The Balance between Art and Commerce

Roger Zelazny

There comes a point—and I don’t know precisely where it occurs —when you’ve been around long enough and are sufficiently well-known that you sell everything you write. If I want to try something experimental I do it in confidence that it will appear somewhere. I no longer even think of something not selling. So, to this extent, the question concerns something which no longer seems to apply to me. I will have to return to an earlier period in my career to consider market influences.

When I was just beginning to submit stories to magazines and found them being returned to me with rejection slips, I did make it a point to read every issue of every magazine I was trying to hit (including lots of back issues), cover to cover, in hope of learning the sorts of ideas and narrative techniques which were selling. So I was influenced to the extent of using the contemporary market as something of a model for my own efforts. This worked for me in a short time, with my first sale and with a horde of others which followed. These were mostly short, forgettable gimmick-stories, but that was fine with me. I couldn’t write anything else at the time, and I considered the period an apprenticeship. Selling gave me an incentive to keep writing, and writing those sorts of things was practice which I knew I needed while I figured out what it was that I really did want to say when I found my voice and moved on to greater lengths. And when this finally occurred I could not but be grateful for the support of a sympathetic editor and an earn-while-you-learn situation.

Several years later when I began to write full-time I shifted the bulk of my writing activity to novels, for which I would first sign contracts and then do the books. I was only happy that that sort of market situation existed, and following the personal angst of a psychological shifting of gears I felt nothing else in the way of pressure or influence. I encountered very little in the way of editorial suggestions concerning the material I was turning out.

So, in my case, I found that the marketplace of those days helped me to develop as a writer. And I’m now past that point I mentioned in my first sentence, so that I do not really know what the marketplace of today is like for a person just starting.

In general, what kind of balance do I feel should exist between art and commerce, craft and commerce? I feel that a sufficiently good story will sell. I do not feel that publishers exist to provide writing lessons or vocational therapy. Will I change a story if I am asked to? Yes. Up to a point. If I feel the change is a good idea, great. If I feel it doesn’t make much difference one way or another, okay; I’m a reasonable guy, and if it makes the buyer happy without hurting things, I’ll go along with it. If it’s something I feel very strongly should not be changed? Then I’ll tell them so, and if we can’t work it out I’ll take the story someplace else. But I’ve always felt that we both want the same thing—a good story that will make us money. And I’ve had a very frictionless life in this regard.

So, I am happy with the situation as it is right now, for me. I am more than a little curious how newer writers view it, however, as their general apprehension of these matters today is doubtless clearer than my own.

Notes

The SFWA Bulletin editors asked: “In what way has the marketplace, in your opinion, deformed, enhanced, or helped your work? What kind of balance do you think should exist between art and commerce, or craft and commerce?” Zelazny and thirteen other authors responded with essays, including Brian Aldiss, Isaac Asimov, Jack Williamson, Anne McCaffrey, and Arthur C. Clarke.