



A Bit About Writing

Now that I have agreed to write a book comes the hard part: writing a book. Years ago, when the desire to write a book first hit me, I got hold of two years' worth of the "Best American Short Fiction Of The Year" anthologies, about 30 stories in all, and studied each one. Every one of them stank, and here I share the reasons as a cautionary tale- mostly for me.

At that time (25 years ago), neither desktop publishing nor the interwebs existed, and to get published you had to exert extraordinary effort to be different- to break the mold, transgress the boundaries of the genre, transcend your peers, that sort of thing. And every one of the writers who managed to get their stuff into those Best Of anthologies was a professional writer with extensive publications and every one of them did their best to stand out in this regard. How did they do it?

Simple. In high school, we learned the essential elements that a piece of creative writing had to contain to be successful. Remember that? Well, each writer decided that to break out of the pack, he or she had to LEAVE OUT at least one of those essential ingredients. This would guarantee that their story would transcend the genre, transgress the boundaries, etc. This probably played well with the critics and (obviously) with the editors of the anthology but it fell completely flat with me. Here I recount some of those "missing part" stories:

First you had the protagonist who is such a boor or chump or evil person that the reader cannot identify with him or her at all. This will run the reader's motivation quickly down to zero. OK, the main character of this story is a complete jerk. Why should I want to read about him/her if s/he had no redeeming qualities at all?

Second, you had the story with no protagonist at all, just a bunch of characters that enter the stage, interact, and exit. Hmm... remind me again why I want to read this story?

Then you had the story with no plot. Oh well, there might well be a protagonist, but what is that character supposed to do if he or she has no story to tell? And why should I read about it?

Then there was the story with no beginning or introduction. It read like chapter 16 of a long book but without chapters one through fifteen already under your belt you had no idea what the hell was going on. Now that certainly transgressed the boundaries of the craft!

Worse than that was the story with no conclusion. Raymond Chandler once said that the mark of a good detective story was if you would still read it even though you knew in advance that the last five pages of the book had been torn out. That might be true in the abstract but in reality, a story without

a conclusion cheats the reader out of his or her reward for persistence. It wastes their time. Then there was the story which, had it been a painting, had far too much paint on the canvas- run-on sentences bristling with subjunctive clauses, parenthetical digressions, and basically enough "writing" for two or even three stories. Reading one of those was like strolling through the La Brea tar pits. After a while, you just get too tired to carry on.

On the opposite end of this spectrum was the story which, had it been a painting, would be a blank canvas with a few dots of paint over in one corner. Next, please.

Only now have I come to realize that those stories were to writing what avant-garde jazz was to music: written for other writers and the critics. Ooh, listen to that! A diminished 13th chord resolving to a minor seventh! And on top of being impossible to hum along with, it is impossible to dance to! None of those stores was intended to be "popular".

OK, so what's my point here? Just this: I want to write stuff that will make the average reader hum along with it, maybe to get up and dance to it. I want the reader to have fun, to have a good time, at least when I am writing about something that is funny. I won't be writing silliness all the time; there will be stuff in there that is definitely not funny, but I will do my best to not be boring or depressing. What other writers or critics might think of it doesn't matter to me, because they are not my demographic, not my target market, not my audience. YOU guys are. If I succeed, you will consider the effort of reading it to have been worthwhile, and if I write more after that, you will be positively disposed towards reading it too. That is what success means to me.

And I'm not going to leave anything out of the recipe to just to score points. Rest assured the burger will have a slab of raw onion on it the same diameter as the patty and a layer of mayo as thick as the onion slice on top of that.

Plus the secret sauce, of course.

That's Slim's story for a Monday evening, and he's sticking to it.