On Writing and Stories

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In a book which I read around fifteen years ago—the title of which escapes me, as well as everything else in it—I came across one notion concerning writing which seemed a watertight little truth worth preserving, and still does. What the man said, in so many other words, was that editors don’t buy stories, they buy writing. It warrants a moment’s meditation.

Obviously, there has to be a story or at least a situation on which to hang the writing. However, I have often been confronted by friends, acquaintances and strangers, who tell me they’ve just gotten The Greatest Idea For A Story, Listen Please And Tell Me What You Think. I’ve listened and told them what I thought. I’ve told some, and truthfully, that I was surprised they weren’t selling their stuff, because their ideas and plots struck me as quite good. But then, I’ve sometimes had occasion to see the final product—a story all written out, neat & pretty-pure & on crinkly white bond—and smelling to high heaven, because for all his mentation the author did not dignify his story with interesting, and sometimes not even grammatical, prose. There is little excuse for poor grammar and syntax on the part of a would-be writer, and if a person did not receive an adequate background in this while he was in school, it is a thing remediable by recourse to one of the many, good and easily available texts on the subject. This point is obvious, but so is the fact that it is often ignored.

Grammatical prose need not be interesting prose, however. Interesting prose may be the result of one of two things: hard work or natural talent. Not much to say about the latter, and the former means practice. It means writing a thing over and over and over again until it starts to sound decent and until making things come out decently becomes a habit. Once this has been achieved, a person is ready to sell writing, and the question as to where the stories come from becomes easy to answer, because then there are only two sources.

One is inspiration, and it can’t be controlled. Sometimes an idea, a situation, a character, a setting will burst like a Roman Candle behind your eyes and stay there while you write with a deadly compulsion until it’s all down on paper and the fire goes out and you can start sleeping and eating again. If writers had to rely on inspiration, though, their finances would suffer far more than their health.

So in between those demonic flashes, a writer who is aiming at a regular output has to make do with the second source. He has to go through the mechanics of constructing a plot, then start writing and hope that things will catch fire somewhere along the way. His writing then has to be interesting enough to carry whatever perhaps trite things he has to say, by embellishing the characters to bring them as close to humanity as is possible for him, by considering the background to the extent of providing as much consistency, depth and color as he can, by supplying details having a tone of truth for both of these, details from out of his imagination and details looked up in other places. He can take one of the Trite & Mighty: a triangle love/hate story, a revenge story, a Man v. Nature story, and if he pays the proper homage to the god of mundane labor he will succeed in selling the writing, where a man who neglects these obeisances would not sell the same story.

That writers favor certain sources when seeking detail is axiomatic. It is a thing governed by background, temperament and attitude. While Andre Norton, say, turns to anthropology and mythology, Wilson Tucker will turn to contemporary military and political annals. If I had to name two books from which I’ve mined detail in quantity, I would name A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration and Use of Arms and Armor in All Countries and All Times, Together With Some Related Subjects, by George Cameron Stone (Noble Offset Printers Inc. N. Y., 1961) and The Forest and the Sea, by Marston Bates (Mentor, N. Y., 1961).

But the detail or its source is unimportant, really, to the extent that we know it is available. Anyone with access to a library can dig up detail. It is the use to which it is put that is important.

The next time you read a story which does not contain a single original idea, which does not possess even one particularly memorable character, which does not have an especially unique setting, but which you do not feel cheated at having read and possibly even enjoyed, remember then that the story is paying homage to the writing. It is the latter which the editor purchased. If magazine editors had to rely on artistry rather than craftsmanship, there would be no magazines. This is the main reason I bite back a chuckle whenever I read an article or listen to a panel discussion concerning Literature & Science Fiction, or vice versa. Look for it in the occasionally inspired work, which percentage-wise is as prevalent in s-f as anywhere else, if you bear in mind that s-f itself represents only a small percentage of the awesome tonnage of material published every year. Mostly, you’ll just see writing, and that’s why it’s that way.