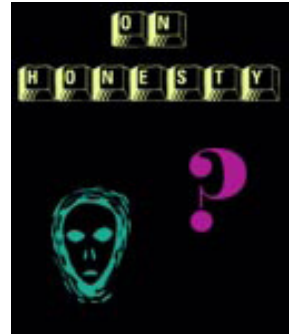




On Honesty



by

R. Michael Burns

In my previous article, I alluded to the need for honesty in fiction. It might seem a strange demand to make of an art which is, by its nature, concerned with making things up. But I would humbly suggest that honesty is vital to writing good fiction.

It all comes down to distinguishing between fact and truth. Journalism is (or at least should be) concerned with facts -- who, what, where, when, why, how? Fiction, by contrast, is about truths, about getting down to some of the fundamentals of what makes us human. Where as journalism is beholden to objective data and has very little room for speculation, fiction is always speculative, is always subjective. As such it can reveal truths far more fundamental than mere facts. It can -- in the hands of its greatest purveyors -- lay the human heart bare.

But in order to do so, fiction cannot be timid, cannot be weak. Bertolt Brecht is said to have put it this way: "Art is not a mirror. Art is a hammer." Fiction is the sledge we wield to shatter facades, to bash holes in our mundane preconceptions and let a bit more of that light of meaning shine through -- even when doing so leaves us feeling vulnerable, exposed, frightened. Especially then. We can do our pounding with the huge clamor of a jackhammer ala Nabachov's earth-shattering *Lolita*, or with the subtle tap-tap-tap of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. We can examine our characters against the prosaic backdrop of Philip Roth's contemporary cityscapes, or against the vast imaginative canvas of Ray Bradbury's colonized Mars. What remains central is the human heart struggling to understand itself.

And this leaves no room for dishonesty. I don't mean petty dishonesty, like saying the South won the Civil War or that Ronald McDonald signed the Magna Carta in 1216. I mean big lies like having characters act in ways which don't ring true to human experience. Creating characters that have no obvious emotions, nor any trait to reasonably explain their emptiness. Characters who exist only to serve the plot, who will act in any manner, however vapid or irrational, however contrary to human experience, simply to assure that the story gets from A to B.

I have that complaint about a particularly popular author of "hard-boiled" horror. Successful though he may be, his characters always leave me flat. They just can't be bothered to behave believably, to feel things. And they act this way in a genre which is, by definition, an emotional one. This author tosses average people into overwhelmingly strange events, and in the face of it all, his characters act with the calm, clear-headed emotional detachment which soldiers and cops train for years to achieve. That strikes me as an outright lie. A combat-hardened commando might feel nothing when he shoots someone dead, but a suburban housewife who's pushed into taking deadly action to defend herself from a stalker is likely to take it pretty badly, no matter how well justified her action. Events like facing death on such intimate terms are traumatic to most people, and it is only a deeply dishonest writer who lets such clashes pass without lingering effects on her or his characters. Conflict has consequences. To fail to depict this in fiction is to deny truth -- and really, to miss the point of writing in the

first place.

As a horror writer, I hear a lot about the limits of genre, the repeated insistence that if you choose to work within a certain category of fiction, you are limited by the strict rules of that genre. I don't buy it. A genre is defined by those who write in it, and I believe a good writer can create his or her own rules as to characterization -- and everything else.

I'd suggest that characters can be written with some real depth, even in genres which tend to be primarily about action and plot. Take Tony Hillerman, a mystery novelist, a writer in a genre infamous for tortuous storylines and frequently contrived plots advanced by contrived characters. But Hillerman's characters act believably, with genuine complexity. They have self-doubt and believable failings, complex opinions of traditional culture and their places in it. And these qualities don't simply exist to advance the plot, but arise because Hillerman cares enough to deal with his characters honestly.

Or consider Elmore Leonard -- a crime writer. Yet his people, too, have real personality (exposed through some of the best dialogue around). His protagonists are often self-serving, have good qualities and bad, full of conflicting drives and emotions. Leonard gives them dimension without ever slowing the pace -- indeed, the kinky complexity of his characters is what moves his plots, and what makes his books so entertaining.

Characters must have an appearance of reality -- what Harlan Ellison calls verisimilitude. For fiction to serve its purpose (if indeed I've hit upon its purpose; see my previous article "Writing Fiction: Why Bother?"), characters must be complex, multi-layered -- must "contain multitudes," as Walt Whitman put it. Humans are paradoxes -- grief mingles with relief, bravery with terror, love with contempt. So it must be with the characters in fiction.

I'll say it plain, my friends -- if you can't handle that level of honesty, maybe fiction isn't your game. As a teacher, I've often heard parents call for kids to be protected from books and stories that might disturb them. But fiction should disturb us, must disturb us in some way, or it has failed. It can be stark or subtle, can come with a laugh or a gasp or a full-fledged wince. But if it shakes nothing within us, then it has not served that vital purpose -- art as a hammer, whose blows throw off the sparks which kindle that light of meaning in this darkness of mere being. You can see the world from just about any perspective you want (fiction is almost infinitely flexible that way) -- but you dare not see it through rose-colored glasses. Characters with no flaws, no complexities or contradictions, have no room for growth -- and therefore have nothing to reveal to readers.

And revelation, after all, is what this whole writing thing is about.



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