writer’s private life sound fascinating. Alexei Sayle was talking about this the other night and he was saying that there are these columns where, if nothing interesting has happened to you that week, you have to throw yourself down stairs twenty-four hours before the copy date. Then you can write an article about procedures in hospital emergency rooms and how scandalous they are. There are these columns where the writers start off telling you about their shopping and their kids, and then they torture some moral out of it. Then they start off with what sounds like a moral and they get around to their shopping and their kids. Then there’s the ‘Why? Oh, why?’ column. And the celebrity-obsessed column - any amount of trivia and irresponsibility. And there is the team-driven feature. And above all, the formulaic book review - 600 to 800 words. I know about those because I write them. Around publication time I read them with great anxiety. The 800-word piece goes (in posh voice)‘Vanessa Flinches’ sensitive 39 th novel contains all the unthinking strengths of its predecessors and, paradoxically, all their carefully thought out weaknesses…” Because they love to begin with a paradox, or, as they call it, an irony. And so it hums along until the mid-mark, and then it goes, “Nevertheless…” Now the, the wise writer whose book is under review just doesn’t bother with the preliminaries. You go straight down to “nevertheless” because that’s the only bit you’re interested in.
We need the essay to deliver us from this short-term and formulaic stuff. And so I ask myself, ‘Where has the essay gone? Where can it go?’ Now certainly for us in the UK there are not many outlets. We don’t have the equivalent of the New Yorker. We couldn’t have, because if we called it the Londoner, the provinces would be up in arms. Quite rightly so. We have the LRB, and the Guardian newspaper now publishes an excellent Saturday books supplement. They publish an essay a week. How long that will last, there’s no knowing. So, you can’t make a living at it. You can’t guarantee to get your essays into print. But on the other hand, I’m not actually conscious of a glut of essays on the market, Taking up Amanda’s point, I think the issue with poetry is that no one is buying it, no one is reading it, but everyone is writing it. This is not the case for the essay.

To pick up on Peter’s point about creative non-fiction, I think in the last twenty years we’ve had this wonderful flowering of imaginative non-fiction, ranging very widely, outside literature, and outside politics, into psychology, medicine, popular science. Many of these books are expanded essays, and they’ve expanded what we think of as the scope of the essay. And they’ve expanded public taste. If you think of Oliver Sacks with Awakenings, and The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat - this man invented single-handed the wonderful genre we now call the ‘Neuro-Gothic’. And we have a wonderful writer in the UK called Ian Sinclair, who recently produced a book called London Orbital, and it is a contemplation of the orbital road - the M25 - that runs around London, which many of us daily curse. But Sinclair has made poetry out of it. He has this wonderful blend of topographical and psychological concerns, and I think he’s given birth to what the essayist James Wood calls ‘hysterical realism’. Dava Sobel's Longitude, was a massive bestseller. Who would have thought that the public taste would run to a short, finely-written book about longitude. But it did, and I think the publishers are willing to give it a go now. If the packaging is right, the public will pick it up and run with it. We have the London Review of Books in the UK publishing essays in association with Profile Books, and we actually have a company called Short Books to cater for the expanded essay.

What I think is happening is that boundaries of genre are breaking down; the form is expanding, becoming more imaginative. I know I’m about to start in myself on a little exploratory cross gender, er, cross-genre sort of book – probably cross gender as well. I’d better throw a bit of that in. If, ten years ago, I’d come forward with a proposal for it, my publisher wouldn’t have understood what I was trying to do. But now they’re willing to give it to a go, though I have to add, they’re giving me very little money for it.

But I think the essay is tending to spread its wings and appeal to a broader cross-section of readers, though it may be in book form. So, I am hopeful because I think the essay, which has such a venerable pedigree, also works as a modern form. We’ve been through the machine age; we’re into the information age where the essay is still driven by the individual hand and pen. It’s the hand-crafted article. And when so much journalism is synthetic, and so much fiction looks half-made, the essay is the finished artefact. It is the thing that bears the maker’s mark.