

THE LITERARY ENTERTAINER

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What does it mean to be a writer?

Is it merely one who participates in the craft? I suppose in the most theoretical sense, yes. He who writes is referred to as a writer. But that is as far from practical reality as are school children playing a game of baseball in a sandlot being considered equivalent to playing Major League Baseball; or someone singing in the shower being compared to performing a concert at Carnegie Hall.

So is the answer therefore a distinction between the amateur and the professional? No, it is an issue of talent and how that talent is applied. This is the heart of our discussion.

I've listened to far too much pointless debate about "literature" versus "commercial fiction writing." That isn't what this article is about, for on many levels, that debate is comparing apples and oranges, though we will touch on both areas to some extent for illustration purposes. What is called contemporary "literature" is typically vaunted for its depth, insight, revelation of truth, intellectual stimulation, poignancy—and lots of other three-dollar words, while the redheaded stepchild of commercial fiction writing is more often derided as shallow, pedestrian, mere pulp for the ignorant masses. And in some contexts there's a measure of truth to these antithetical descriptions—but far from the complete truth. And worse, it completely misses the point of our discussion here.

Why do writers write?

Let's think about it logically. If it be for their own personal pleasure or intellectual musings, and kept private, then it's merely a journal or diary or personal works. Stories written by storytellers are for readers. Therefore, writers write to be read—by others, i.e. by an audience. And by definition, an artist plying their craft before an audience is an *entertainer*. That's the crux of the matter. Far too many individuals, who fancy themselves to be writers, never got the memo that their primary purpose in the work of crafting their stories was to be entertaining.

Does that simple axiom of truth preclude depth if insight? No. Does it preclude intellectual stimulation, poignancy, or revelation of truth? Not at all. Shakespeare proved Tragedy was just as popular as Comedy. But keep in mind his primary goal was to put butts in the seats of the Globe Theater and put on a great show.

So how do you know if you're a REAL writer?

Before we delve deeper in to the facets and functions of Literary Entertainment, let's first tangent a hair to talk about who should even be asking this question or not. Because I've heard that question asked so many times I want to puke. And the answer has nothing to do with one's passionate desire to write all the time, or even how fertile one's imagination is to conjure up a wealth of plots and characters. I know some people who love to sing all the time, but who can't carry a

tune in a bucket. There's the issue of that "talent" thing. As the coach in *Chariots of Fire* told the runner, "You can't put in what God's left out."

I'm sorry, but if the talent of **STORYTELLING** wasn't something God put in, then please don't inflict it on an unsuspecting audience. Note, I didn't say "writing," I said "storytelling." Clerks in a law office write. Copy editors at an Ad Agency write. Newspaper reporters write. School children write. Storytellers entertain.

It's funny. Of all the disciplines of fine art: music, dance, acting, painting, sculpture, singing, writing, etc., it seems only writing is the one area where anyone who likes to read mysteriously believes they are qualified to perform the magical art of storytelling. That's like saying that because you own a radio you can play the piano. It's an absurd notion. Furthermore, if you've ever tried to master a musical instrument you know that performance mastery isn't inherent, even if the talent to do so one day is. It takes practice and hard work to develop that talent to the level where public performances are not an embarrassing disaster.

Yet even those genuinely blessed with the gift of storytelling still come to a crossroads of whether they choose to apply that talent as a hobby, a personal amusement, an entertainment for family and friends—or whether they seek to apply it professionally.

Once the decision is made to write professionally, a whole different set of considerations comes to bear. The first is the realization that as a professional storyteller, you now are seeking to ply your talent in an established marketplace of other storytellers (the competition) before established audiences of readers (the consumers). One's success in this field is therefore measured by how effectively the writer can find his or her audience and satisfy their market needs. Please note that these are all "business concepts" not artistic concepts. Indeed, the professional writer needs to adopt a professional attitude toward their business of writing, and the other professionals who function in it.

I find it very amusing to hear the disingenuous whining of all the self-appointed literati who continually disparage commercially successful writers such as Stephen King, Tom Clancy, John Grisham, Robert Ludlum, Danielle Steele, J. K. Rowling, and others. As if they were to say, "Oh sure, millions of people buy their books, and they have more money than God—but their books are no good!" As if those millions of people who bought those books are stupid dolts, ignorant plebeians, the malodorous unwashed masses who lack the elite sensitivity and cultural insight to appreciate truly fine literature.

I have another theory for them: perhaps it's the writers and critics of much of what is *labeled* as contemporary "fine literature" who haven't figured out how to connect with a viable commercial audience, thereby revealing their lack of understanding of the wants, needs, and desires of the common man. Perhaps, through negligence or a callous lack of sensitivity, they have obliviously ignored the technological revolution taking place over the last thirty years or so, that has made so many seemingly endless forms of multimedia entertainment available, which in turn, has made it nothing short of amazing that anyone bothers to even pick up something as arcane as a book anymore for the purpose of entertainment and enjoyment.

A little trivia: Edgar Allen Poe’s work was considered “trash” in his day. Charles Dickens wrote for the masses in order to make a living—yes, purely to make money. Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, the sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, was self-published by this Samuel L. Clemens fellow. If you’ve not seen the movie *Quills* with Jeffery Rush as the Marquis De Sade (an unconventional writer, to say the least), go rent a copy and check it out. Today, Poe and Dickens’ works are considered “classic literature.” They connected with an audience, an enduring audience that has given them a piece of immortality long beyond the grave.

So never waste a moment thinking that if you want people to read and enjoy your stories—lots of people—that this desire in any way diminishes your artistic integrity, or is a poor display of your talent. That notion is also patently absurd.

Let’s also highlight another important distinction here: often that which is called “literature” is that which tends to appeal to the head, designed to stimulate intellect and reasoning, to educate regarding truth and insight through the metaphor of plot and character; whereas commercial fiction is that which tends to appeal more to the heart and to the emotions, designed to cause a reader to *feel* and experience the journey of the storyteller’s imagination. Who is to say that one is a valid performance of writing and the other is not? And yes, that works both ways—and (gasp!) in some instances they are one and the same. I mean, where does it say that to qualify as “fine literature” or “real writing” the hallmark impact a story has to have upon its readers is boredom?

Oh, Bob, but “mere pulp fiction” doesn’t *challenge* the reader as does the depth of “real writing.”

Really? Challenged in what way? I’ve read Horror novels that made my heart pound and kept me from sleeping. I’ve read Science-Fiction novels that inspired me to want to create new universes. I’ve read Romance novels that made my cry. I’ve laughed out loud at some of the comical characters in Witch & Wizard Fantasies. You don’t think that’s a challenge and notable achievement for a writer—to be able to elicit the extremes of true human emotion merely by the application of their storytelling talents?

An Analogy

A young preacher fresh out of seminary may have a deep burning desire in his heart to spread the Gospel and save souls. Yet that’s not going to happen very often in his ministry if he’s preaching to empty pews every Sunday. It doesn’t matter how sincere he is, how well-meaning and caring, how much insight he believes he has to share. He’s shouting to an empty room. The cultivation of the audience really is important. Is it *more* important than the message? That’s debatable; but what isn’t debatable is that it is critical and indispensable to the process. Because without it, you’re preaching to an empty room.

Don’t misunderstand. I’m not advocating turning all your work into third-grade reading-level pabulum. And indeed, a lot of material out there really is crap. What I *am* advocating is that you begin to see your work in a whole new light—not merely as the fruit of your imagination, a story well-drawn and told well—but with an eye on whom you wish to tell this story and what impact you wish to have upon them. Identify and acknowledge your audience. Figure out what it is that

they seek from a book, and do your best to apply your writing talents to meet that need. In business we refer to this as “marketing.”

In Stephen King’s own treatise *On Writing*, he talks about the importance of writing for what he refers to as an “ideal reader.” For him it was his wife Tabitha. He said he knew what she liked, and therefore wrote to please her. I saw the Monty Python troupe interviewed on one occasion where they remarked that they never wrote their sketches “to be funny.” They wrote them to make each other laugh. They knew what cracked each other up, and it so happened it also did quite a few others. And that’s the point: crafting your work to achieve a deliberate effect or impact on a specific audience—a real audience, not a hypothetical one.

Why do people buy books?

Do some buy books for intellectual stimulation, for the gleanings of great insight and truth, to be challenged in heart and soul? Yes, there is a market segment of book buyers out there who make their purchase decisions on this basis. Granted, it isn’t a very big market segment in the grand scheme of things, but it does exist. So if you choose that as your target audience as a professional storyteller, then you need to understand the wants and needs of that group in order to satisfy them. You may never make much money in the process, but that’s up to you, because besides them, there’s everyone else, a distinctly larger potential market segment to serve.

Contrary to popular belief, our country doesn’t have a very large “leisure class” population of the idle affluent (despite what many politicians may claim) who have nothing better to do all day than to ponder the mysteries of the human condition, debate philosophy and polemics on Mars Hill, or run for the US Senate. No, sorry. You see, greater than 99% of the people in the English speaking target market for our books still have to work for a living, no matter where they fall on the socioeconomic continuum. They are busy people with hectic lives. The number of leisure hours they have per day is apportioned in small, finite quantities. And when a moment’s respite arrives, they have the choice of watching over 200 digital channels on TV, playing a video game, going to the movies, renting a DVD, listening to a CD or an MP3 player, going shopping, socializing, or one of many, many other entertainment distractions.

Yet what all these distractions have in common is that they are just that—a distraction, a pastime (to literally pass the time). In great measure these folks don’t want to use that precious leisure time considering the story of the plight of some dysfunctional malcontent as he struggles against an uncaring and unfair world of social injustice, poverty, ignorance, or disease. No, these people have problems of their own, and really don’t want to wallow in someone else’s during the brief bit of break they get in making it through each day. They just want a few hours of pleasant, peaceful entertainment to escape their chaotic world and go on an adventure in someone else’s world. This is the magical gift of the storyteller to them—and not a free gift, one they are happy to pay for!

What do you think the daily living conditions were like in England in Shakespeare’s time for the average peasant—i.e. non aristocracy or royalty? Might a few hours in the afternoon watching the fables and fantasies of England’s past Kings, or Julius Caesar’s assassination, or two star-crossed lovers from the feuding Montague and Capulet families, or mirthful fairies on a mid-

summer night, might they have brought a pleasant interlude of entertainment into those people's lives? I'm fairly certain Will had that figured out. And his works stand today as some of the finest ever composed in "literature."

Perfect Practice

So if you indeed have the talent of storytelling, and wish to apply it professionally, then you must work to develop that talent. You've heard the old cliché, "Practice makes perfect," and hopefully you've also heard its contradiction, "No, PERFECT practice makes perfect." Doing something poorly again and again doesn't make it any better. It just makes it feel more normal, and grow annoying to everyone else. Therefore, I challenge all of you real, professional writing aspirants out there to write with a new objective in mind—if you haven't already discovered this. Write with an *emotional* impact target. That's right, emotional impact, purely as a skills development exercise.

I've observed that many writing groups on the Internet have monthly writing challenges, where members contribute short stories or other works in different genres. I'd like to challenge you to do something more focused: to write a scene—just a single scene, a separate one for each of the items on the list below, designed to make your reader:

1. Feel terrified, but not grossed out, rather frightened with genuine heart-stopping suspense to the point of a pounding pulse and sweaty upper lip.
2. Feel saddened enough to cry with genuine anguish.
3. Feel aroused, sensually and sexually—not with anything explicit or vulgar—but with a seduction scene so red hot the reader has to put it down and find their significant other, or take matters into their own hands.
4. Laugh out loud, hysterically funny belly aching laughing, tears in the eyes—oh, stop, stop—caliber of laughing.
5. Feel anger and rage to the point of wanting to seek vengeance.
6. Feel pride and inspiration, kindling the fires of courage, honor, and sense of duty.
7. Be genuinely awed, mystified, but not confused, at something wondrous and fantastic.

There you go. Seven single scene writing exercises, each one designed to elicit a specific emotion or impact upon an audience of readers. Share those scenes with your writing group or some trusted friends and see how successful you are at achieving your goal. Don't tell the target audience what effect you were going for, just give it to them and say, "Read this scene I'm working on and tell me how it strikes you."

If you'll take this challenge I can tell you what's going to happen. Some of the exercises, and hopefully all of them, will work. But even if only a few of them do, or even just one, it will tell you something about where your talent as a literary entertainer lies, and perhaps what genres (market niches) you're best suited for. If they all work in achieving the impact desired, then the sky's the limit for you.

“You can lead a horticulture, but you can’t make her think.”

I read a book awhile back on screen writing. The author made the statement that any good movie needed five big memorable “moments” in it to make it successful. Do you even bother to think of your stories in terms of creating “moments,” purely for the reader’s enjoyment, or do you just marvel if you accidentally do?

What is a “memorable moment”? That’s easy, it’s a scene like one of the previous seven challenges that makes that kind of direct tangible emotional (and in some instances, physical) impact on your reader.

Wait, wait, wait, Bob! This all sound so contrived!

Great observation, whoever said that. It *is*—if you understand contrived to mean “by design.” Do you think Michelangelo just started chiseling on a block of virgin marble, or might he have had something in mind to dig out? A great performance, in any medium of art, requires practice, discipline, and intent by design. Oh sure, it’s very romantic to naively believe that writing is merely this mystical effusion of the soul. But in my experience, most who espouse such drivel are those who don’t like to do revisions.

Even for you “stream of consciousness” writers who just sit down and start off “Once upon a time...” and then play faithful scribe to the little movie playing in your head until you get to “...and they all lived happily ever after. The End.” you still have the opportunity during the editing and polishing phase to go back and strengthen your work. And when you do, ask yourself, “Where are the memorable moments, the high-impact sequences, that are going to make the emotional connection and lasting impression on my reader?” If they’re not there, add them! If the scenes you thought were intended to make a strong impact just don’t get the job done, then work and rework those scenes until they do.

As I mentioned earlier, there really is a lot of crap out there in print, that while it may *technically* be written well (purely from a craft standpoint) it is neither literature, nor is it good commercial fiction. It’s just crap. What’s the definition of crap? Stories with no memorable moments of great impact upon the reader—a featureless defecation of a scribbler endeavoring to emulate someone else’s work, a genre specific formula, simply to meet a deadline, or all of the above. Don’t you feel cheated when you read a book (or see a movie for that matter) and when it’s done there really isn’t anything about it that stands out in your mind as especially memorable? On the other hand, I can attest personally to reading many a novel written by no one I’d ever heard of before that moment, but was quickly sucked into a real page-turner that I couldn’t put down until it was finished, even if it was the wee hours of the morning. That kind of storyteller had captured my imagination and provided enough moments in the journey to make me want to press on, insatiably hungry for more—and buy another book by that author if I ever saw their name again.

Michelangelo Revisited

I had the good fortune to take a tour in Italy many years ago, an art tour. While in Florence we were shown many of the exquisite sculptures of Michelangelo. I fell in love with what was ex-

plained as Michelangelo's "classic" approach to his art. He taught art as existing on one of three levels of performance:

1. The Apprentice
2. The Craftsman
3. The Master

An Apprentice was just as it sounds, a trainee. A young charge who worked at the side of the Craftsmen and Masters, learning the trade. When the Apprentice had mastered all of the fundamentals he was promoted to Craftsman. That is, a Craftsman was fully proficient at his art. If he was directed to sculpt an arm, he could sculpt an arm, and make it look just like an arm was supposed to look. If told to do a relief of a battle scene, no problem.

Some in the tour were confused at this point and asked, "Well, if the Craftsman is completely proficient, what distinguishes him from the Master?" The Master, it was explained, was the one with artistic "vision." He was the one who could look at the block of virgin marble and "see" the angel or goddess inside that needed to be freed. The Master therefore instructed the Craftsmen on their tasks. Craftsman didn't "see," they just carried out their assignments.

This analogy for the professional writer, i.e. the Literary Entertainer, is this: to truly master your art, you must be able to "see" even before the story is written what is needed to "make it really have a profound impact on all who experience it" when it's done. It is from that inner vision that the great memorable moments are "envisioned" and captured upon the page.

So that's the real challenge: to **SEE** the function of professional writing as more than the crafting of the stories, but as an opportunity to create "moments to remember."

The sum of the matter is this:

- If you are a Professional Writer of Fiction then you are a Literary Entertainer.
- Write memorable scenes and your work will be remembered.
- Write memorable scenes and you will build and grow a viable audience.
- Write memorable scenes and—irony of ironies—you will earn the right to share your deepest insights, your most cherished truths, your most inspiring thoughts with that audience—yes, material of high "literary" value—all whilst entertaining them and satisfying their craving for the sheer enjoyment of your gift of storytelling.
- But we forewarned, even if you have something truly profound to say through your writing, to assume that right by fiat or pedigree—prior to garnering your audience and earning the trust and loyalty of that audience—is the height of elitist arrogance.

"Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry—that's entertainment!" And while you're at it, if you have something worthwhile to say, say it.