

TRUTH IN FICTION

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Editor's note: Scott Samuelson spoke with Josh on 10 July 2008.

Scott: Josh, as a fiction writer you have no doubt thought about fiction as a way of knowing.

Josh: Yes. Fiction knows in part by testing hypothetical systems of human behavior. Every story makes an implied argument about how we should live our lives. Every story embodies a system of values we either should or should not adhere to. For example, when Ernest Hemingway tells a good story, that story is a very clear, if indirect, argument for a value system he thinks we should live by.

Scott: The ethicist would argue directly in a philosophical way, attempting to prove a moral choice. A social scientist might study actual cases, but the fiction writer engages us indirectly by illustrating in an artful, make-believe situation?

Josh: Yes, that's right. As a fiction writer, if I set out to write a story with a system of ethics in mind, for example, telling a story to demonstrate that honesty is a good thing, more often than not, I produce a story that rings hollow or that ends up sounding like propaganda. The fiction writer creates a world with a system of ethical rules, rules that the writer may not even articulate. When characters make certain choices, they suffer the consequences of their actions based upon the world the writer has created. One of the things readers will not typically forgive is a text or an author that creates a system of rules for the world that they're reading about and then breaks those rules. The particular ethical code itself cannot be the most important thing. Consistency in the story's world is the most important thing.

Scott: Do you have an example?

Josh: Yes. I'm working on a story right now, and I don't know how it's going to end. All I have is simply a problem. It's a story about a man who is in the grocery store one day buying some things for his wife. He gets up to the cash register to pay, and he realizes he has forgotten his wallet. So the man behind him in line says, "Don't worry about it. I got it," and swipes his credit card and pays for him. The main character

says to this guy who pays for his groceries, “I’d like to pay you back—what’s your name, what’s your phone number, what’s your address. Please let me make this up to you.” And the man who has paid for the groceries responds by saying, “Don’t worry about it. Give it to God,” and walks away.

And so then this character has to figure out, “How do I give \$18.37 to God? and so he begins to explore all of these different ways that he could give God \$18.37. He’s not a member of the Church. It’s not in a Latter-day Saint setting. As a writer, I can’t suddenly break the rules of this world and have God show up in his bedroom and accept \$18.37. That would be breaking the ethical rules of this world I have created, because part of the rule of this world is that God is difficult to find. And if God becomes easy to find, then I’ve broken the rules.

Scott: So, to come back to the way in which a fiction writer knows: The fiction writer plays this game which is to make up rules and test characters against them?

Josh: Fiction writers can’t spell out the rules on page one of the story because to do so would be to go against verisimilitude, the likeness of truth. But here’s an example from my life: I moved to Cairo, Egypt. In Cairo it was essential that my wife and I learn that society’s rules: What are the rules for buying something in a market place? What are the rules for what my wife can and can’t do by herself in this society? What are the rules for Americans in this society, and are they different from the rules for people who are native to Cairo? To return to fiction: fiction lets us practice this process of learning a new society’s rules vicariously because periodically we find ourselves in this new situation. In Cairo, knowing the rules could be a matter of life and death.

Scott: In reading fiction we practice figuring out the system, learning to draw principles inductively from the world. What is your answer to the person who says, “Why all the indirection? If you want to explore society’s rules and how to act, why don’t you just talk about it directly?”

Josh: Literature aims to answer three questions: “Who am I?” “How should I live my life?” “What does it mean to be human?” When we read *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, it’s easy to say this story is a metaphor for the ways in which we get beaten on a daily basis. Hemingway argues for noble behavior in the face of those beatings. So

why doesn't the story deal with these questions directly? An important reason is aesthetic. Literature is committed to beauty, and often the indirect illustration is more pleasing than the bold, obvious answer.

For example, I can say, "Humanity is beautiful." Alternately, Ezra Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro" says, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/Petals on a wet, black bough." I would argue the poem's indirect assertion about humanity's beauty is more pleasing than the direct statement because the petals on a wet, black bough are also delicate as human beings often are. Further, the wet, black bough is a metaphor for the world in which we live—wet, black, and sometimes very unpleasant. Pound captures a larger truth through indirection.

Scott: So to return to the question of what it means to be human, what does it say about who we are as humans that we find this indirect method so powerful and attractive? What does that tell us about our nature?

Josh: I think it says very good things about us. Maybe many things, not the least of which is that we are creatures of beauty, we are drawn to things that are beautiful. Also we are creatures who understand that a dictated, un-illustrated truth is no truth at all. A simple, direct statement of truth like "humanity is beautiful" seems like less of a truth than "the apparition of these faces in the crowd;/Petals on a wet, black bough" because truth is, by its nature—like the poem—more complex and layered.

Scott: For me one reason "humanity is beautiful" is an inadequate explanation is that it appeals to just an isolated part of who I am. I am an eternal soul who yearns after truth. But my soul is housed in a body, a body that is very important to me because it is grounded in the earth. The petals, black boughs, rain, and wetness appeal to my physical senses. I'm a complex being who wants truth to appeal to my soul and to my body: I want the pure truth but I also want the truth through my senses. We don't want to know just with our heads. We want to know with our body.

Josh: William Carlos Williams says there are no ideas but in things. In William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* one of his characters says "love" and "sin" and "fear" are simply shapes to fill a lack, words for those who have never loved nor sinned nor feared.

The abstract word “love” doesn’t necessarily communicate an idea as powerfully as a thing communicates an idea. Fiction writers believe that images have more power to communicate ideas than do mere direct statements of abstract concepts. So the fiction writer is concerned with telling stories through concrete images.

Scott: Can you illustrate this idea from one of your stories?

Josh: I wrote a story that ends with the narrator holding out a rock to his wife and trying to get his wife to accept this stone that he’s handing out to her. Fiction writers believe that if they do the job, the rock has more power and more importance than would any abstract statement at the end of the story. Some people want to be told the moral of the story, but fiction writers believe they can put into a gesture of a character picking up a rock and holding out to his wife meaning and power.

Scott: I think people long to engage in interpretation. We yearn to construe meaning. I think of that great moment in the Book of Mormon where the angel, rather than telling Nephi something, asks him, “What desirest thou?” And Nephi says, “To know the interpretation” of his father’s dream. Something deep within us wants the challenge of figuring things out from the clues. Theologically, we might say we came to this earth to be immersed in this process.

Josh: You mention Nephi’s experience with the angel and desiring to know the interpretation of Lehi’s vision. There’s a parallel in that scriptural reference where the angel says again and again to Nephi, “Look. What beholdest thou?” Essentially, this is what the fiction writer does. The fiction writer creates a story and then holds it up to the world and says, “Look.” Readers in turn may ask, “What does it mean?” and fiction writers, if they are wise, say, “Look. What beholdest thou?”

That’s how we try to figure out the world. Fiction writers don’t figure it out and then pass it on to the world through a system of bullet point lessons. Rather, through a system of stories where the moral is not necessarily given directly but is nevertheless present. We are witnesses, and from witnessing events we draw out the truths of our lives.

Scott: Give another example of this process from your own fiction.

Josh: I mentioned starting with a problem, say, owing God \$18.37. In another of my stories, the problem is that the wife walks into the house one night and does something she has never done before. It could be a little thing—maybe she sits down and starts practicing the piano which she has never played. In one of my stories the wife comes home, sits down at the table and instead of watching television like she normally does, she pulls out a math textbook and begins studying geometry. This behavior is new; this is something different. When I begin a story I don't know how it ends. I don't know where the story is headed because it's in the process of solving a problem. To the person who would say, "So you don't really have a truth in mind?" I say, "Not at the beginning, but at the end I do." In solving or not solving the problem, important truth can emerge.

This also applies to interpretation: if a student comes up with a different truth than I do in reading and interpreting this story, I would have to be fine with that. I don't think that I have a choice otherwise. If someone looks at my characters and the choices they make and the things that happen and draws out different lessons from it, so be it.

Scott: How far can interpretation go? I know a Robert Frost poem in which the narrator tells the story of riding in the buggy behind a horse. Somebody comes out of the woods, stabs the horse and kills it and runs away. I had my students back in the 1970s at the University of California, Irvine write about this poem, and one of the students said, "We are in the middle of an oil crisis. This is a poem about the energy crisis that America is going through. The horse represents transportation and the person coming out of the woods with the knife and killing the horse represents the oil barons that have taken advantage and held America hostage in its transportation." That interpretation seemed outlandish to me. This poem had been written well before the oil embargo. Yet, I want my students to make application between works of literature and their lives. This student had probably sat for hours in line at a gas station trying to get gas and for all I know he spent those hours reading this poem, writing the paper that he had to write for my class. What are the rules of engagement with interpretation? Are there certain admissible and certain non-admissible interpretations? What would be the lines of demarcation between those realms?

Josh: I think there are at least two schools of thought in how we interpret the work of literature. One school of thought says, “The author’s original intent is what we should be aiming to uncover. We should look at the work of literature and our purpose should be to examine what the author was trying to say to uncover the original intent.” The other school, which you and I would call “reader response,” believes that a text doesn’t even exist really without a reader. Readers bring to a text their own values, experiences, and backgrounds. It’s impossible for readers to separate a text from their own backgrounds, values, and histories. So, personally I think that we get in to dangerous territory when we use the phrase “is about.” “This poem ‘is about’ blah blah blah...” It seems to be very authoritative when we make a statement like that. I am far more comfortable with statements like, “This poem is a metaphor for this.” So the Frost poem is certainly not about the oil crisis of the 1970s, but can we read the different forces at play in the poem as a metaphor for the oil crisis of the 1970s? If Frost has truly uncovered truths about human conflict in his poem, then we should be able to translate those truths about human conflict over into other conflicts. So I may disagree that the poem is about the oil crisis of the 1970s, but I can read the poem as a metaphor for the oil crisis of the 1970s and perhaps, even, of 2008. •