

## THE BEST WRITING REACHES INTO THE PAST

*We Write Because The Current Times Have Failed Us*

A history book written by a scholar who is an expert on a particular period might be especially concerned with facts. Though of course, no historian as much as they might try can deny their own interpretation of those facts. And most don't even try. Nevertheless, an empirical scholar of ancient Greece will have a different take on the Trojan war than the Iliad. And a scholar of ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia will have a different take on those civilizations than the Old Testament. Much different.

So why are those narratives more popular than any scholar's? Or why for example would I rather watch Shakespeare's dramatization of the War of the Roses or *Henry V* rather than actually troll for facts about the Plantagenets or the Bolingbrokes?

Or why would I rather enjoy these works of historical fiction rather than something that reflects my every day life?

The answer seems obvious. Is it because these narratives are inherently more entertaining? They are meant to transport us from a deathly polite understanding of the world and take us into a realm with larger than life figures experiencing larger than life dramas? Probably. But I venture it is something deeper.

I venture these narratives capture our imagination more because rather than reach for facts, or try to sensationalize what we've already experienced, they reach for the *essence* of a past we can't possibly ever know.

What is that essence?

Every civilization (or tribe) at one point or another faces a crisis of faith. A moment where they witness their own fall from grace; it takes the imaginative genius of artists to look into the past and witness those qualities about a society that make it worth existing.

Honor. Integrity. These are not abstract terms; they only become that way when we've lost the means of expressing them.

It is up to writers to look back at those times when those qualities could be expressed unironically and remind the people of today of who they were and what they can be.

This is why writers always supposedly "steal." Writers are not innovators. They are reminders.

To tell the story of Henry V or Harriet Tubman or Omar Ibn Al Khattab is not about getting the facts of their life straight. It's about capturing what those people meant. It's about capturing a

time and a person whose honor and integrity was expressed forcefully.

It is not just historical fiction that we find this to be the case. But in religion as well.

Karen Armstrong, that all-encompassing genius scholar of religion, asserts that the *Enlightenment's* ideal for the "separation of church and state" was not about purifying matters of state from being corrupted by religious agendas, but to purify religion from the inherently corrupt agendas of the European state.

I mentioned the Greeks, who always concluded their dramas with ritual sacrifice. I mentioned the Old Testament.

Take the Qur'an. The Prophet Muhammad knew he wasn't inventing anything new. He not only admitted it, he *insisted* on reminding people of what came before--because the tribespeople of Arabia had lost their way. The Qur'an asserts itself as the word of god and not entertainment, despite being a linguistically groundbreaking phenomenon. Though I venture our understanding of "entertainment" (i.e. idleness) is not the original purpose of *being entertaining*.

Which speaks to another point. Writers and storytellers exist to revitalize impotent language. To entertain can actually mean encouraging development of our highest self, rather than embracing idle pleasure--*if we allow it to*. When a society no longer has the words to express high ideals honestly; when they subvert their expressions to irony and crass and debase themselves in their words and thus their actions, the only way to save them is to get them to look back at those times where people expressed their highest ideals wholeheartedly.

The writer or dramatist or storyteller who makes the past present and allows us to relinquish our need to fit into society by allowing us to indulge in immersion through a time when we imagine it was safe to express our highest ideals (though in reality, it could never be--then or now).

Or in its inverse, historical fiction allows us to indulge in debased times long gone that may allow us to heed the direction our current society is going.

And from those stories we are able to immerse with a renewed innocence and hope.

Despite what our actual influencers and so called "leaders" are doing.

"Catharsis" in Aristotle's *Poetics* is not about enjoying the actual act of purging our feelings. It's about allowing a release of our darkest impulses so that we don't unleash them onto society.

When we write and tell stories, we reach for something more whole than what the current times have allowed us. Perhaps the perpetual cycle of society is that we are *never* allowed to experience this wholeness. And that any time where we might experience it is wholeheartedly *imagined*.

All the more reason, then, to write.

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