



Writing Fiction . . . Why Bother?

Writing
Fiction:

Why
Bother?

by
R. Michael Burns

(Note: Writing this article required a certain degree of arrogance on my part -- the assumption that I have something worth saying on this subject, and the ability to say it well. Ultimately, of course, it's up to you as the reader to decide how effective I've been. All I can really say in my own defense is that writing (for publication, at least) always demands this kind of bravado. As a writer, you must believe that you have thoughts worth sharing, and the skill to express them deftly.)

Those of us interested in fiction talk a great deal about how to write -- and why not? Insightful analysis of our craft is an indispensable means of honing our skills. Dissecting our own work and that of the authors we admire and emulate is an excellent way to learn the anatomy of storytelling.

What we seldom discuss, however, is why we bother to write.

It's a rather odd question -- it seems as if the answer should be obvious. But is it?

Money certainly isn't the reason. If you're keen for cash, write self-help, true-crime, celebrity biographies, diet books. A number of fiction writers earn a living at it; a lucky few (whose names we all know if we glance at the New York Times Bestsellers List) win the publishing lottery. But most fiction writers toil in relative obscurity, making the kind of money you can earn flipping burgers -- or less.

Mere entertainment isn't really a sufficient answer either. If entertainment is all there is to it, why not juggle or do card tricks? Those skills provoke more immediate reactions, and you can make use of them at parties or on street corners. I can't help believing there's a good deal more to writing fiction, something specific to the act and art of storytelling. Something fundamental to who and what we are.

A good many writers I know say it plainly: I write because I can't stop. I know the feeling. But if anything, it only deepens the mystery. Why can't we stop? Why is it that, even as the rejection letters mount ceilingward on the corners of our desks, we just can't quit spinning our yarns?

The instinct for storytelling seems to be hard-wired into human genetic circuitry, deeply imbedded in that ancient and essential group mind that Carl Jung called the Collective Unconscious. You'd be very hard put, I think, to find a single culture or society in all of human history that didn't have its storytellers -- the sages who kept the tribal history in their heads and made sure each subsequent generation learned the old tales; the minstrels and bards who wandered from village to village singing their stories in squares and marketplaces. The folks who elaborately described the exploits of larger-than-life heroes, of crueler-than-cruel villains, of gods and

monsters, of magic and miracles. The myth-keepers.

For me, the answer to our question is illuminated by the words of Dr. Jung: “So far as we can tell, the sole purpose for human existence is to kindle the light of meaning in the darkness of mere being.”

What is fiction if not that -- an attempt to kindle a glimmer of meaning, an effort to understand ourselves as individuals and as a part of this kinky family called humanity? A groping toward comprehension of what we are and how we fit into the grand cosmic scheme of Being.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner put it this way, “. . . the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself . . . alone can make good writing, because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.”

This isn't to say that every good story must be some tortured inner dialog, no more than an extended version of Hamlet's famous “to be or not to be” soliloquy. Conflict with things external to a character is almost essential to maintain a reader's interest, whether the antagonists are squabbling relatives or demonic forces, needy lovers or particle-weapon wielding aliens. Remember learning the various kinds of common conflicts represented in literature? Broad conflicts such as Person v. Person; Person v. Nature; Person v. the Unknown, and so on. I think that more often than not, the stories that move us, that linger with us, are the ones in which the outward conflict somehow mirrors a character's internal turmoil -- and that the central conflict always comes back to what Faulkner suggested, what might be called Person v. Self.

Let's take our friend Hamlet as an example. Certainly there's a good deal of external conflict in the Prince of Denmark's tragic tale, most notably between Hamlet and his throne-usurping uncle. But the real conflict is the one exposed in that famous speech -- does Hamlet have the personal fortitude to do what must be done to avenge his father's murder? The question is not so much whether he can overcome Claudius, but whether he can overcome his own nagging uncertainties.

Or, if you'd rather talk about more recent stories, consider Luke Skywalker. Even in a tale as straightforward and mythically broad as Star Wars, the outer conflict mirrors the inner one. Will Luke trust in the Force, or follow his father's path to the Dark Side? Can he save his father and, thereby, himself -- or will he give in to his anger and fear and become the very thing he has sought to destroy? Luke's artificial hand renders the symbolism transparent: in fighting the half-machine menace of Darth Vader, he is doing battle with the darkness in himself.

Scrooge's ghosts are his own inner voices, tearing down his greed and pettiness, forcing him to decide who he truly is. Getting stranded on a lost island swiftly erodes the socialization of the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, revealing who among them can hold onto his humanity and who cannot. Similar examples abound throughout literature.

In other words, resolving the external difficulties always comes down to resolving the internal difficulties -- the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.

To explore this, whether in the broad, legendary strokes of a J. R. R. Tolkien, or in the fine and subtle psychological shadings of a Thomas Mann, is surely to kindle that light of meaning.

I don't mean to suggest that writers necessarily provide the answers to life's larger questions. More often than not, what fiction does best is to provoke the questions, to jab and prod us into looking a bit more closely at ourselves -- what aspects of our souls do we expose as writers? What reactions do stories inspire in us as readers?

Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. It seems to me that fiction is one of the greatest tools we have for self-examination. The grand secret of fiction is that by making up tales -- by telling lies -- we can, if we are sufficiently honest in our observations, expose the truth.



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