



# Science-fiction UPC Award 2006

Conference, 29/11/2006

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**The Virtue of Enjoyment: In Defense of Escapist Literature**

## Introduction

I am not a writer.

You may be surprised to hear this. After all, I'm speaking at a writing award, and have published a number of novels. Yet, I also have a master's degree in creative writing--and, from what I've been able to tell from my career in academia, I'm certainly not a writer. At least by the standards of many academics.

What is a writer? A writer is someone who says something that matters. A writer is someone who crafts beautiful language from their words. A writer is someone that the public should revere and respect.

This is, unfortunately, not me. I just like to tell stories.

Now, as I understand, I'm the first fantasy author that you've ever invited to speak at this award. More so than that, I'm one of the only younger authors you've had. I am at the beginning of my career, rather than at the end of it. The list of distinguished authors you've had here in previous years is a little daunting to me!

And so, I thought very long and very hard about what I could say to you that would be meaningful. In the end, I decided that the best thing I could do would be to talk about the feeling of wonder that a good book can provoke. To talk about what it is to tell stories.

And, to defend that art. Telling stories. It is an art that I think can be even more powerful, more useful, and more real than I think we give it credit. As readers of science fiction, you like to think. I, however, want to focus my speech on feeling.

## Background

Maybe I'd better back up a little. Let me explain my history to you, and perhaps you'll see how I got where I am.

Before I became a storyteller, I was two things. I was a scientist and a dreamer. That is a mixture which, actually, I don't think is all that uncommon among writers of science fiction and fantasy. We tend to be the types who, when confronted by a broken sink, like to sit and think about the mechanics of how that sink works, wonder at the marvels of plumbing, and devise a magic system involving the transfer of magical energy through pipes.

All while we're getting sprayed in the face with water because we're too distracted to just fix the pipes!

If you've read my novels, you'll find that my goal is to mix the fantastic with the rational. I work very hard to craft stories and settings that are--paradoxically--at the same time both magical and scientific. I strive to prove that fantasy can be so much more clever than people assume, to blend a sense of wonder and a sense of amazement together with the logic of a good plot and excellent setting.



I do this because I am a lover of both learning and wonder. In my youth, I spent equal time delving through magazines on Zoology and physics as I did reading books about the fantastical.

In fact, when I went to college my first year, I ended up choosing biological chemistry as my major.

Writing, my true love, eventually asserted itself--and, as you can see, I ended up as a writer by trade. Yet, I have a deep and profound respect for the sciences. They have shaped my writing career, pushing me to develop my own differing brands of logical magic.

And yet, there is a fundamental difference between the sciences and the arts, and I think it's one that we--as writers of science fiction and fantasy--need to be aware of.

Studying science, in my opinion, should make you think. Reading fiction, however, should make you feel.

### Writing as Science

I realize that this is a somewhat controversial position to take. Those of you listening to me my claim that good literature is that which makes you think and makes you feel.

And this might just be the problem of disconnect we have in our literary environment today. During the years of institutional literature education--the growth of writing as a 'teachable' college skill, with MFA programs and PhDs in writing--something has happened to the way that academics view literature.

It seems that people in literature departments want to see writing not as an art at all, but as a science. They think literature should always teach. That should always explain. They seem to think that it is something you should be able to pick apart, like a physicist shattering atoms down to quarks, then pointing out the various pieces that make it tick.

I worry, personally, that this is due to the literary community feeling threatened by the scientific community. On a college level, the sciences produce. New innovations are made through research, new cures discovered. Research in the sciences has real, quantifiable results.

Literature--not quite a traditional art, but far from a true science--has found itself disinherited in this modern system. What is the study of literature? Is it research? Is it art? In order to prove itself, it seems to me that the literature departments have turn their studies into something that belongs in a biology lab--dissection, discussion, and quantification--rather than in an art studio.

Brilliant writing, to them, is writing that can be discussed at length.

This is all, in theory, just fine. Literature is meaningful, didactic, and wonderful. And yet, I don't think any of these things should be the goal of a piece of fiction. Fiction is about story. Everything else should grow naturally from that story. When meaning, or even language, takes precedent over character and story I think that you undermine the very nature of your work.

The literature and writing departments disagree with me. More and more, they are believing--and teaching--that if a work of fiction simply entertains, then it is of less value. It is base. Unworthy.

And so, I guess that's why I'm not a writer. I'm not even really sure what I am. I do know, however, what I want to create. Something that has meaning, not because it makes me look brilliant, but because the characters in it are just so utterly compelling.

### Feeling

It's not my intention to get into a lengthy discussion of the institutional bias against popular fiction in academia. Much has been said about this by people who are much more intelligent and knowledgeable than I am.



My goal, therefore, isn't to point my finger too accusingly at English departments or literary pundits. I'll leave that to Steven King. Instead, I simply want to prove what I said before--that good fiction, in my opinion, can offer something profound that nothing else--nonfiction, visual art, or even science--can give us.

That is emotion.

The result of all of this dissection, arguing, and research in writing programs is a move away from the feeling in prose. Contemporary literature isn't about emotions--it's about clever word plays, it's about trying to innovate with form and message. It's about trying to say or teach something, rather than about trying to express something.

Popular literature fills this gap.

Now, I'm not trying to say that we should abandon trying to put themes or ideas into our literature. There is a place for that, certainly. Where would we be without the didactic stories of Lewis, Aesop, and even Chaucer? Science fiction and fantasy stories often present poignant themes that really do make their readers think. What is Harrison Bergeron but a classically didactic story, with the same flare as a traditional Middle-Ages morality tale?

However, I put forth the assertion that literature doesn't have to mean anything to be valuable. In fact, I place a greater value on that literature which doesn't mean a thing! To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, all art--or, at least, good art--is ultimately useless.

Popular Fiction

This brings us to escapist literature. Escapism. It's a word in English that has often been used to demean fiction that focuses too much on entertainment. Escapist works, many readers feel, are ones that have little value because they take you away from the real world instead of teaching you something useful. A lot of literary writers claim that all popular fiction is simply 'escapism.' And, unfortunately, many science fiction writers turn and point their fingers at fantasy writers and say "No! We're the ones writing escapism. Those people write the escapism!"

That's fine. I want to write escapism. Because to me, something that takes you away from your world and puts you into else's is in and of itself something wonderful. Because it makes you feel.

The true classics of both science fiction and fantasy are not those books that try to teach the reader. They're the books that try to provoke emotions in the reader. Dune, Lord of the Rings, Ender's Game, even the Robot stories by Asimov--these aren't works intended to explain things to us, even if they do include important themes, not to mention interesting magic and science.

The main objective, the core theme, of these works is feeling. Emotion. Entertainment.

And that is the very thing that, for some reason, the reading community at large is beginning to look at with embarrassment.

The decay of emotion

I'm not an emotional person. Ask anyone who knows me. They'll tell you that I don't really get mad, and I don't really have moods. When I finally sold a book after some eight years of work, my response was a simple "That's nice" rather than a whoop for joy. It isn't that I didn't feel happy--I just don't tend toward extremes of emotion.

Perhaps this is why emotion fascinates me so. Like junk food would seem to a man who spent his entire life starving, like mandatory education would seem to a child who grew up in a place



where only the rich could be schooled, I am a man who finds that which I don't have to be much more interesting than what I do.

Emotion is wonderful. One of the very few things that can cause me to really feel is a well-told story. I don't have to be surprised by a brilliant plot--though I like them--and I don't have to be awed by the originality of the setting. A well told story with a dramatic climax can bring emotion to me more powerfully than anything else.

It can be something expected--like the resurrection scene in The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe. It can be surprising yet inevitable, like the car wreck scene in Unbreakable. Either way, these stories mean something to me. They make me feel.

And, for some reason, my entire academic career tried to teach me that this reaction was somehow inferior to the one I should get from reading a confusing, thickly-written story by James Joyce.

I rebel against this.

So, why am I telling you this? Is it just because you gave me a podium, crossed your fingers, and stepped back to see what I'd say? As you can probably tell, this topic is very important to me.

And yet, I don't just want rant randomly about things that annoy me--though, like most authors, I'm quite good at it. The reason I chose this topic is because of you.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are scientists and engineers. You are people of logic, reason, and thought. That is a wonderful thing. In fact, I consider myself one of you more than a true artist after the classical style.

And yet, I worry that your logical minds also present a danger to you in writing. Just like mine did. When I spoke of my childhood earlier, I glossed over the tough decision it was for me to originally choose biological chemistry over writing as a career. Why did I do it? Because my logical mind told me that writers don't make any money, and that if I tried to write books for a living, I'd end up begging for beans by the side off the road, my manuscripts only serving to give me a nice warm fire in the trash can beside me.

My logic overruled my feelings. I felt a similar thing happening to me when I looked at my writing from a critical, literary standpoint.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have to resist the urge to force our literature to try to do what the sciences already do so well. I think we need to understand logically why something as seemingly frivolous as emotion is so important to our writing.

And so, as I draw to a close, let's talk just briefly about why it is that I find emotion so vital.

#### Importance of feeling

Why is feeling important? I think that, in part, it comes down to understanding other people. Throughout history, when men have committed tragedies against other men, one goal of the offending parties was to make their soldiers and followers regard their enemies in a logical manner, not an emotional one. People placed in concentration camps became things, not people. Slaves in the United States were thought of as more animal than men.

The trick of these regimes has been to create a disconnect in their followers. It is much harder to hurt another man if you empathize with him. However, if you can convince yourself that he doesn't feel in the same way that you feel, then you can force yourself to do much more.

What is my point here? Is it to connect literary writers to Nazis? Sometimes I felt like I was being tortured when I was forced to read so called 'classics' in school.

But, of course, I exaggerate. No, I'm not trying to make any connection there at all. What I'm trying to prove is that the ability to feel and understand other people is vital to our human society at large. The ability to see another person and to imagine what they must be feeling is, in my opinion, one of the greatest and most mature of all emotions. It is at the core teachings of nearly every humanistic religion across the world.

Understanding others provokes powerful reactions in people. It makes us give. It undermines hatred and incivility. It takes our focus away from the self, and points us toward the best that mankind can offer.

And, at the risk of being a little too self-aggrandizing, is why I simple value in 'escapist' literature. Books like we write aren't focused on thinking, or teaching. The great art of a popular writer is the ability to make the reader think and feel as the characters think and feel.

Tension is only as strong as the reader's connection to characters as they progress in the story. Danger is only as threatening as the reader's ability to worry about the characters. A brilliant ending is only as powerful as its ability to affect the characters for triumph or tragedy.

When we read a good book, we feel as if we succeed or fail with those involved. It takes us from being just ourselves and makes us into, for a time, someone else.

This is what popular fiction can do. A literary piece can have delightful language, a poignant message, and a powerful theme. But if I don't care about the characters, then it will fail as a story for me.

#### Conclusion

I close with a specific and, hopefully, modest request. Those of you here today are my colleagues. Writers, dreamers, men and women of science and thought. To us, learning and ideas are very important. We read for them, and love books that tickle our logical senses.

Yet, in writing, we run the danger of letting ourselves forget about the deep and powerful ability of a well-told story to evoke emotion. I give you a challenge, then. Don't let those who seek for 'literary' writing make you feel ashamed of your love of a good story. It has power beyond anything they are willing to admit.

But, also, don't let your thirst for logic let you write the life out of your story. If your writing is about people first, then the logic, plot, and science of them will be all the more powerful by association.