“Nawabdin Electrician”

In August, 2007, when “Nawabdin Electrician” was first published in *The New Yorker*, at least two bloggers singled it out for discussion. Andrew Colom in his blog<http://everythingbutthefiction.blotspot.com/> talks about the cultural signs in the story, how it reflects our global world consisting of both first-world digital modernity and third-world indigence, with Nawab acting as a median between the two extremes. He says Nawab represents a segment of Pakistani society that wants to clog the wheels of progress: “What happens to an individual like Nawabdin in the post-industrial, digitalized world? His stature would slip away like his motorcycle almost does.”

However, Colom’s misunderstanding of the kind of story this is is reflected by his suggestion that the story’s most glaring flaw is that it does not have a clear thread of connection between the first and second half when abruptly the real conflict of the story is introduced with the encounter with the man who tries to steal the motorcycle. Colom says here we see Nawab’s divided loyalties—between poor men like himself and superior man as he has become. Colom says the first part of the story—the back-story—is not really relevant to this—the actual story.

Robert Lennon’s discussion in his blog,<http://wardsix.blogspot.com/> is, perhaps because Lennon is a very fine writer himself, more perceptive. Lennon notes that it is a common problem for writers to be condescending when they write about working-class characters, especially colorful ones; the result is often a “patronizing cuteness that mars the authority of the narrative.” He says that Mueenuddin, however, creates a tone that is both serious and funny, creating a character that might have come off as ridiculous in less skillful hands. “As written, Nawab is a fascinating figure, a goofy person whom Mueenuddin entrusts, at the story’s conclusion, with a difficult decision. Nawab makes the decision swiftly and mercilessly, revealing a deep hardness to his character only hinted at before.”

In the 2008 *Best American Short Stories*, edited by Salman Rushdie, Mueenuddin provides in the “Contributors’ Notes” the background for his story, saying he first heard it from the “incomparably salty mouth of—Nawabdin Electrician, now aged, but during my childhood the most colorful though certainly not the most crooked employee on my father’s farm in South Punjab.Yes, a robber put six bullets in him, and yes, he survived.”

So if the second part of the story is based on an actual event told to Mueenuddin by the person to whom it happened, then what is the first part based on? Is it the invention of the writer, and if so, how does it relate to the second part? Why does Colom think it has nothing to do with the “actual story”?

Well, as is often the case, a misunderstanding about genre, at least in my opinion, is the reason for Colom’s finding fault with the story. A better understanding of genre underlies Lennon’s more perceptive appreciation of the tone of the story as both serious and funny, and the central character as a fascinating figure who is goofy, but who is given a serious decision.

Genre misunderstandings are often the cause of controversy about a work. The film that is being touted as a highly likely candidate for Best Picture at the Oscars this year, *Slumdog Millionaire”*has been the center of a genre confusion/controversy recently. Many bloggers have called the film “poverty porn.” In the February 4 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, the Indian author Chitra Divakaruni says this accusation reveals a misunderstanding about the nature of art. Challenging the claim that the film is filled with clichés and exaggerations about India’s poor while ignoring the real modern India of economic success—that the film reinforces stereotypes about India, Divakaruni says those who make these accusations forget that the film is fiction, not a documentary.

Divakaruni says the film follows the convention of the picaresque, a genre that depicts with energetic abandon the many misadventures of a hero, usually of low social class, who ultimately triumphs over a corrupt society by using his wits.” Yes, indeed, Divakaruni is right. Those who ignore the genre conventions used by the director of*Slumdog Millionaire* are bound to misunderstand it. And sure enough, on February 10, someone wrote to the *LA Times* taking issue with Divakaruni, insisting that the film does not deal with the subject of rags-to-riches in an artful way. “It offers a fantasy solution to the horrors of children’s exploitation—a poor boy winning millions by being a TV contestant. Art should offer new ways of seeing, not just present graphic images of an old vision of poverty. Too often Hollywood movies offer us sensation instead of moving and insightful material.” --Peggy Aylsworth Levine, Santa Monica.

Levine’s argument suggests that only realistic depictions constitute art--that fantasy, by definition, is not art. She also seems to think that it is the purpose of art to offer a “solution” to such social issues as child exploitation. Both of these assumptions suggest misunderstandings of the nature of art and the importance of genre.

I have no way of knowing what Mueenuddin had in mind when he wrote the story, other than what he tells us about the “real” Nawabdin in his *Best American Short Stories*notes. Would it help me read the story more pleasurably and profitably if I did know what he had in mind? As Mueenuddin suggests in the previous entry, my reading of “The Singers” may not represent what Turgenev had in mind when he wrote the story. Is that important? If an author does not have any particular meaning in mind when he writes, then how does meaning get into the story?

Well as usual for me, my reading of “Nawabdin Electrician” is guided by my reading of previous stories, by my understanding of the short story genre, and by my expectation that a reader should have some knowledge of genre conventions in order not to “misread” a story and therefore judge it unfairly.

What intrigues me about the first part of the story—the part that Colom finds irrelevant to the “actual” story—are as follows:

Nawab “cunningly” performs his magic to slow down the electric meters.

His discovery eclipses the philosopher’s stone (which supposedly turned base metals to gold).

His tools are relatively simple, primarily a ball peen hammer, which dangles like a savage’s axe, and with which he delivers a “crafty blow.”

His twelve girls, whose demand for dowry might have defeated other men, act as a spur to his “genius.”

By his “superhuman” efforts, he maintains the comfort of the landowner he works for.

The motorcycle increases his status and when he hits a bump, he seems to flap small “vestigial wings.”

All of these characteristics suggest that Nawab belongs to the convention, so common in North American Indian folk tales, of the “trickster.” He succeeds by cunning, craft, and supernatural abilities. The second part of the story, which begins “One evening, a few weeks after his family’s festival of sugar,” is a trickster tale in which the hero refuses to die. A potent man, his sexuality even survives the fact that the bullets hit him low, but, as the pharmacist says, “Not even that, thank God.”

When the robber pleads for Nawab to tell the pharmacist to fix him, or at least not to let him die unforgiven, Nawab smells the good strong smell of disinfectant. “The floor seemed to shine. The world around him expanded.”

When the robber dies, crying, “It’s not true,” Nawab’s mind catches at the man’s words and death, “like a bird hopping around some bright object, meaning to peck at it.” But instead, he thinks of the motorcycle saved, and the glory of saving it. “Six shots, six coins thrown down, six chances, and not one of them had killed him, not Nawabdin Electrician.”

A wonderful little story about the triumph of life over death, the triumph of the right way over the wrong way, the triumph of cunning over crassness. Let the dying man beg, for all the good it will do him. Let the living exult in life. It’s a universal fable, not a political statement.

POSTED BY CHARLES MAY AT [11:06 AM](http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.in/2009/02/nawabdin-electrician-slumdog.html) [http://www.blogger.com/img/icon18_email.gif](https://www.blogger.com/email-post.g?blogID=3161136885462262525&postID=3640007985309515578)

LABELS: [" GENRE](http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.in/search/label/%22%20Genre), [MUEENUDDIN](http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.in/search/label/Mueenuddin), [NAWABDIN ELECTRICIAN](http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.in/search/label/Nawabdin%20Electrician),[SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE](http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.in/search/label/Slumdog%20Millionaire), [TRICKSTER](http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.in/search/label/trickster)

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| REACTIONS: |  |

**7 COMMENTS:**

[http://img2.blogblog.com/img/b16-rounded.gif](https://www.blogger.com/profile/02706738167106227281)

[A. Colom](https://www.blogger.com/profile/02706738167106227281) said...

Greetings,   
  
I am Andrew Colom. The guy you so intelligently corrected on his misunderstanding of this wonderful short story. This was the first short story I had ever read; therefore, you were very generous in pointing out to me that having read other short stories is key to understanding this one. I never would've thought of that. I believed my proclivity towards watching reality television gave me all the literary credibility I needed.   
  
Since I read it over a year ago, I don't recall this story's details, but I do recall appreciating several aspects of it. Maybe I misread the story (though even the notion of one misreading a story reveals a quite juvenile understanding of literature in my opinion), but I can say I have read a number of short stories in my life, and I tend to find that so called "literary" short stories rely too heavily on back story to create depth, and that's not my preference. But you sing that old muse of genre. Darling blog critic, have you recently stumbled into graduate school? I'm inspired to see you applying your school lessons.

Nawabdin Electrician," in The New Yorker

There's a very interesting [short story](http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2007/08/27/070827fi_fiction_mueenuddin?printable=true) in this week's *New Yorker*, by a new Pakistani writer named Daniyal Mueenuddin. It's about an electrician working on a large farm in rural Pakistan, more or less taking care of his business until something dramatic happens. I won't say much about the dramatic thing that happens to Nawabdin (read the story), but here's a teaser to give you a sense of the writing style: 

The motorcycle increased his status, gave him weight, so that people began calling him Uncle and asking his opinion on world affairs, about which he knew absolutely nothing. He could now range farther, doing much wider business. Best of all, now he could spend every night with his wife, who early in the marriage had begged to live not in Nawab’s quarters in the village but with her family in Firoza, near the only girls’ school in the area. A long straight road ran from the canal headworks near Firoza all the way to the Indus, through the heart of the K. K. Harouni lands. The road ran on the bed of an old highway built when these lands lay within a princely state. Some hundred and fifty years ago, one of the princes had ridden that way, going to a wedding or a funeral in this remote district, felt hot, and ordered that rosewood trees be planted to shade the passersby. Within a few hours, he forgot that he had given the order, and in a few dozen years he in turn was forgotten, but these trees still stood, enormous now, some of them dead and looming without bark, white and leafless. ([link](http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2007/08/27/070827fi_fiction_mueenuddin?printable=true))

In the story as a whole, I think Mueenuddin finds some very congenial ways to convey a poor electrician's point of view. He's got a good sense of comic details, but doesn't depend on them too much. I also liked the ambiguities at the end regarding Nawabdin's character. Any thoughts on this story?  
  
Incidentally, Mueenuddin also has [another story online](http://www.all-story.com/issues.cgi?action=show_story&story_id=322), at the literary magazine Zoetrope. It's quite different from "Nawabdin Electrician"; I think it will be interesting to anyone who has been in a serious cross-cultural or interracial relationship. (I'm happy to discuss that story too.)