

THE NEVERMENDING STORY

"If you have not survived your trouble out of your own resources then you have not really survived it, you have merely closed yourself against it." – James Baldwin

O! my brothers and sisters in arms, in art and in amour, all you clever wordwranglers, answer me a question, for I am sorely troubled. Many uplifting narratives have I read and viewed and by these efforts I have been much comforted, for like you I did become convinced that nothing long-lastingly bad can happen to the clever and the diligent, the deserving and the kind.

Then came Trump, *et sequentiae*.

Now that innocent people in the Land of the Free have been harmed in ways that cannot be undone, by people who exemplify popular movie villainy, and considering that to some degree this is always and ever the case, how do I resist the impulse to tell the woefully mistreated that they must not have been sufficiently plucky? That they didn't work hard enough in a two-minute Skills Acquisition Recap to develop the strengths and insight they needed to defeat evil landlords, conniving corporations, self-serving politicians, crippling illnesses and ICE?

Everything About It Is Appalling

Four decades in sitcoms and children's TV have led me increasingly to believe something mildly heretical: that the stories we enjoy steer us wrong. Nickelodeon's plots, sure; romance writers' confections and sci-fi writers' off-world hijinks. But I suspect it's not just badly-done story that fails us in our exploration of what it means to be alive and aware. It's not just Disney's anthropomorphic uplift, Spielberg's triumphant humanity in the face of the unexpected, Michael Bay's clamorous bravado. It is Story itself, the telling of comforting tales set in slightly-altered worlds, with key elements jury-rigged to amplify "emotional truths."

Because, come on Player One. Ready or not, we won't be threatened by ur-wizards, swallowed by whales. We will not fight Transformers. We will lose our memories, our hair and our retirement savings and our children will leave home and never visit. Fundamentalists of every stripe will fight to deny us rights. As the poles melt and conservatives strive to make the definition of society meaner and smaller, minorities, women and the disabled will continue to battle for everything the white men who run things take for granted. This is what we need to be prepared for, not being locked in Nakitomi Tower or chased by a Great White.

Picture Yourself On A Boat, Up The River

In most entertainment narratives, fundamentally decent underdogs face difficulties which they overcome with hard-to-learn new talents. They earn their triumphs. We watch this happen and, alongside them, we learn.

But, more each year, these narratives involve invented worlds, impossible devices, and characters like *The Shape Of Water*'s Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon) who may as well be wearing a neon Bad Guy cravat. Any story taking place in a world that you don't recognize is a bad classroom. I find that most of what I've labored on since I was eighteen essentially demonstrates how to win at chess against an opponent whose Queen has been removed. The bad guy is blazingly obvious, bullying is its own punishment, the town rallies around the persecuted, the disease is defeated with unlikely and untested natural cures, the misfit's a genius, the picked-on find secret allies, the truth becomes obvious even to the superstitious and obtuse, the defeated enemy slinks cowering away. And Jeff Goldblum predicts all of it in the first reel.

American families watch an average of 1,800 hours of television a year. If you observed a thousand games of chess against Queenless opponents you would begin, slowly, then with increasing conviction, to feel you'd learned something about how to win at chess. Then, in your real life, you'd wonder why you so often lose, and you would long more and more for the warm reassurance in the world of Chess Stories.

You'd be ill-informed, overconfident, under-prepared. You'd know Batman's parents' names and how many parsecs are associated with the Kessel Run, but not the dates of the Civil War or how a toilet works.

I'm familiar with the problems faced by writers working on deadline to fix works of imagination so their third acts resonate. When we're stuck, we think the right and proper solution, the smart dialogue or situational fix, hasn't yet occurred to us. If we go back and give the bad guy a phobia or the hero a speech, the great floating ship of Story will come about and miss the iceberg of implausibility.

I increasingly suspect our labor is fraught and our hours long, particularly in sci-fi and animation, because of limitations hard-wired into fantasy by the liberties it takes with reality. Story is not a ship, it is ship-plus-iceberg, always in the third act being pretended back to the surface.

Look, Up In The Sky...

When speculative fiction shows us a What-If world, it implies the *whole* world. Whether dogs have begun talking or a woman with bulletproof wrist bracelets can defeat an army of Germans, it purports to give us that world entire – its laws, morals, infrastructure. So...

- Why does a moral superhero who can hoist anything not spend all day lifting collapsed walls off earthquake victims?

- Does Superman's peering through walls not violate the 4th Amendment's guarantee against unreasonable searches? In today's Tennessee, will he help arrest women who've had miscarriages?

- If Super Moral Man destroys a heroin ring, will he also participate in pot busts? Must we in America treat him as a muscular simpleton who can be trusted to waylay thugs but who needs to be reined-in if he begins pursuing Wall Street firms hawking over-leveraged synthetic derivatives?

I quote author John Lamb Nash: "The promise of superhuman retribution for human injustice has crippled the moral sense of everyone who has ever heard of it, but the wound runs so deep we cannot see its origin."

"Real life is more complex than any story..."

Granted, but real life is unburdened with the requirement that it be *instructive*. Grab any snapshot of life – crime, war, love story – and tunnel into its synaptically complex antecedents the way historians do, and you'll find coherence. You have to, because something real led to it. Physicist Irving Langmuir pointed out that real science, unlike pseudoscience, always becomes clearer the closer it's examined. Story, subjected to the same probing, always grows less so. Because it's about something that didn't happen. Trying to "understand" it better through close analysis is like trying to patch a drawing of a tire.

But story comforts!

Absolutely. So does morphine, but nobody pretends those under its influence see the world more clearly. I don't want the morphine-comforted flying my plane. I don't want the story-comforted, their consolation drawn from Revelations or *X-Men*, writing evolutionary bio texts, or reporting from the White House. I want to know what's real, not what's aspirational, "transformative," click-worthy.

We and our children can enjoy Narnia, Hogwarts, the Hundred Acre Wood, but we're not better armed to face our lives if we come to believe that the laws in those worlds are the ones prevailing in ours. In fact, the more we are so persuaded, the more we'll be frustrated in our adult doings. The more we'll long for life in Fantasyland. We'll be invested in the deeply-felt sense that the virtuous prevail, that the suffering are avenged, that vital skills can be learned in a two-minute montage. A ragtag group of kids can hack into any computer. Love is always drawn from antipathy, strength from frailty, insight from pediatric gastritis.

From such faulty premises come the desires to slash social services (who needs them if good wins out?), lower taxes on the rich (that's the virtuous prospering!) and buy "good guy" guns, because only the naughty get shot. Anyone suffering at the end of a story must have deserved it. This philosophy has ruined the lives of

countless adults and children, told they must have sinned to be so miserable. It engenders learned powerlessness, acceptance of what ought never to be acceptable. (Not to mention a stubborn faith, observable in Las Vegas, that the universe must, even against long odds, eventually redirect good fortune towards the afflicted.)

The Ascendance of the Virtuous has been for millennia the principle political and religious argument against those who battle inequality. The suffering earned their plight. Consider the *miasmas* that were thought to cause cholera, bringing death to the impoverished and therefore morally unworthy, before Dr. John Snow removed the handle of London's Broad St. water pump in 1854 and proved otherwise. It had been unthinkable that disease might strike the moral and the immoral with equal asperity. Disease and early death had been, in a sense, Christians' karma.

Bullets And Quickies And Drugs, Oh My

A quick survey of movie billboards reveals the predominant come-ons in American filmed stories: *SEX, DRUGS and HANDGUNS*. I have spent my life among writers. This is manifestly not a case of us writing what we know.

HANDGUNS: I once read three novels in a row, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Laughter In The Dark*, each of which resolved with the surprise use of a handgun. This wasn't Netflix, it was Nabokov, darling of Western literature. In 50 years, I've seen guns fired on TV or in movies probably 200,000 times. I've put handguns into several dozen feature and TV scripts. Only once have I actually seen a handgun outside a store's weaponry case or a cop's hip. I've never touched one (a gun, or a cop's hip). I've only seen one civilian with one, nervous with her cashbox at a garage sale in 1997. (As Lou Reed sang, "*Guess I've led a sheltered life...*") As a former .22 owner I've spent time at rifle ranges and blipping cans in quarries, but I have never seen a handgun fired.

I venture that the NRA would not have ruined the lives and dinner conversation of so many Americans were it not for the thousands of stories showing a good person with a Glock prevailing against crooked cops, aliens, bank robbers, home invaders, plane invaders, Rooskies, mummies, zombies and giant snakes.

(I've encountered scores of people who've struggled all their lives with depression. A real gun, one at their heads every day. Considering that one in six Americans is on antidepressants, why don't I see this plague depicted regularly in TV or film? Okay, action for a depressed person is tough, a characteristic of the condition. But that shouldn't matter. The execs have it wrong about all story "coming from character." Character is exposed or changed in reaction to incident. As a story, *North By Northwest* works as well with Maria Bamford as it does with Cary Grant.)

DRUGS: Illegal drugs are ubiquitous in the dressing rooms, parties and film stages of American entertainment narratives. But the unglamorous fact about L.A. is, since Jerry's Deli on Beverly closed you can't even get a sandwich here at midnight. The

town shuts down like a regional airport. We don't party till dawn, we go to bed at ten because we have a 7:00 a.m. call. I've worked in Hollywood since 1982, on over a hundred series and pilots, and I've never seen cocaine. Ditto for every non-prescription drug except marijuana.

SEX: I've written casual sex into I don't know how many screenplays, TV pilots, sketches, monologue jokes, syndicated cartoons. I recently bought six well-reviewed new novels in each of which casual sex was a key element. There's casual sex in every other New Yorker short story.

I've had what might be called casual sex twice. That's fewer times than I've been in car accidents. It's only one more time than I've drawn a Royal Flush in Las Vegas. So, what am I trying to reach, what truth of humanity am I trying to portray, with the introduction of a pile of blow, a Sig Sauer or a doorway quickie?

"Bad Things Briefly Happen To Attractive People"

This is the structure of most Hollywood entertainment:

Bad Things: for the thrills; for the poster

Briefly: for a happy ending

Happen: for action

To Attractive People: for the box office \$ to make more movies

I've worked with the handsome, the beautiful. They can't figure out how to turn on the AC in their dressing rooms. I had a star in the 80s who'd never heard of PBS or Ralph Nader. Told that Nader was a consumer activist, he said, "Put in a better-known consumer activist." I had a lead actor, playing a university professor, who'd never heard of Princeton.

In each story we must gin-up an impossible problem which these attractive people solve, often with the reveal of a Previously Undisclosed Helpful Fact ("Look! A secret passage into the back of the impregnable fortress!") or a breach of the premise's logic, in which case the hero's struggle and perspicacity can't both be taken seriously.

To wriggle this knot, we often use what I call the Loser's Paradox, wherein the thing that makes the hero miserable also miraculously saves the day. His asthma medicine is the crucial ingredient for the explosive that blows open the jail; her friendless hours spent in the library give her the optics knowledge to use her glasses to burn through the rope-bridge bearing her pursuers. The Loser's Paradox is a self-extracting Zip file of unjustified optimism. Why it can't be employed by Bad Guys, who labor under manifest deficits of their own – deformities, ostracism, poor dialogue – is never explained.

Sometimes the Loser's Paradox is the film's poster. *Mute Witness*: the protagonist can't speak. *Wait Until Dark*: she can't see. *Hear No Evil*: she can't hear. The problem with these heroines' outcomes as emotional truths is that most people with their deficits won't be attacked in the dark by villains searching for cached diamonds, they'll be denied access to medical care and reasonably-priced housing. They'll be turned down for staff jobs on shows in which they might have told their real and important stories.

Why Do Birds Get Written To Magically Appear?

When those supervising us ask why a character acts a certain way, frequently we're not speaking the same language. There's the Character Why and the Authorial Why. Studio types seem innocent of the second Why's existence. They argue for Joe or Jane to say or do a thing because, "it's what they'd do." They seem to believe we're describing these people instead of inventing them.

The Authorial Why is more honest: under stress, the characters do or say some mildly uncharacteristic thing because *we*, not they, have to blow up their car or house or relationship.

When Roman Polanski's *Frantic* was released, L.A Times critic Peter Rainer observed that the film is predicated on the seizure by bad guys of Harrison Ford's wife, when they could as easily have grabbed the suitcase they were actually after. The baddies seize the girl not because they want the girl, but because their authors need them to take her. Because Harrison Ford doesn't risk his life in a foreign city chasing after a suitcase. Because *Not So Frantic* is a sucky title.

"You mean these are just puppets you're making act irrationally to entertain? Can't you believe in the power of the wondrous?"

Not when I'm the one who made the wondrous, who fine-tuned it so it appeared wondrous. The magician doesn't think he's really doing magic. I'd like to see a film studies course in which stories are analyzed for their authors', not their characters', intentions. The way film is currently taught seems to me like studying architecture by asking why the buildings decided to be those shapes.

Introducing The Fudge

My general pique at all this has vitrified into my Least Conspicuous Fudge Theory. As there are hard and soft determinists, the theory comes in Weak and Strong variants. The Strong Fudge Principle boldly conjectures:

If you create a world with different physical laws, you cannot draw moral conclusions from the outcome of any action staged there.

“Different physical laws” includes super powers and talking lawnmowers, but also any universe with a personal god parceling out justice to the handsome.

The Weak Version, where physical laws aren’t changed, parallels quantum indeterminacy:

$$R \times ES = k [BGS]$$

The product of Realism and Emotional Satisfaction is a constant, with Big Guest Stars as a scaling variable.

OBJECTIONS!

I doubt my theory is bulletproof – I’m a comedy writer, not a philosopher – and I see some objections backed up at the microphones, so let’s tackle them.

1) Nobody believes this stuff anyway. They’re *stories*, for God’s sake. As in, “made up”? Get over it!

This one’s the biggie. Whistle Zip-a-dee Doo-Dah and cash the check. But it doesn’t help if you’ve spent your life taking *very serious* studio and network notes. The note-givers believe they are doing good, and they’ll keep us in that rewrite room for fricking ever until we craft a story that demonstrates the moral point they’re pushing.

Those who say, “Okay, they’re fake, but the moral characters are terrific exemplars,” I wholeheartedly agree with. Character Lessons, the first derivative of the story calculus, are swell. This is what we get from literary fiction at its finest: an examination of the complexity and diversity of human nature in the world.

2) Isn’t it better to have morality in stories, which educate, than to be condemning witches to death in real life? In stories it’s harmless, plus people learn.

I’m not sure how much stories educate. More than this: I suspect the Hero’s Journey stuff is precisely the part that doesn’t. Facts can be dropped on the ground in any tale, and arguably be as useful as (certainly, in a Hollywood movie they’ll reach a bigger audience than) those in a book. But how many real facts have you seen in a TV show lately?

- On TV, 66 percent of ER resuscitation cases are successful. In real life it’s 15 percent.

- Evolution may not be mentioned in children’s TV, even on cartoons with an educational mandate. The explanatory framework without which nothing in

modern biology makes sense cannot be named, because it conflicts with a comforting story.

- Genetics, the source of most of our character flaws, is unmentionable in Story since it undercuts personal agency. All those *Karate Kid*-type training sequences are less persuasive if we know our protagonists have the Activin-type II receptor B and *follistatin* haplotype for increased muscle mass. They still have to be bitten by radioactive spiders or suffer tedious lectures from Henry Higgins for us to take their growth seriously.

3) Fantasy gives children confidence. I have such happy memories of believing I could do anything, be anything!

From my playground memories, the first kids who drew inspiration from superhero knockabout and began testing that confidence were the bullies. They were going to whomp you anyway, but now they did it with more brio and with clever catch-phrases. I was punched in the face at six by a boy who thought he was The Saint.

Contra the TV-spread myth about bullies backing down when confronted (I've written it many times) there are multiple studies (see *Garandeau, Wilson & Rodkin, 2010*) showing that bullies are the most admired children in a classroom. So, not only do you get pummeled, the lout gains prestige.

4) What about confidence in areas other than the physical?

Which superheroes are, with their new powers, better painters or poets or mathematicians? They deflect bullets and beat people up. That's all they do, except when they're encountering or inventing impossible devices or abilities. Confidence that one might reproduce these feats has crippled the social lives of a half dozen of my young adult Facebook friends, who seemingly spend their lives inventing new Elvish languages and writing petitions to bring back Invader Zim.

5) We are, by picking the narratives we pick, saying, Here's the most amazing thing that happened that week, or on that submarine. That's why it's a story, because it's unlikely. If it was likely it would be journalism. Story celebrates the exceptional.

"Celebrates"? Puffery and nonsense. Journalism chronicles the unlikely too, and mostly keeps its head about it, though Story-izing creeps into feature news too. A decision is made about whether it's a Happy Story or a Sobering Story and counterthematic data are omitted. Check out the truths elided from *Making A Murderer*, or from Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner's *Lincoln*, which falsely shows Connecticut voting against the 13th Amendment because the States were called upon alphabetically and an early *No* created more suspense. When 95% of our "experience" with cops, courtrooms, judges, criminals, scientists, comes from their

fictional counterparts, how well equipped are we to encounter and understand them in real life?

I love writing and reading stories – my bedside table runneth over. But do you recall the myth of the poisoned well that would drive mad any villager who drank from it? The wise King's solution: "To live, we must drink. But we must appoint one of us to remember that we are mad."

6) It's a drab world. We need the madmen, the dreamers, the believers in the impossible!

In the era of 9/11 and Sandy Hook "Truthers," Pizzagate and QAnon, I'm not convinced we need more believers in the ludicrous. The real madmen aren't inspiring private school students to study poetry in charmingly ivied ways, they're campaigning against vaccines and shooting abortion doctors.

The miraculous is by definition that which the world does not contain. As hopeful boy-toads squat in their parents' basements mashing Xbox buttons with comic-yellowed fingers, their future overseers are building the gibbets from which to hang them. Look into Stephen Miller's soul-dead eyes and ask yourself what good it does in the solid world to pretend otherwise.

7) Story tells us to love!

If plastic soda bottles told us to love, that wouldn't mean we needed more soda bottles. We'd love anyway, honestly.

8) I bet you're a load of fun at parties

Boy you know it.

9) True heroes exist. Can't we write faithfully about Anne Frank, Mother Teresa? Even if we change small details – "She sat down and meditated," instead of "She despaired" – aren't those possible worlds?

Faithfully is the key. When you ignore Tonya Harding's admission that she knew in advance about Nancy's kneecapping, you've stepped off Bradbury's path. The camera is powerful, and each moment dwelled upon is a lesson. The factual butterfly you take out of the food chain starves not only the primordial bat or fish, it stills the voice that urges – strains, yearns – in your third act to say, "See? Virtue triumphs!" You're painting a car you haven't built. You're referring in your Closing Statement to facts that were never entered into evidence.

10) Jesus Christ, fish and bats, what do you want, anyway?

Skepticism about the degree to which any action carried out in Wonderland can enlarge and inform us. Awareness that Story has always been contrived to sell something – it's the training wheels of thinking, invented to keep children from playing with wolves. At some point, those training wheels need to come off. This needn't crimp your adult imagination. One can bake gingerbread men without believing they're going to run down the street.

And, hey, showbiz titans: lay off the staffs. Don't pretend you're whipping us to "fix the logic" in your idea about raccoons with ESP. Any astute audience member with a Rewind button can find the inherent contradictions. All we're really looking for is the Least Conspicuous Fudge, so we can go home and live our real lives, the ones where, God knows, stuff doesn't always work out.

Okay, so that's my theory. And there's no Easter Bunny. Discuss.