



The Thinking Room

... about Writing: What Makes A Good Story?

from: <http://www.russellweb.org.uk>

There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way of writing, although there is 'bad' writing that most people wouldn't want to read.

A Good Story is one that our readers judge to have been 'good' – there is no other measure.

I am a UK writer. The Guardian reported in 2014 that "... [the] UK publishes more books per capita than any other country" ¹. According to Wikipedia ², 184,000 books (all categories, including revisions) were published in the UK in 2011, whilst the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook for 2015 ³ says that over 150,000 new editions are published each year.

**"Everyone has at least one book in them",
or so the saying goes.**

Fiction is a smaller subset of the annual publishing round and many writers sense an intense competition to get their works noticed. In my own favourite genre, Science Fiction, the competition is extremely fierce. The Locus online directory for 2014 ⁴ lists just 538 new novels published in 2014. That is more books than most readers will get through in a year, but it is also considerably less than the numbers of writers trying to find readers. Most traditional publishers don't work in this genre, bookshops seem to be very skewed towards stocking a few well-known names and many readers have migrated to digital sources where they can access free fiction (the proliferation of free self-published books on the Kindle may be fuelling that).

Not every story is a good story, of course. There are more than a few 'turkeys' out there (and hindsight shows me that some of my early work fits in that category!).

How can our books stand out in this crowd?

What distinguishes a Good Story from the 'also rans'?

I think there are five important attributes that need to be present in a piece of fiction to make for a **Good Story**:

1. **Theme:** there needs to be a relevant overall message that our readers can connect with.
2. **Plot:** the message is conveyed through our characters' words and actions, as they resolve the situations and problems that we put before them ('the plot'). Those experiences must be interesting and exciting, and they must resolve something that our readers will feel is important.
3. **Characters:** Few readers will be excited to read about bland people living bland lives, so we must present authentic yet exciting characters.
4. **Setting:** readers hope to enjoy the imaginary place that we create in their minds. They want to be entertained, relaxed and re-energised. To achieve that we must use richly textured settings that feel authentic and yet different from everyday experiences.
5. **Structure and Style:** we must use an appropriate blend of our writing skills to present our stories to our readers. Our way of writing must meet our readers' expectations (sometimes we may have to work hard to match their expectations to the story we are trying to tell), but it must also excite them through the unique voice that we use (see my earlier blog entry on Writing Styles and voice).



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The more time we invest in planning Theme, Plot, Characters, Setting, Structure and Style, the more likely we are to create original, authentic and exciting stories that our readers will cherish.

Structure and Style go hand-in-hand with *Voice*, although as writers we are not restricted to only writing in one way and we can use different styles in different stories. However, it is important to use a similar style in stories where our readers will expect that. For example: I really enjoyed reading all of Ian Flemings' James Bond stories except for *The Spy Who Loved Me*, because the lurch in writing style jarred too much with my expectations for a 'Bond story'.

It helps to use Themes that resonate personally

In my writing I often have Cold War, Religion and Love themes. These topics are important to me and as I write I can feel my life experiences pouring into the page. My emotional engagement with the story-telling at a thematic level helps to drive tales with meaning.

Those themes buzz in my head as thoughts of Plot develop. I often find that the plot grows around the characters as I define them. It becomes an iterative process of circling from plot to character, character to plot, until both feel like they have reached a moment of culmination. I know when I have reached that point because a pressure builds in my imagination that begins to force the story onto the page.

I find defining Settings much harder to complete and often worry about whether I have described them sufficiently well in order to draw the reader in. I always aim to follow the mantra of "*show, don't tell*", but it is hard to describe settings through dialogue and some description is needed before action can take place. My way of resolving this worry is to keep reading scenes and chapters out loud. I seek out the places where narrative exposition is becoming dull or intrusive and then either re-work it into a more compact form or shift it into dialogue or action.

I hope these thoughts are some help when you are planning your next story – good luck!

27th October 2015

References:

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- 2 - "Books published per country per year", Wikipedia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Books_published_per_country_per_year
- 3 - Owen, Alysoun (ed) (2014) *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2015*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, p.148
- 4 - Locus online "Monitor" directory for 2014: <http://www.locusmag.com/Monitor/2014/Directory1.html>