| Chapter V |

Tell the truth

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Tell the truth

We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth.
—John F. Kennedy

 f you take nothing else away from this book, remember always to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If you do this always, you will be a master storyteller. This is much harder than it sounds.

What does it mean to tell the truth when writing fiction? For one thing, it is not about facts. Storytellers are not concerned with facts, just truth. Sometimes facts can even get in the way of the truth.

When you are watching a horror movie and you know that the girl in the tank top and panties shouldn't go into the basement alone, and you know she has other options, but she goes into the basement anyway—that's a lie. It only happened because the storytellers wanted it to happen, but not because it was a logical thing a reasonable person would do.

On the other hand, if the girl does everything you would do, and is even a little smarter but the monster gets her anyway—now that's scary.

You want to see truth in fiction? Watch Jimmy Stewart's breakdown in *It's a Wonderful Life*, just before he decides to kill himself. It's about as real and truthful as anything you'll ever see on film. Capra is known for being lighthearted, but when he got dark, he always told the truth. If you want to affect people deeply, tell the truth.

Remember in *Big* when Tom Hanks has gotten his wish and has become an adult? Remember his first night away from home in the sleazy hotel? He cried. This is a comedy, right? But when Hanks cries in that scene, nobody's laughing. In fact, it's painful to watch. The filmmakers played the truth of the scene.

The Donner Party was a group of pioneers in the 1840s who got

snowed in in the mountains and resorted to cannibalism to survive. This is not light subject matter. Charlie Chaplin read about this incident and thought, Now that's funny!

The Donner Party inspired one of Chaplin's most famous scenes from one of his most famous films. In *The Gold Rush*, he plays a man trapped in a small cabin in the snow along with another unfortunate soul. They are starving. And even though some humor comes out of the situation, you never forget that these men are truly hungry.

With nothing left to eat, Chaplin cooks, and serves up, his leather shoe. Chaplin treats the shoe like a spaghetti dinner. He eats it like he's eating a fine meal. He makes the tragic funny. I'm not the first to say it, but the truth is funny.

Raiders of the Lost Ark has a great example of truth in it. There is a scene in which a scary opponent who dazzles us with dangerous-looking swordsmanship, confronts Indiana Jones. I remember sitting in the theater on the edge of my seat, expecting an exciting action sequence. But instead, Indy calmly pulls out his gun and shoots the man dead. Anyone who saw that in the theater remembers the uproar of laughter that followed. Why was it so funny? It was the truth. It was the most logical thing for Indiana to do.

On the old *Batman* television show, the villains would always construct some Rube Goldberg-like contraption to kill Batman. Even little kids wondered why no one ever pulled out a gun and shot him. It was a lie and we all knew it.

Lying is visible ink. It is easy for the audience to see and therefore doesn't work.

Roseanne changed the face of television because she refused to lie on her show. She played the first "real" mother on television.

The film *Election* has some amazingly honest work in it. In one scene, a girl gives a speech at a school assembly, a speech that is so honest as to how most of us felt about high school that it seems like she's reading from your own diary.

In that same film Matthew Broderick has a scene where he is preparing for a sexual escapade by washing his genitals in the tub. Few

of us would admit to doing such a thing in public, but a theater full of people will howl with the laughter of recognition. The film was raw with the honesty of human behavior.

Most writers are afraid to put something so personal down on paper. We think that it is a window into our own personal lives, and we don't want to be judged by it. But here's the big secret—we are all the same. The more you dip into your own behavior, good or bad—the more others will see themselves, and you will fade into the background.

Several decades after World War II, color movie footage of Hitler was discovered. Some people thought it shouldn't be shown because it humanized a monster. But that is what makes Hitler a monster—he was a human being, not some creature from outer space. It makes a much stronger point not to shy away from that fact. It means if we are not careful, we may produce another monster.

It is the same with a hero. If you can show that a hero had fears, doubts, and human foibles but did a heroic thing anyway, it makes him all the more heroic.

The worst of us has good in him and the best of us has some bad. That is a truth that many of us want to deny, but as storytellers it is the truth we must illuminate.

The truth will always be sadder, happier, funnier, scarier, and more profound than the best lie. More importantly, the audience never "sees" it, but does feel it.

The masculine and the feminine

'The King died and then the Queen died' is a story. 'The King died and then the Queen died of grief' is a plot.
—E. M. Forster

The quote above is often used to define the difference between plot and story, but I'm not going to use it for that. I'm going to use it for what I call the "masculine" and "feminine" elements of story.

First, a little background. I was watching Shirley MacLaine on *Inside the Actor's Studio* and she was asked what time of day she likes to write. She answered that if she was writing about the present, she liked to write by the masculine energy of the sun, and if she was writing about the distant past, she liked to write by the feminine energy of the moon.

The concept of seeing the moon as feminine and the sun as masculine seemed to make sense to me, in an ancient sort of way. And for some reason it stuck with me and I began to look at the two attributes in terms of story. Then I had, what was for me, an epiphany: there are masculine and feminine elements of story.

When I put this hypothesis to the test, and applied it to classic stories that have worked over time, it held up. When I then applied it to my own work, it elevated the level of my stories. When I told friends and students, they also found that it helped them.

I define masculine elements as external, while feminine elements are internal. Without equal, or close to equal, parts, your story is unbalanced.

Consider the way most of us think of comic book stories—a square-jawed hero who is all good and never questions himself. Its concept of good and evil, right and wrong, is cartoonish. There is no gray, only black and white. Everything is on the surface. It is external. This is masculine.

Now consider the typical soap opera. It is all about evoking emotion. The outrageousness of the situation doesn't matter as long as it

leads to a strong emotional response. It is all about what characters are experiencing inside. This is feminine.

There are action films, full of excitement, in which lots of things blow up and tons of people are killed, which men just love and which bore most women stiff because they are devoid of emotion.

Conversely, there are stories that bore men because they seem so slow and plodding—films that deal with the emotional lives of people but seem to have no story or forward movement.

Allow me to generalize here: Who buys pornography and who buys romance novels? One is all external and devoid of emotion and the other is largely internal and all about emotion. Both are unreal fantasy worlds. In movie-world vernacular they are "boy movies" and "chick flicks."

Why is it that all of these forms—mindless action films, soap operas, comic books, pornography, and romance novels—are considered "trash" by most of us? Even those of us who indulge in them regard them as guilty pleasures. It is because they are unbalanced.

Understand that I'm not saying that one, feminine or masculine, is better or worse than the other. On the contrary, I am saying that one without the other is a lie. Again, our job as storytellers is to tell the truth. Your stories will have much more resonance if you do.

It is a lie to have a man mow down fifty people in a story, with no consequences. There are consequences when people are murdered. There is an impact on the families of those killed, on the communities where they live, and more than likely on the killer.

Even in morally ambiguous worlds, such as those of *Goodfellas* or *The Godfather*, there are consequences for murder. The murderer becomes a target.

"He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword." This is not simple moralizing or preaching. Even in headhunting societies, the reason that they shrink heads and sew up the mouths and eyes of their victims is to keep the vengeful spirit within contained. Even in a culture where murder is condoned, they sense consequences.

This is why stories that ignore these consequences are considered unreal cartoons.

They are hollow, with no real point.

I can't tell you how many screenplays by men I've read that have no emotional or thematic life whatsoever. They are all about plot. Lots of things happen, but without any real purpose.

I have also read many scripts by women where plot and action take a backseat to emotional matters.

This is where I'm sure many of you want to kill the messenger, but I have seen it over and over again. I'm sure other writing teachers will tell you the same thing. Please don't have a knee-jerk reaction to this concept. You may fall at either end of the spectrum, regardless of your sex. Remember, I am generalizing. But I have noticed it to be generally true. And it is my job to tell the truth.

More specifically, how do I define masculine and feminine traits?

Masculine traits are anything that moves the story forward externally. For example, Character A, a policeman, finds out that the murderer in the case he's investigating is another cop. That is a masculine element.

The murdering cop is Character A's best friend and once risked his life to save Character A. This is a female element. It is the balance of these two elements that creates dramatic tension and keeps an audience interested. It keeps their brains working: What is Character A going to do? It creates depth.

Even in E. M. Forster's example of story and plot he uses the King to express the male and the Queen to express the female. It appears that Forster too recognized this on some level.

Remember The Donner Party? They were the group of snowbound pioneers who were forced to eat their dead to survive, and that Chaplin had read about.

Saying that they ate their dead is a purely factual statement devoid of emotion.

The following is the diary entry of one of the party members:

> [According to Mary Graves, as reported by Elizabeth Farnham in *California In-Doors and Out*, published in 1856]
> The morning came, and still the flood fell. They roused themselves to move on a little, if it were possible, despite the storm; but they had lost their course, and the sun no longer befriended them. It was proposed to return to the cabins, following their own tracks, but the Indians would not consent, and Miss G. resolutely determined to follow them. There was nothing possible, there, but starvation. The fate before them could not be worse, and might be better. Miss G.'s resolution encouraged her companions. They went on all day without a morsel of food, the rain pouring continuously. At night it ceased. Some were confused in their perceptions, some delirious, some raving. Those who were strong enough to realize their condition, might well now despair. The women bore up better than the men. One of them had a cape or mantle stuffed with raw cotton, and upon a minute examination of it, she found, between the shoulders, about an inch square of the inner surface dry. The lining was cut, and enough taken out to catch the spark from the flint. They lost or left their axe, but were able to make a fire, after much difficulty, of a few gathered boughs. They sat down around it. There was nothing else to be done

Here's a third-part account published a few years later:

> [According to Mary Thornton in Oregon and California in 1848, published in 1864] The snow beginning to fall, they all sat down to hold a council for the purpose of determining whether to proceed. All the men but Mr. Eddy refused to go forward. The women and Mr. Eddy declared they would go through or perish. Many reasons were urged for returning, and among others the fact that they had not tasted food for two

> days, and this after having been on an allowance of one ounce per meal. It was said that they must all perish for want of food. At length, Patrick Dolan proposed that they should cast lots to see who should die, to furnish food for those who survived.

See how including emotional details gives the incident so much more impact than just the external facts? It creates dramatic tension.

As I said before, one cannot draw a line and say that all male writers write this way and that all female writers write the other way. But since discovering this concept, I have made certain observations about what kinds of people cross the line.

Actors, dancers, visual artists, poets, playwrights, English and literature majors tend to fall more on the feminine side of things, regardless of their gender. These people tend to put a lot more emphasis on character, the beauty of words, scenery, mood, and theme. Plot is seen by many of these people as cheap.

Films and books that are more feminine usually do better among critics and intellectuals, but seldom bring in a wide audience. They are often called "character- driven." Critics will often believe that these stories are too "smart" for the masses. Too cerebral, they might say.

Video gamers, mainstream comic book readers or creators, and action film fans tend to fall in the masculine category. Again, this is regardless of gender.

Stories with an emphasis on the visceral tend to do better with audiences. This is why the summer film releases are big budget special effects extravaganzas. People have fun going to films like this, but don't expect to get caught up emotionally in the content—and they seldom are. Other than an "Ooh," an "Ahh," or a "Wow—that blowed up real good!"

I like to see a good explosion as much as the next guy, but I want to care about what or who is blowing up. In *Jaws*, the shark is blown up at the end, but it matters storywise, and its one explosion has more impact than ten explosions in other films. Storytellers often feel that you either have one kind of story or another, but it is the balance that gets you the

best of both worlds—a fun story to watch or read that has resonance for the audience. If you aren't trying to speak to an audience, why bother to write it down?

This is not about writing down to members of your audience. This is about writing for them. It is not their job to understand you; it is your job to communicate with them. And if you use drama to find an emotional way to give them an intellectual idea, they will "get it." They may not be able to articulate the idea, but they will understand it on a level beyond articulation.

Actors often talk about giving characters vulnerability. I think this is just another way of talking about the internal, emotional life of a character. Without this quality, characters are caricatures, not fully realized human beings.

The character of Quint in *Jaws* is a virtual cartoon of a salty old sailor until he delivers a speech about a terrifying experience he had with a shark attack. At that moment, a character who had shown nothing but a crusty exterior opens up and becomes human. This combination of masculine and feminine traits tells the truth about being a human being. One without the other is a lie and we know it. We feel it.

You have more than likely heard conflict broken down this way:

Man against Man;

Man against Nature;

Man against Himself.

I have seen *Jaws* described as Man against Nature. Is it? I think that is only a masculine view of the story's conflict. You could accurately describe the *Jaws* rip-offs as Man against Nature, as they had no characters of change—no armature. But *Jaws* has a solid armature. *Jaws* is about a man facing his fear and conquering it. I would say that is Man against Himself.

Moby-Dick has also been described by some as Man against Nature. This description totally ignores Captain Ahab's obsession with the white whale and how that obsession eventually kills him. The whale is only an external manifestation of Ahab's internal conflict.

There is no reason that the other two masculine conflicts

listed above can't include Man against Himself. In fact, to be full, they should. Otherwise, what's the point?

Things that affect a character physically are masculine and are visible ink. How he feels about them is feminine and invisible. If you can strike a balance between these two elements, your story stands a better chance of resonating with audiences.

Remember the masculine conflict only forces the hero to deal with his feminine conflict. It is the external pressure that makes a diamond of a lump of coal.

Look for ways to balance the masculine and feminine elements in your stories. More than likely, you will be drawn toward one over the other. Be careful of this; it will not serve you well to give into the things you already do well. If you go through the ritual pain of doing the very thing you don't want to do, you will become a better writer. You will ascend.

Just as the letter Y can sometimes be a vowel, theme can sometimes be a feminine element. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the theme is the feminine element.

That story is a case where the characters must be stereotypes to represent the different strata of society. All components are there to illustrate the armature idea.

Writer Rod Serling used this kind of storytelling to great effect in his work on the classic *The Twilight Zone* television series.

In the 1960s and '70s, we learned a valuable lesson—that we should treat all people the same, regardless of race. But somewhere along the way we decided that what that meant was that we weren't to even notice, or acknowledge, a person's race.

As a black man, friends have sometimes told me that they never even noticed that I was black. We all know this is a lie. What they mean to say is that it doesn't matter to them that I'm black.

It is not a crime against society to notice that someone is different than you.

The crime is to judge them for it.

The differences between men and women have been used to keep

women down. So we as a society have tried to fix things by pretending that we were all the same.

All the while being frustrated by the opposite sex and whispering in shadows with our friends that we just can't understand how men/women think.

Male brains and female brains are as different from one another as a ton of bricks is from a ton of feathers—equal but not the same.

I knew going into the idea of masculine and feminine traits was going to get me into trouble with some of you, so I did a little research on the subject.

I learned that the amount of testosterone we receive in the womb at a critical point in our development determines the "maleness" or "femaleness" of our brains. According to the book *Brain Sex* by Anne Moir, PhD, and David Jessel this has been accepted by virtually every brain specialist or neuroscientist. There are real physiological differences in the way our brains function.[1]

For instance, from the earliest ages, girls are more interested in interpersonal relationships than boys. Shortly after birth, girl babies show an interest in voices and faces, whereas boy babies show an interest in inanimate objects.

Throughout the animal kingdom, testosterone makes males more aggressive and competitive while female hormones decrease these traits.

Some of the traits enhanced by the testosterone-formed male brain are:

- a desire for status and power;
- an interest in how things work;
- an interest in acquiring facts and data;
- an emphasis on logic;
- an interest in problem solving;
- more aggressive than females;
- more competitive than females;
- and a more heightened sex drive than in females.

Female brains received less testosterone in the womb. Some of the traits enhanced in the female brain are:

- an interest in people;
- an interest in intimacy;
- an emphasis on interpersonal relationships;
- an interest in bonding with others;
- an interest in the feelings of others;
- and a greater ability to empathize.

It is easy to see why most men are drawn to a particular type of story given the inner workings of their brains.

Here, too, it is clearly seen why women are more often drawn to certain types of stories.

The corpus callosum is the link between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. In women, this connector is thicker, making it easier for women to exchange information between the two hemispheres.

Women store their emotions in both hemispheres while men keep their emotions only in the right hemisphere, making them more difficult to access. This explains why it is often said that men are not in touch with their emotions. They literally aren't. At least they are not as in touch as are women.

One study showed that when asked to identify the expressions on faces, women used very little of their brain to perform the task, whereas men used much more of their brain and had much more difficulty than women performing the task.

Not only are women more in touch with their own emotions than men, but they are more in touch with the feelings of others. Women are physiologically more equipped to empathize with others.

Whether you believe that these brain differences are a result of intelligent design or evolution, there must be a reason that each gender has a specialty. We must need both ways of seeing the world in order to survive in it.

Since I have been thinking about the masculine and feminine components of story construction, I've listened closely to the ways men and women talk about the films and books they enjoy. I was recently discussing a film with a friend of mine. She liked the film. I did not. What she said in the film's defense was that it had to be good because it made her cry four times. A response I often hear from women.

I know another woman who will always say, "How could you not like that film— it's so romantic!" Or she will say, "But it was so beautiful."

On the other end of the spectrum, many of my male friends gush over martial arts films or special effects extravaganzas devoid of any emotional content, but full of action or killing. When you look at the makeup of our brains, these responses seem to make more sense.

Consider a film such as *Casablanca*, which balances both feminine and masculine components very well. A very romantic film, but I know just as many men as women who respond to the film. It has a solid plot that ties in closely with the humanistic elements of the story. Achieving this balance gives stories a resonance that helps one reach a broader audience.

It's a Wonderful Life has some of the most romantic scenes I have seen in any film. It also deals with George Bailey's inner emotional life of depression and disappointment. It also has a strong plot. That balance crosses gender and time. Virtually every classic has close to equal parts of male and female elements.

The Omaha Beach sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* was hailed by both audiences and critics as being one of the most realistic war depictions in the history of film. Was it the great special effects that made it so? I don't believe so. The sequence contained both masculine and feminine elements.

When the sequence opens, Tom Hanks is having tremors, an external indication of his inner emotional condition. Other men on the Higgins boats begin to vomit from seasickness and nervous tension.

Before one shot is fired, we are already an uneasy audience. There is a sense of dread.

When the boats hit the beach, the men are riddled with bullets. How many times have we seen people being killed on film? Why is it that these

deaths seemed to affect us more than most? It's because we had sense of how these men felt before they died—their abject terror.

I know men who are usually energized by depictions of violence on screen, but who were mortified by these scenes of death.

In one shot, a soldier wanders back and forth in the mayhem, looking for his missing arm. In another, a man with his insides exposed cries out for his mother as he lies dying. Although full of action, this is no action film.

This film is "realistic" because it is honest about the emotional impact of violence as well as the physical. I have seen actual footage of D-Day with men falling down dead and it seems less real than in Ryan. Why? It's because it isn't a complete picture.

Seeing a man fall over dead without knowing anything about him has less impact. *Saving Private Ryan* gives one a sense of what it might have felt like to be there.

Here's a good way to think of it: If a good friend of yours says to you, "There was a really bad car accident on the freeway yesterday," you might have some interest. On the other hand, if she says, "I was in a really bad car accident yesterday," your interest is much greater.

The first statement is all masculine; the second contains both male and female components. It involves emotion because you care about the person in the story.

I don't like everything about James Cameron's *Titanic*, but he does in that film exactly what I did with the car wreck example. At the beginning of the film (in present day) he has a man explain, in all male terms, what happened to the ship after it hit the iceberg and how it sank. Later in the film we see characters we know going through the experience. We get a sense of what it might have felt like to be on that sinking ship.

Remember that the *facts* are not necessarily the *truth*. The cold fact that the Titanic sank says little about the truth of the experience.

You don't have to take my word for this idea of masculine and feminine story elements. Listen to how people talk about stories they read, watch, and write. They will more than likely fall in one camp or

the other and downplay the importance of the opposite element. They will be all-plot-and-action or all-character-and-mood. This division will probably fall along gender lines. It's just the way our brains work.[2]

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[1] Anne Moir, PhD, and David Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men and Women* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992).

[2] There has been much scientific study on gender brain differences and there are a few books and articles on the subject worth taking a look at:

- *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps: How We're Different and What to Do About It*, by Barbara Pease and Allan Pease. Broadway Books 2001.
- *Psychology Today* Jul/Aug 2003.
- *The Wonder of Boys*, by Michael Gurian, PhD, Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 1997.

Drama in real life

In 1968, sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., an elementary school teacher from the all-white town of Riceville, Iowa, tried an exercise to teach her young students about prejudice. The exercise became an annual event.

She first asked the kids what it meant to be prejudiced. They all knew what it meant, and that it was bad.

Then she told them that those of them with brown eyes were better than those with blue eyes. Using the tried-and-true stereotypes of racism, she said that blue-eyed people were lazy and stupid.

The blue-eyed kids were to be shunned for the entire school day. They were not to be played with or spoken to. They could not use the drinking fountain and were not allowed to use the playground equipment at recess.

In contrast, the brown-eyed kids were given second helpings at lunch and an extra five minutes of playtime at recess. They were, in every way, treated better than the blue-eyed kids.

Needless to say, the blue-eyed kids had an awful day. Their brown-eyed classmates made life hell for them. They resorted to name-calling and teasing of those who were, just the day before, their friends.

The next day, the teacher told the children that she had lied about brown-eyed people being better, and that the reverse was true.

The blue-eyed children, now believing they were superior, behaved as their brown-eyed counterparts had the day before.

At the end of the second day, she told her students why she had put them through this painful experience.

Now, when they were asked about prejudice, these children understood it, and the evils of it, intimately. These young people were transformed forever. When interviewed about the experience as adults, they say it was life changing. They also say it was worth the pain they went through.

The teacher had told them about how bad prejudice is, but apparently the telling lesson did not take. You can see how experiencing

rather than telling is what transformed these children through ritual pain. Remember, drama is a way of getting across an intellectual idea emotionally. That is exactly what happened here.

When film of the elementary school teacher's exercise is shown to adults, they learn all of the lessons the kids did, but without having to go through the experience themselves.

This is what makes drama so powerful—it is a way for people to experience things without actually experiencing them.

Your responsibility as a storyteller is to be a good teacher, not a good preacher. If you only talk about what you want to say, you are only proselytizing. But if you show your audience through demonstration, it will learn, seemingly, on its own. Not only that, but its members will learn it more thoroughly.

This is why here, in this book, I use so many stories to make my points. I want you to make the observations yourself, with my guidance.

There is more to this remarkable story, by the way. The teacher, Jane Elliot, suffered greatly for her actions. She was called a "nigger-lover" and received death threats from angry parents and townspeople. Her own children became the targets of violence perpetrated by other kids.

Through all of this, she kept doing what she thought was right. She kept right on doing her exercise.

She made personal sacrifices for the greater good. This is the definition of a hero in life as well as drama.

Every element of drama has its real-life counterpart. Try to notice the invisible ink in life as well as fiction.

The myth of genre

Genre is visible. People know if they are watching a western or science fiction. But invisible ink is about the inner workings of story, not the costumes the characters wear.

Among the people who know me, I am known as the guy who doesn't like any film that comes out. This isn't true; it's mostly true. Anyway, they rack their brains trying to figure out what it is I do like and why. They think it might be subject matter or a certain kind of tone or maybe a particular genre. But there is always some wild card film that blows their theory.

Among people I work with, I am known as a person who can go easily from writing one genre to another. They can't figure out how I do it. It's simple. I just try to tell a story and tell it well. That is the same thing I want from other storytellers as well.

I believe that thinking of stories in genre terms only makes one think of how stories are different from one another instead of what they all have in common. Good drama doesn't understand the boundaries of genre. It doesn't care if someone rides a horse, a car, or a spaceship, as long as you care about the rider.

Genre is concerned with the external. Some stories have been told in completely different genres with only cosmetic changes. Akira Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress*, a samurai movie, became the basis for the first *Star Wars* film. Another Kurosawa film, *Seven Samurai*, became a western.

Kurosawa himself took William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and set it in feudal Japan. Patrick Stewart took that same story and set it in nineteenth-century Texas for his television production, *King of Texas*.

The classic musical *West Side Story* is *Romeo and Juliet* updated and set in the world of rival street gangs in 1950s New York.

The John Wayne western *Red River* is a retelling of the classic sea epic *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Same story, different genre.

Genre is irrelevant to the dramatist. A dramatist should only be concerned with drama. If one genre can help you tell your story better

than another, use it. No genre is better or worse than another.

If you think about it, *Jaws* is just a monster movie. And, like a lot of monster movies, incidental characters are picked off as our hero tries to stop the creature. But somehow, the film transcends genre. It's because it has an armature and a character of change.

Lots of films came out after *Jaws* that tried to repeat its success by emulating its masculine elements. One film used an orca whale in place of a shark, and another used a mutated bear.

None of these films went below the surface to understand why *Jaws* had resonance.

Terminator and *Aliens* are also just monster movies on the outside; what sets them apart are their strong armatures.

This happens in literature as well. No one ever says that *1984* is just a science fiction novel. Or that *Animal Farm* is a kid's book because it has talking animals. Nor do they say the same of *Gulliver's Travels* because its world is fantastic.

Is *Star Wars* sci–fi or is it fantasy or is it action? If it is sci–fi, does it have anything in common with *Alien*? What do *E.T.* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* have in common? What are the similarities between *Terminator 2* and *Galaxy Quest*? Indeed there is little these films share in common.

We have also prescribed a hierarchy to genre stories: "This is a costume drama; it must have more to say than a sci–fi story." This, of course, is not the truth.

When Clint Eastwood made *Unforgiven*, it felt like few westerns before it because it was more concerned with theme than with props, setting, costumes, and stereotypes. It transcended genre.

Fed up with the restrictions enforced on him by networks and advertisers, Rod Serling stopped writing the prestigious teleplays for live television for which he was famous. When he announced that he would be doing a fantasy show, many thought he had given up on doing "serious work" for television.

Mr. Serling knew something the executives didn't. "I knew I could have Martians say things that Democrats and Republicans couldn't," he said. He was able to use the prejudice of genre hierarchy to his advantage.

He wrote fantastical stories about real human issues without any flack from advertisers, and audiences always knew what he was saying.

We all have a fondness for a particular motif. I like the clothes and cars from the mid-twentieth century. I have a visceral response to those things when I see them in movies. That doesn't make the film good.

More importantly, other people may not share my appreciation for these things, so as a storyteller, I must speak to them on a deeper level. The armature must be so strong that it makes the story universal and makes the genre inconsequential.

As a storyteller, you should be aware in which genre your story will, more than likely, be viewed. Outwardly, it should be in a recognized genre.

That will make it much easier to sell and to market. Only you need to know you've transcended the genre. Your audience will know it too; they just won't know they know.

Related to this topic is the idea that one medium is superior to another—live theater is more artistic than cinema—or that novels are inherently better than comic books. Or movies are better than television.

These are all just mediums that can be used to tell stories and that is all. Each has its own strengths, and it is up to you to use the strengths of whichever medium you choose to help tell your story.

If you want to test this idea, read the graphic novels (comic books) *Maus* and *Maus II*, by Art Spiegelman. It was the first comic book ever to win a Pulitzer Prize. A special category had to be created so that the book qualified.

Will Eisner's graphic novels are also worth your time. I'm sure that if he told stories in another medium, everyone would know his name. In fact, the top award in comics bears his name. He has won several, by the way.

Early in the days of movies, they were thought to have no importance, a cheap dirty little entertainment. Most "legitimate" actors avoided the "flickers" all together. But there were a few pioneers who saw the power of the medium and learned to use it to tell stories.

D. W. Griffith was the first filmmaker to use crosscutting; that is, cutting between one scene and another to build tension. When others voiced their concerns, saying that it might confuse the audience, he said, "If Dickens can do it, so can I."

Don't let your medium or your genre stop you from telling a good story.

Climax

One of my students once asked me, "What about climax?" At first, I didn't understand the question. What about climax? I thought it was pretty self-explanatory. It's the one thing everyone knows about story structure—that at the end, there's a climax. But I thought about it more and realized: A climax is the bringing together of the masculine and feminine elements that shows the character's change, or lack thereof. We can see how much a character has changed based on how they respond when the pressure is on.

At the climax of *E.T.*, the government guys are after the alien, and Elliot helps him go home. Elliot does this even though it hurts him.

Going back to sacrifice, one of the things sacrifice does is allow audience members to see the sincerity of a character's change. It gives them a yardstick by which to measure growth.

In *Tootsie*, Dustin Hoffman could continue lying about being a woman, but at the climax he has grown enough to tell the truth. At the climax, he reveals himself to be a man on live television. He does this despite the possibility of a lawsuit by his employers and the alienation of the woman he has fallen in love with. But he is an honest man now, and we see it through his extreme actions.

In *Casablanca*, Bogart does precisely what he said he wouldn't do and he "sticks his neck out" for others by killing a man and giving up the woman he loves. Nothing forces him to do this except his own growth.

In *Jaws*, the climax occurs when the protagonist is alone on a sinking boat as the shark makes its way toward him. But he has the courage to do what he does. His fear is gone.

The climax of *The Twilight Zone*, mentioned earlier, is when the man having the birthday challenges the others to kill the kid with the powers. He makes a sacrifice, but since the others don't respond to his call, it is for nothing. But we can measure their lack of change by their inaction.

The climax of the play A Doll's House is Nora's change. She stands up to her husband in a way she never would have at the beginning of the play.

Simply put, the climax of a story puts the protagonist in an intense situation that forces a choice that shows growth or lack of growth.

This is only true of stories that transcend genre and have a solid armature.

God from the machine

You may have noticed in a cartoon or two that, often, when Bugs Bunny is in trouble, he reaches into a pocket and pulls out exactly what he needs. Not only does he have what he needs, but he doesn't even have a pocket until he needs one. This is called deus ex machina. It translates to "God from the machine."

Ancient Greek playwrights would sometimes put a hero into a sticky situation, only to have him saved at the end by one of the Gods. The "God" would be lowered down to the stage, suspended by ropes or some such contraption or machine. This is where we get "God from the machine."

Guess what? Audiences got tired of this trick very fast. It's not very satisfying to have your hero not save himself. It's a cheat and it's lazy. It is a form of dishonesty and your job is to tell the truth, remember?

Sure, it works when Bugs Bunny does it, because it is so ridiculous it's funny. But most of the time, even in comedy, it is better to let your hero solve the problem—no invisible pockets.

On the other hand, if you want to spring a new problem on the audience, feel free. This works well because it only gets your character deeper into trouble. Trouble is good, because trouble is conflict, and conflict is ritual pain.

Supporting plots (subplots)

I don't like the term subplot; I think it confuses people. What happens is that storytellers try to include subplots to flesh out their world and make it feel full. This is never a reason to introduce a character or subordinate (sub) plot.

I like to call them supporting plots. They are there to support the main plot. Everything should hang off the same armature.

Often, the story of the protagonist's clone will be seen as a subplot, but it only exists to help make your point—like the other "stalkers" in *There's Something About Mary*. Those are supporting plots.

The other womanizers in *Tootsie* only exist to put pressure on Hoffman's character to see himself in another light and change. How is that subordinate to the main plot? It isn't.

What about the man who honestly falls in love with Hoffman as a woman? It shows Hoffman how his lies can hurt people deeply.

There is nothing subordinate about these plots. I think that if you think of them as supporting plots, it will lead you down a path that supports what you are trying to say. Your world will, indeed, be fleshed out, but with things that matter.

Few can see the impact of supporting plots on the armature idea; but there they are, invisibly making stories more resonant.

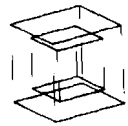
Slave, not master

I often have spoken to writers who say the reason they like writing is that they have so much power. If you want it to snow, you can make it snow. Or if you want to make it sunny, you can make it sunny. You can do whatever you want. You are a master of the universe. Guess what—that is not so. You are a slave to your story, not a master. Your characters, places, scenes, and sequences must be built around the armature.

In *Raising Arizona*, when the convict escapes from prison, it is raining. Why is this? It is because that scene has to resemble a birth as much as possible. The mud dripping down the convict's face as he emerges from the hole, screaming, helps complete the image of a grotesque birth. The rain provides the mud, of course, but there is also thunder and lightning. There is a storm, which further signifies something is wrong.

Think of it more as making discoveries rather than decisions. You will then find yourself looking for things that illustrate your point. If you do this, your work will be stronger and more focused. It will elevate your work over most.

I know some storytellers who think they can buck the system. They want to bend the rules of story around what they want to do. It doesn't work. But they never seem to understand why people don't like their work. It's a pretty simple rule—if you write without a destination, it's a sure bet that you'll never get there.



| Chapter VI |

Dialogue

Sounding natural

Address and dismiss

Address and explain

Dialogue

My barber wants to make a film. He wants to write a screenplay, so he wants to know the format. He figures that once he knows the format, he's set. There is nothing else to know, right? As he said to me, "I already know what I want people to say."

Most people are under the impression that scriptwriting is coming up with dialogue. Most critics seem to think this as well. They will go on and on about dialogue, but they know nothing about drama, or how it is structured.

I feel like dialogue is talked about and written about far too often. It is the writing that people can see, so they focus on it. Of course, you know now how much more there is to story construction. But I suppose I must write a little about dialogue.

Remember that invisible ink is the writing below the surface of the words. This invisible ink keeps the audience's brains active. Subtext is a kind of invisible ink. The dialogue exchange that follows is something I heard at a friend's house, over a Christmas breakfast, between a mother and her grown daughter.

MOTHER
You sound hoarse.

DAUGHTER
Yeah, I had a cold. It's going away, now.

MOTHER
You should take care of that. How long have you had it?

DAUGHTER
I'm fine. It hung on for a while. I'm fine.

MOTHER
It's going away? You taking anything for it?

DAUGHTER
I'm okay.

There is nothing unusual about this conversation. But here's the thing: The daughter's husband had recently died of AIDS. The daughter also had AIDS, but was not yet showing any signs of the disease. Read the exchange again with that in mind. That's subtext. That's invisible ink. Lots is being said, but not spoken.

Subtext is all in the setup. Once you establish that two characters hate each other, for instance, all you need to do is put them in the same room together and have them talk about the weather—the audience will do most of your work for you.

Dialogue is a tool, and just like any tool, you use it when you need it. It can be used to define your armature, give essential plot information, or reveal character. If it isn't doing that it isn't doing anything.

The following scene is from *Some Like it Hot.* In this scene, we meet the two main characters. They are musicians who play in a speakeasy during Prohibition.

SOME LIKE IT HOT
Screenplay by
Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond 1958

The girls have gone into a tap-dance. The captain of the chorus looks toward the bandstand, grins and winks at—JOE, the saxophone player. He winks back. JERRY, who is thumping the bass fiddle behind him, leans forward and taps Joe on the shoulder.

JERRY
Say, Joe—tonight's the night, isn't it?

JOE
(eye on tap-dancer) I'll say.

JERRY
I mean, we get paid tonight, don't we?

JOE
Yeah. Why?

He takes the mouthpiece out of his saxophone, wets the reed.

JERRY
Because I lost a filling in my back tooth. I gotta go to the dentist tomorrow.

JOE
Dentist? We been out of work for four months—and you want to blow your first week's pay on your teeth?

JERRY
It's just a little inlay—it doesn't even have to be gold—

JOE
How can you be so selfish? We owe back rent— we're in for eighty-nine

JOE (CONT'D)
bucks to Moe's Delicatessen—we're being sued by three Chinese lawyers because our check bounced at the laundry—we've borrowed money from every girl in the line—

JERRY
You're right, Joe.

JOE
Of course I am.

This is called *exposition*. The scene gives us information about the financial status of these men, as well as about their personalities.

Exposition is some of the hardest writing to do. Finding a natural way to have characters speak things they already know can seem impossible at times. It is easy to do it clumsily. This *is* the *kind* of thing you should learn from observing the way others do it.

But here is a word of warning: now that you know what to look for, many of these techniques will seem obvious to you; be careful not to dismiss something because you can now see it.

Sounding natural

Over the last few years, I have noticed that every character I read, or see in the movies or on television, sounds like characters in another movie or television show. Real people don't talk like movie people. Listen to how people speak. They didn't all grow up in your neighborhood, nor do they all have your educational background.

Because I've worked in both animation and comic books, I know a lot of illustrators. One of the things I learned is that the good ones always do life-drawings. They learn to draw the human figure from looking at a human figure. Sounds obvious, huh? Well it's not. Many comic book artists learn from copying other artists. These people are never as good draftsmen as their life-drawing counterparts. They will often hear the advice, "Draw from life." This is good advice for us all.

When you write dialogue, or anything else, think of yourself as a puppeteer. You are hiding under the table; you don't want anyone to be thinking of you. You want their attention on the puppet. Once they are thinking of you, you've lost them.

This does not mean you can't have a character say witty, funny, smart, profound things, but it had better be the character talking, not you.

As a storyteller, your job is to get out of the way of the story. This isn't about you. It may be about what you have to say, but it isn't about you. Let go of your ego.

Address and dismiss

The first time I noticed this technique, I was watching John Carpenter's *The Thing*. In the film, an alien creature with the ability to assume any form terrorizes a group of men in an isolated research base.

In this particular scene, the alien has assumed the shape of one of the men, but then begins to distort. The neck stretches impossibly and tendons snap. The head detaches from the rest of the body as the other men watch in disbelief. The head, now upside down on the floor, sprouts spider's legs and grows two antennas with eyes on the ends. Even for this film, it was almost too much. They had reached the outer bounds of their reality. Just then one of the men says, "You gotta be fucking kidding."

This kind of dialogue can save you when you think you may lose your audience. Sometimes audience members need a representative within the narrative. It allows you to address and dismiss their concerns so that they can stay engrossed in the story.

A very famous address and dismiss is in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, when they are trying to escape the super-posse by jumping off a cliff into a river.

When Sundance admits he can't swim, Butch laughs and says, "Well, hell, the fall will probably kill you!"

This example cuts the audience off at the pass, so to speak, before they can say, "Give me a break, there is no way they could make that jump!"

In *Tootsie*, we must believe that the other characters believe Dustin Hoffman is a woman. There are many comments made by other characters about how unattractive Tootsie is. This is an excellent use of address and dismiss.

All of these examples get laughs from the audience. I think it's because it's another kind of truth-telling. It's a tricky tool because it could pull people out of the scene. It is a kind of wink to the audience that lets them know the storyteller knows that maybe she's gone too far; but when used correctly, it is seamless—invisible.

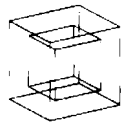
Address and explain

This is related to address and dismiss but serves a different function. The best example is in the first *Star Wars*, when Luke Skywalker sees the Millennium Falcon for the first time. After it was revealed, a hush came over the audience as they took in the magnificent ship. Then Luke exclaims, "What a piece of junk!"

The crowed erupted with laughter, because that's not at all what we were thinking.

This was George Lucas's world and we knew nothing about it. There is no way we would have known that the ship was considered a piece of junk without that clever bit of dialogue.

One of the things that drives me crazy when people talk about "good dialogue" is that they never talk about how well it's used, only how it stood out. Some of the best dialogue is quiet and subtle and reveals things about plot, theme, or character, with the precision of a surgeon. Sometimes that means it's not quotable, but quotable dialogue is not the primary job of a storyteller.



| Chapter VII |

Superior position

Show them once so they know

Superior position

There is a distinct difference between 'suspense' and 'surprise,' and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I'll explain what I mean. We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let's suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, 'Boom!' There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there.
The public is aware the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions, the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: 'You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There is a bomb beneath you and it is about to explode!' In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story.

—Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock's definition of superior position is about the best there is. It is when the audience knows something that the characters do not know. Most of the time it's used for suspense, but not always.

In Chuck Jones's hilarious animated cartoon "Feed the Kitty", a huge bulldog adopts a sweet little kitten. The problem, or conflict, is that the woman of the house has forbidden the dog from bringing anything into the house, so he must keep his new pet a secret.

At one point in the film, the woman starts to make cookies, and unbeknownst to her, the kitten climbs into a bowl of batter set under an electric mixer. When the woman flicks the switch to mix the cookies she finds that her dog has pulled the plug. She doesn't know he's trying to save his pet and just thinks he's causing trouble. She puts the dog outside so that she can work uninterrupted. While the woman is putting the dog out, the kitten climbs out of the bowl and wanders off.

This all happens when no one is watching—except the audience. We now have superior position.

The woman returns to her cookies unaware there was ever a cat in her mix. Worried about his pet, the dog is outside looking through the window as the woman flips the mixer on. He is mortified as the beaters go to work on the batter and, he thinks, his little kitten.

I have seen this film in a movie theater and I have rarely heard such uproarious laughter than during this scene. The poor bulldog looks on in abject horror as the cookie dough is rolled out with a rolling pin, then cut by cookie-cutters, then put into an oven to bake.

Outside, the dog is a wreck. He blubbers like a baby and lies in a pool of his own tears.

Why is this so damned funny to an audience? And believe me it is funny.

It's funny because we know the cat is okay. Imagine how people would react if they thought the cute little kitten had been beaten, cut up, and baked. It wouldn't be very funny. But just letting the audience in on the joke allowed the storytellers to put that poor dog through hell.

Even frightening experiences in our own lives can be funny in the retelling because we have a superior position over our past selves. We know everything turned out okay.

Remember that you have this tool, and it can frighten or amuse an audience depending on how you apply it.

This kind of invisible ink is often overlooked by storytellers, but if you want to keep readers turning pages, or viewers watching, you would do well to master this technique.

Alfred Hitchcock used it to engage filmgoers throughout his fifty-year career.

Show them once so they know

This is a great tool for storytelling. It is almost always invisible to an audience.

In the film *The African Queen*, there is a sequence in which their small boat is trapped on a sandbar. Humphrey Bogart's character must get into the river and try to pull the boat free by hand. Unable to free the boat, he climbs back aboard. When Katharine Hepburn notices that Bogart has leeches on him, Bogart goes into a panic. He is deathly afraid of, and disgusted by, leeches, and he trembles in horror. He is truly shaken by this event.

Shortly after the leeches have been removed, the characters realize there is nothing they can do to free the boat by staying aboard. So Bogart must try again to free it by hand. It means he must get back into the river. You can almost feel his dread as this realization sinks in.

When he starts down into the river we know how brave he is. We know that he's facing an obstacle that is particularly large for him. It is almost like he is his own clone character. We can measure his bravery next to his fear seen before.

This kind of invisible ink can be used a couple of ways.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind is a film that makes use of UFOs as part of its reality. Here is a famous scene from that film.

Richard Dreyfuss is in his truck at night and he is lost. He stops his car in the middle of the road to check his map. Behind him, we see a pair of headlights drive up. Dreyfuss waves the car around. The driver goes around Dreyfuss's truck.

Very shortly after, the scene is repeated almost exactly. Dreyfuss is stopped and looking at his map when a pair of headlights drives up. Without looking up from his map, Dreyfuss waves the car around. Unbeknownst to him the lights behind the truck rise vertically. (Good use of superior position, by the way.) It's a creepy scene.

It works so well because we saw the previous headlights behave in a normal fashion, so now we have a comparison for what is normal and what is strange. Very smart storytelling.

The interesting thing is that most people forget about the first set of headlights altogether, but it is what makes the second pair of lights strange and fantastic.

Spielberg does the same thing in the first *Jurassic Park* movie.

Knowing that the Tyrannosaurus rex's vision is based on motion, the Sam Neil character throws a road flare off into the distance so that the *T. rex* will follow the flare away from kids it's attempting to eat. It works.

Shortly after this, Jeff Goldblum's character tries the same thing. He waves the flare to get the dinosaur's attention. The *T. rex* chases Goldblum. Then Goldblum throws the flare off to the side expecting the monster to follow—it does not. It never misses a step and continues after Goldblum.

This creates a tension in the audience because we know what was supposed to happen and how it went wrong.

They use this kind of invisible ink in Pixar's *Finding Nemo.* The tough fish has a plan to escape the tank where they are kept. As he tells the other fish his plan, the filmmakers show us exactly how the plan is supposed to work, so that when it later goes wrong the audience knows where and how the plan derails.

This creates a kind of wonderful anxiety in the audience members. They bite their collective nails as they follow along and the plan is carried out. Will it work?

When I was a kid, I read a lot of magazines and books about special effects, and whenever they showed a photo of a miniature they would place a quarter or some such object next to it so the reader would have a sense of scale. One could see just how small the model was because we all know the size of a quarter.

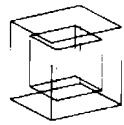
This is akin to how the first two pigs are used in "The Three Little Pigs" story. As I said earlier, it is the failure of the first two pigs that allows us to measure the success of the third. In a sense, we have scale—things to compare.

We know how strange and unusual it is to have headlights float up instead of going around a car.

We feel that Jeff Goldblum is in real trouble with the *T. Rex* because his plan doesn't work as it should.

This form of invisible ink is often ignored by inexperienced story-crafters. They will often jump right to the third little pig expecting the audience will "get it." It won't.

Invisible ink is all about communicating with your audience clearly and getting it to feel and think what it needs to so it will experience your story.



| Chapter VIII |

When bad things happen to good stories

How to translate critiques

Judging your own work

When bad things happen to good stories

One day I was watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and I realized that it had the wrong ending. Who am I to say this? I'm just a guy who looked at the clues and saw the grammatical errors in the dramatic structure.

First, let me say that I like Spielberg. More than a few of you, I'm sure, don't like his work. But he is a master storyteller and you should learn all you can from him and use those skills to tell the stories you want to tell.

In short, *CE3K* is about a man, played by Richard Dreyfuss, who sees a UFO one night and becomes obsessed with seeing it again. The UFO has planted an image in his brain, and he is driven to find out what this shape means.

He begins acting so strangely that his wife takes his kids and leaves him.

When he realizes that the image in his head is Devil's Tower, in Wyoming, he goes through hell and high water to get there.

I'm leaving out some details, but when he gets to Devil's Tower, he gets to see the UFOs and is invited to leave with the aliens. This is what he's wanted, so he leaps at the chance and boards the spaceship. It flies into the sky over the closing credits, taking Richard Dreyfuss away on a wondrous journey to parts unknown.

The End. This is the wrong ending.

Richard Dreyfuss has a wife and kids he's leaving behind. He didn't make a sacrifice. What he does is selfish. He has not grown from this experience at all.

There are even several clones in the film that tell you that Dreyfuss may be gone for decades. There are people returning to earth who have been missing for years. Where are their families now? Their lives will be disrupted forever. Yet Dreyfuss goes.

He even sees how upset one character is because her son was taken away from her, even for a short time.

The ending would have been stronger if Dreyfuss had to watch as the spaceship disappears into the sky while he stayed behind.

That's just my opinion, right? No, it isn't. After I noticed this problem with the film, I heard Spielberg himself say that he would have chosen a different ending now.

When he wrote the script, he didn't have a family and now he does. He said that he would make a different decision now.

Spielberg was making the mistake I see a lot of writers make. He was having the character do what he himself would have done in a given situation without really looking at what needed to happen for the story.

You are the slave of your story, not its master. You don't make decisions, you make discoveries.

Let's use another Spielberg film that I love, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. What could possibly be wrong with that?

A good friend and I have an ongoing argument about this film, but ultimately I think we agree. He doesn't understand how Indiana knows to close his eyes when the Ark of the Covenant is opened.

My argument is that he's been set up as an expert on the Ark, so it's no surprise that he knows what to do at the end.

First, let's look at something that could be seen as deus ex machina—the literal appearance of God from a box to save the day. The storytellers did a very clever thing: they planted God throughout the film, so it is not out of the blue when God shows up at the end.

When Marion first produces the headpiece to the Staff of Ra, the wind begins to blow. She is inside when this happens; yet the wind blows.

Later, when the old Egyptian man translates the markings on the headpiece, the wind blows even harder than before. Again we are inside, so wind is a little unusual.

Then it comes time to dig up the Ark. Storm clouds boil with thunder and lightning. This is real Old Testament God behavior. (By the way, there is no other use of weather in the film.)

God gets more blatant later when the Nazi's swastika is burned off the crate where the Ark is being kept. By this time, we have been

primed for God's appearance, so we aren't pulled out of the story.

What's the big deal when God comes out of the box at the end? It comes down to Indy's character change.

When the film starts, it is established that Indiana Jones does not believe in God. By the end of the film, he seems to believe in the Almighty.

None of these evidences of God are for Indy's benefit, they are never shown to him, so his change comes out of thin air. That's the deus ex machina, his sudden change. That's why my friend wants to know how Indy knew what to do at the end.

Albert Brooks is a hilarious filmmaker, but sometimes he makes mistakes in his storytelling. In his film *Mother,* he plays a man whose marriage has just broken up, so he goes to live with his mother to find out why he can't relate to women. He and his mother don't get along, and he figures this is where all of his woman trouble stems from.

Here's the problem: Because Albert Brooks decides to live with his mother, the conflict feels forced. The two have great, hilarious disagreements. They drive each other crazy, but one is always aware that Albert could leave anytime he wants. This takes the edge off their comedic conflict. I kept asking myself, "Why doesn't he just leave?" It isn't honest. Tell the truth, remember?

Whenever there are characters who don't want to be together, the storyteller needs to find some glue that holds them together. In *The Odd Couple*, for instance, Oscar is afraid Felix will kill himself. So, as much as his friend drives him crazy, Oscar doesn't want him to die. Felix stays because he has no place else to go. These two things are the glue that binds them together.

Mother could have used more glue. Watch it and see if you don't agree.

Stalag 17 is a Billy Wilder film that, even though I have it on DVD, I can't keep from watching when it comes on TV. And as much as I love Mr. Wilder's work, I think this film is flawed.

The story takes place in a German POW camp during the Second World War. The Americans imprisoned there think there is a German spy

living among them, in their barracks. William Holden plays Sefton, the suspected traitor. He is a wonderfully gray character, and it is easy to see why the others suspect him.

But there are two characters who seem not to serve any real function. They are comic relief, but they too often pull the focus away from the main story. Few things these characters do support the main plot. They are the fat on what is otherwise a lean script.

I have shown this film to people hoping they would enjoy it, and for many these two characters ruin the film.

You may think that I watch films looking for these types of mistakes, but I don't. After a while these things will stick out to you like a sour note to a musician.

How to translate critiques

The truth of the matter is that most people don't have the skills to articulate what is bothering them about a piece of writing. They will see everything through the lens of their tastes and their concept of drama. Rarely will they look at what you are attempting to do and be able to give unbiased advice about how to achieve it. Their comments will be subjective, not objective. Everyone who reads the work will say something different.

They will say things to make themselves sound learned. They will correct your spelling and comma placement. They will hate the main character, but never tell you it's because he's just like a guy who owes them money. They will see things that are not there and never ever see the invisible ink.

So how do you sift through all of this and get to the helpful stuff? You must learn to hear what they mean, not what they say. Listen to the music, not the lyrics.

But if they say they didn't like the ending, remember what Billy Wilder said, "If there is something wrong with the third act, it is really in the first act."

Here are some hints:

- If you hear the same critique from three or more people, listen to it. But keep in mind they might be describing the symptom, not the disease.
- If someone doesn't understand what is going on in your story, that is worth listening to.
- If someone loses interest in your story, it is worth finding out where.
- Other writers can often be the worst at giving critiques. They will try to remake you in their image. "This is how I would do it." Only they won't say that out loud.

- If you clearly communicate your story, other writers will often say that it's too blatant.

This is something I learned when I worked in animation. When you show work in progress, they will always feel obliged to tell you what's wrong with it and how to fix it. But when you show them a finished piece, they are much more accepting.

Judging your own work

A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.
—Thomas Mann

Don't write for other writers. People are drawn to writing for different reasons and many people do it to seem smart. If you have a good first act, most will never recognize it, because they're not really clear on what a first act does. They know nothing of construction, but will turn their noses up at the idea of it anyway. The less they know about it the more they will object to it.

The one thing I have noticed about people who are exceptional in their creative work is that they are always trying to get better. That's how they got good in the first place. These people judge themselves against the best work. They aim for the top.

Just worry about the craft and the art will take care of itself.

The term self-expression has had a harmful impact on storytellers. Stories are not about the storyteller. If your focus is on yourself, then it is not on what is best for your story.

Learn to look at your work as if it isn't your work. Be as hard on yourself as you would anyone else.

Learn from the masters. Figure out how they did what they did, why it worked, and apply it.

Don't be fooled by flash-in-the-pan successes and don't try to imitate what is new and novel. If someone comes along and does something different, such as telling a story backwards, or out of sequence, it doesn't mean it's going to be the way things are done from now on. How many backward movies do you want to see?

Respect your audience. It's not their job to "get it"; it's your job to communicate it to them.

Understand that you are only as good as you are today, and don't beat yourself up. You'll get better.