

thinking story

“Whereas life separates meaning from emotion, art unites them. Story is an instrument by which you create such epiphanies.”

**Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE,
AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING**

Of course, ‘Thinking Story’ can mean many things. From the point of view of the reader or audience ‘Thinking Story’ can be a story that makes you think and then later reflect on. ‘Thinking Story’ from the perspective of the writer, however, takes us into the mind of the storyteller themselves, their psychology, their creativity and what it is that drives them to tell their tales. Perhaps, as well, ‘Thinking Story’ leads us into the whole nature of Story of what a story is, why human beings have such a powerful need for Story and what it can achieve.

The Teller of Tales and their Philosophy of Life reflects on the different ways of seeing the world and how this is key to both the content and the presentation of the story that is told. **PAGE 4**

The Psychology of the Storyteller considers the nature of the creative mind and what it takes to be a teller of tales and a writer. **PAGE 16**

Where Do Stories Come From? offers a selection of quotes from writers about story inspiration, with thoughts on the importance of reading and books, plus literary and cultural influences. **PAGE 34**

The Human Processing of Story addresses ideas around suspension of disbelief, psychological immersion and absorption in a tale, plus the processing of ideas after the story has been told. **PAGE 45**

The Purposes of Story: Human Need and Story Origins looks first at the human need and longing for Story, and second at thoughts around the origin of Story, including anthropological, mythological and psychological theories. **PAGE 68**

The Purposes of Story: Empathy, Well-Being and Understanding Another's Truth considers the ability of Story to allow us first to walk in another's shoes and second see the world from another's point of view. This chapter also reflects on the importance of sharing our stories as a way of healing and maintaining mental health. **PAGE 80**

The Purposes of Story: The Story Funfair, Sensation and Escapism looks primarily at Story as an entertainment, where the main the purpose of Story is escapist recreation. This chapter also considers how a story's aim is to simply to create sheer sensation. **PAGE 94**

The Purposes of Story: The Safe Space, Morality, Catharsis and Maturation looks at Story as a place to confront difficult issues, plus Story as a supplier of moral codes, plus Story as a means to understand maturation and change. **PAGE 104**

The Purposes of Story: What is Laughter? reflects on the nature of laughter itself, looking the spectrum of laughter, its involuntary nature, plus some recent studies on the rhythmical sound of laughter, tickling, and the importance of humour in human connection and dating. **PAGE 119**

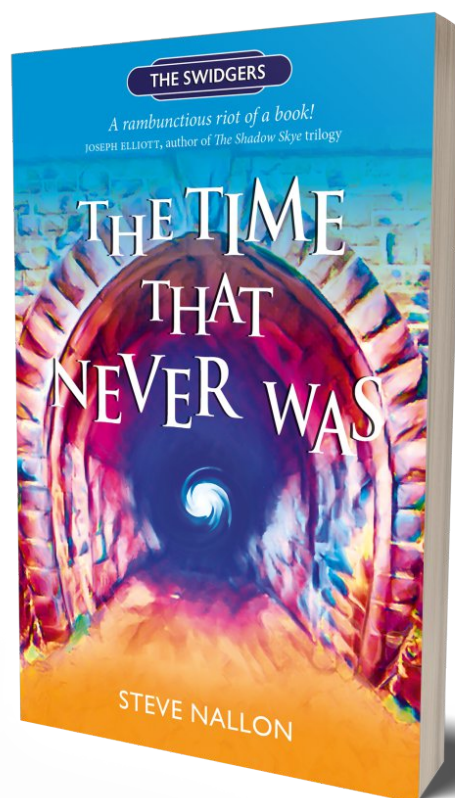
The Purposes of Story: What Does Laughter Do? considers some of the reasons behind human laughter, including its evolutionary pay-off. It also looks at ideas such as the 'Comic Gap' and the difference between 'laughing at' and 'laughing with'. **PAGE 135**

The Purposes of Story: Laughter Theories examines the various theories put forward as to why we laugh, from surprise and release to incongruity, configuration and moral abdication. **PAGE 157**

The Purposes of Story: Thoughts on Laughter and Comedy is a wide-ranging collection of quotations on laughter and comedy from writers, philosophers and comedians. **PAGE 184**

The Purposes of Story: Changing the World addresses the social and political side of Story, where the aim is essentially to change the way of thinking of the reader or audience. This chapter looks at agitprop and alternative ways of seeing the world. **PAGE 212**

The Purposes of Story: Meaninglessness, Ideology and Queerness considers those stories which stress the apparent meaninglessness of life itself. This chapter also considers the role of ideology in Story, plus the uniqueness of Queer stories. **PAGE 233**



thinking story

The Tellers of Tales and their Philosophy of Life

"The most powerful words in English are, 'Tell me a story'."
Pat Conroy, MY READING LIFE

The Philosophy You Live By

It's an old line but one that's worth repeating: The problem with real life is it's so badly written. So often in the real world there are no clear beginnings, nor linear actions with singular intents that lead to neat conclusions. Instead, life throws in our faces unfathomable coincidences, makes us juggle several events at once, pitting us against characters with baffling motivations. Another point is that life, unlike a storybook, is ongoing and evolving. Nothing is ever really cut and dried, for life is made of ragged ends not finales. And no matter what kind of crisis is faced, there's no way we can skip a chapter to see if it all turns out okay on the last page, for in life no one can know the future, and besides, many a crisis never leads to a climax because it remains simply unsolvable. In fact, if you gave 'The

Tale of Real Life' to one of the story gurus such as Linda Seger, Robert McKee or John Truby, they would no doubt immediately insist on a total rewrite or at least a second draft.

In a way though we do rewrite our stories as we go along. And we do so by simply trying to make sense of the world we find ourselves in. But not everyone has the same view of life and so the starting point in looking at Story Craft has to be your personal philosophical perspective on Story, first looking at how you see the world itself, and, second, what you believe the purpose of story is and what it can do.

To start with, let's say that you believe and accept that the nature of life is that it is a series of random and unpredictable coincidences in a universe without meaning, purpose or a divine mandate, and is, therefore, lacking in any morality. Stuff happens, life is pain in the proverbial – and then you die.

Well, that's certainly an extreme perspective on life, but perhaps you also believe that it is the role of Story to help us make some sort of sense out of this strange universe and also create some moral values and social order as a way of helping us get through it. Yes, life may have no meaning but the stories we tell each other, with their neat endings and motivated characters, can at least give it a semblance of purpose by rationalising and ordering our universe out of its chaos. Or, to put this idea in the form of a popular aphorism, '*We have art that we may not to die of the truth*'. And the

essential point here is that Story, with its structure and plotting, becomes our defence against the impossible nonsense and turmoil of life. And surely there's nothing wrong with that?



Any fiction or story with this philosophy offers us the tools to take significance from those random occurrences of life and, in doing so, helps us create a narrative for ourselves and of ourselves. In other words, those turning points, dilemmas, revelations and recognitions, which are endlessly talked about by story gurus on writing courses, give our lives meaning, purpose and shape. And, to be more specific that shape comes in the form of the Inciting Incident, which then leads to the trigger for action that will take us, after most obstacles are overcome, to a moment of crisis followed by a climax that gives us what we want and need if we succeed or doesn't if we don't. And if you want to bring in some Aristotelian terms, as most story gurus do, then let's also include *anagnorisis*

(change from ignorance to knowledge) and *peripeteia* (unexpected change to the opposite).

The case then for Story is this: once you know how a story works, you can psychologically make these narrative concepts part of the structure of your own life story and observe them in the lives of others. The chaos of life now has a beginning, a middle and an end, with events that are not random but have causal purposes that lead to understanding and change.

Well, that's one view. But not all agree with this way of thinking. Critics of this concept of the 'Philosophy of Story' say that when you are creating in your head linear narratives with causal connections what you are in fact doing is fooling yourself there is order in life when there isn't. And that's simply a lie. Stories, particularly of the Hollywood variety, are too tidy, and, as has been said, life isn't like that and never will be. Real life is just a series of perpetual and unavoidable and usually very annoying events. Stuff happens, and that's about all there is to it. Furthermore, you'd be better off recognising all this right from the start. This world we live is not the kid-yourself world of Steven Spielberg or the tie-up-all-the-loose-ends world of Agatha Christie, but one of randomness and bizarre and meaningless happenstance. And this is the philosophical universe of the Dadaist and the Surrealist, and writers and artists such as Salvador Dalí and William Burroughs. Anti-Storyists, you might call them. You might thinking about adding dramatists such as

Edward Bond or Caryl Churchill, who may not go as far as complete randomness but do prefer their audience to make connections between events for themselves rather than be presented with them on a plate.



The philosophical view you take of the world will, then, naturally enough affect the way you think about Story Craft, and indeed, how you go on to build and create your story world. Take, for example, two contrasting Time Tales. Is your perspective on life Kurt Vonnegut's chaotic SLAUGHTERHOUSE-5 or is it Richard Matheson's BID TIME RETURN (later made into the romantic movie SOMEWHERE IN TIME) where love seems almost destined?

"What counts is not the philosophy of the writer (that will reveal itself in any case) but the fortunes of the characters, how their principles of generosity or stubborn honesty or stinginess or cowardice help them or hurt them in specific situations. What counts is the characters' story."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



“[Everyone] ‘writes’ in a way; that is, each person has a ‘story’ – a personal narrative – which is constantly being replayed, revised, taken apart and put together again. The significant points in this narrative change as a person ages – what may have been tragedy at twenty is seen as comedy or nostalgia at forty... In the end, we all become stories.”

Margaret Atwood, novelist

How We Construct Our Story

Human beings are a pattern seeking species, we are almost incapable of perceiving randomness. As David Mamet says in his book *THREE USES OF KNIFE*, that impulse comes from our natural “human capacity to order the intolerable into meaning” and to “structure cause and effect in order to increase our store of practical knowledge about the universe” and to “order the universe into a comprehensible form.” In other words, we are a species that needs to tell stories – and when we do, we dramatise them in such a way that gives them significance in order to bring us meaning.

But of course it takes time to learn how to construct and structure effectively. Ask a child about the events of their day and they are likely to be told either in chronological order (“I woke up. Then I got up. Then I had breakfast. Then I brushed my teeth. Then I

saw my brother's crayons on the table..."), or, if the child is in an excitable mood, in whatever order they come to mind, ("My brother threw orange squash at me... my bike wasn't there... his crayons were lying on the table, so why shouldn't I take them to my bedroom and hide them... my brother said his friend lived too far away for him to walk, but I still don't think he should've said what he said.. that orange juice was all sticky...") A simple chronological ordering of events can be a bit dull, but a seemingly arbitrary telling is nearly incomprehensible, though it is just about possible to work out what happened with that bike and orange juice if you really try.

Of course, as we get older we get better at constructing our narratives. To illustrate this point just listen to yourself next time you are telling the tale of what happened when you had an altercation with your neighbour. You tell the events in a different order to that which they occurred. Some you will spend more time on, giving them emphasis, with the purpose of getting across in the telling the point you wish to make. You may even make certain aspects exaggerated and comic, or even, if you wish to stress the awfulness of your neighbour, build into their actions nefarious motivations as to why you believe they did what they did. And the 'plotting' of your story will probably be so constructed that the key part of the tale will be kept till the very end to give it the maximum impact.

And the next day, you may tell exactly the same tale to another friend, only this time the way you present it won't be exactly the

same. Remembering perhaps the reaction you got yesterday wasn't quite what you hoped, you make subtle but important changes, altering certain aspects of your story to give a bit more oomph or bite. Lay it on thick, as they say.

So what's going on here? In short, what you are doing is constructing and then reconstructing your story with the ultimate purpose of presenting to the world, dramatise if you like, the events that occurred and give them meaning as they are seen to you. And why not? It's your story, so why shouldn't you tell it your way and with your perspective? And the construction of any story or drama – real life or fictional – is no different. Putting all this as simply as possible, we 'storyfy' our lives.



Of course not all human beings are the same. The artist in us might like to embellish but not everyone is an artist. The accountant, the lawyer or the mathematician may prefer to stick to strict facts, and if they were with you on that day with your neighbour, they may, by their nature, insist on correcting your version of events by saying, "No, no, it didn't quite happen like that." But the writer, or

indeed any creative artist, will always go for the truth over facts, their 'truth' being the 'facts' as they see them and wish to present to the world. As the comedian Barry Cryer used to say about obituaries, "If you have a choice between printing the facts and printing the legend always go for the legend."

There may be those who prefer their stories constructed without, as it were, any calculated or conscious construction whatsoever. For example, that story about the orange squash. Yes, there are pieces missing certainly, for it is somewhat elliptical tale, but it's possible to work out that the brother took the bike without asking, the child telling the story then later hid the brother's crayons in their bedroom (perhaps to get their own back for the taking of the bike?) and when the brothers met later there was one almighty a row which ended in orange squash being thrown. The point here is that certain storytellers may prefer to tell their stories like that in order to make the listener work out the chronology, the motives and ultimately the meaning for themselves. And there are many playwrights, for example, who actually prefer their dramas to be presented like that. Think Edward Bond and *EARLY MORNING* or Caryl Churchill and *FAR AWAY*.

Some more thoughts on constructing our own story...

"We dramatise an incident by taking events and re-ordering them, elongating them, compressing them, so that we understand their personal meaning to us – to us as the protagonist of the individual drama we understand life to be."

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

"Instead of making up stories, stay with the facts. For example, 'I am ruined' is a story. It limits you and prevents you from taking effective action. 'I have fifty cents left in my bank account' is a fact."

Eckhart Tolle, German-born spiritual teacher and self-help author

"Narrative becomes the way you make sense of chaos. That's how you focus the world. It's the only reason you should ever try this writing job."

Dennis Lehane, American author whose novels include MYSTIC RIVER, SHUTTER ISLAND and GONE BABY GONE

"Everything is a narrative in life. I learned that early on as a reporter at 'The Washington Post'."

Kara Swisher, American journalist

"Human beings order the world dialectically. Incapable of perceiving randomness, we insist in on in on imposing order on any observed phenomena, any new information that comes our way. We exist; we observed new stimuli; and both are altered in the process. It's thesis, antithesis, synthesis."

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

"We try to organise the world, which isn't organised the way our brains want to organise it. We tell stories about the people in our lives, we project ideas onto them. We project relationships with

people, we make our lives into stories. I don't think we can avoid doing that."

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director

"Despite the natural belittling of one's self, the doubts, the insecurities, we have to wake up to the realisation that we all write our own autobiography, we are the authors of our life story. Realising that, write a good story with your life and make sure to write yourself as the protagonist."

Yossi Ghinsberg, an Israeli adventurer, author, entrepreneur, humanitarian, and motivational speaker

"As you get older, you realise you're only the protagonist in your own story and a blip in someone else's life."

Jenny Zhang, American writer, poet, and essayist



"We all make choices, but in the end, our choices make us."

Ken Levine, American screenwriter, director, producer, and author

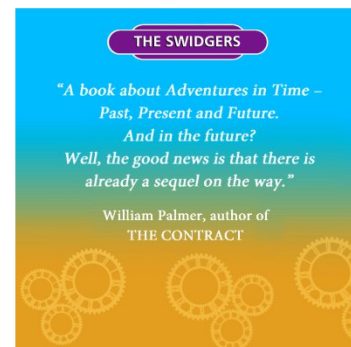
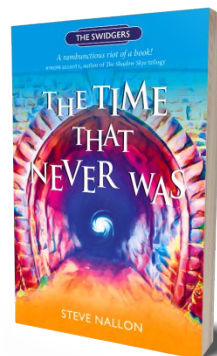
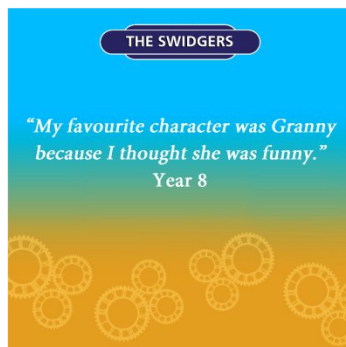
‘Making Up’ your Mind

There are moments as well in our lives where we make momentous decisions. We change jobs, we marry, we emigrate, we come out as trans or gay, we decide to become a writer. And when we do, we form in our heads a narrative for that action – meaning, we create the line of events that led up to and culminated in that momentous decision. Sometimes those connecting links go way

back. As we do this, we acknowledge in ourselves certain realisations that along the path of our journey brought us to where we are now. And here the question to ask is: Would all this possible if we didn't know and understand, if only subconsciously, the narrative structure of Story? Aren't we, as we 'make up' our minds, also making up a story where that decision is the climax of that narrative?

“Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance.”

C.S. Lewis, author of THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE



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The Psychology of the Storyteller

*“What if you slept
And what if
In your sleep
You dreamed
And what if
In your dream
You went to heaven
And there plucked a strange and beautiful flower
And what if
When you awoke
You had that flower in you hand
Ah, what then?”*
Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem *What If You Slept?*

The Psychology of the Storyteller

‘Loner’. ‘Emotionally wounded’. ‘Driven’. ‘Strange’. ‘Stubborn’. ‘Outsider’. ‘Egotist’. ‘Troubled childhood’. All of these words and phrases are associated with serial killers – and, oddly enough, writers. But here’s one thing that a writer must also have that the serial killer never possesses: empathy and a sense of human connection. Without the ability to imagine yourself in the minds of

others, the writer is nothing. In fact, for the writer, the capacity to feel and think what it is to be someone else is everything. But where does this come from? An emotionally damaged childhood? An early trauma that led to a more internal world, but also, perhaps paradoxically, a deeper sense of connection with 'otherness'?

One of the most honest and perceptive pieces of writing on the nature of what it takes to be a writer can be found in George Orwell's essay WHY I WRITE. Speaking of his early years he says this: "I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life." Later Orwell goes on to say, "I do not think one can assess a writer's motives without knowing something of his early development... before he ever begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape... I am not able, and do not want, completely to abandon the world view that I acquired in childhood."

Beyond the psychological there is sociological aspect of the storyteller in the idea of the outsider. The strolling player, the traveller, the immigrant. Then of course there's the sexual outsider. Each has their own sense of otherness that comes from being

beyond and observing from beyond. And without at least some sense of otherness it's difficult perhaps to have the mindset to ever become a writer.



It's not an easy life, either. In John Gardner's fascinating book *ON BECOMING A NOVELIST*, Gardner discusses the practical importance for the writer of drive and stubbornness, but he also talks about 'strangeness' and 'intelligence'. First, strangeness:

"There can be no great art, according to the poet Coleridge, without a certain strangeness. Most readers will recognise at once that he's right... One has to be just a little crazy to write a great novel. One must be capable of allowing the darkest, most ancient and shrewd parts of one's being to take over the work from time to time... Strangeness is the one quality in fiction that cannot be faked... The mystery is that even when one has experienced these moments, one finds, as mystics so often do, that after one has come out of them, one cannot say, or even clearly remember, what happened... All writing requires at least some measure of trancelike state: the writer must summon out of non-existence some character, some scene, and he must focus that imaginary scene in his mind until he sees it as vividly as, in another state, he would see the typewriter and cluttered desk in front of him, or last year's calendar on the wall... the

imaginary becomes real... All I myself know for sure, when I come out of one of these trance moments, is that I seem to have been taken over by some muse. Insofar as I am able to remember what happened, it seems to me that it was this: for a moment the real process of our dreams has been harnessed... one is lucky the lightning strikes, and the madness at the core of the fictional idea for a moment glows on the page.”

The ‘trancelike state’ is not, in principle, that different from Coleridge’s romantic notion of that ‘strange and beautiful flower’ which in a dream he brought back from the fields of heaven. As for ‘intelligence’ Gardner observes:

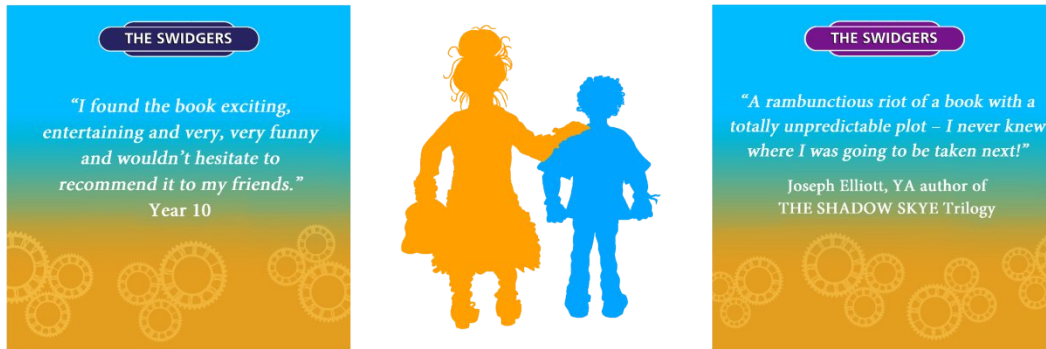
“Another indicator of the novelist’s talent is intelligence – a certain time kind of intelligence, not the mathematician’s or the philosopher’s but the storyteller’s – an intelligence no less subtle than the mathematician’s or the philosopher’s but not so easily recognised... The easiest way to talk about this special sort of intelligence is perhaps to describe what it does, what the sooner or later be equipped to do... The novelist develops an acute eye, sometimes bordering on the psychic, for human feelings and behaviour, tastes and habitats, pleasures, sufferings... The writer who works closely with detail – studying his characters’ most trivial gestures in the imagined scene to discover where the scene must go next – is the writer most likely to persuade and awe us... The point is, whether or not they show it at dinner parties, writers learn, by a necessity of their trade, to be the sharpest of observers.”

As for early emotional damage and trauma, Gardner says, “a psychological wound is helpful, if it can be kept in partial control...

some fatal childhood accident for which one feels responsible and can never fully forgive oneself; a sense that one never quite earned one's parents' love; shame about one's origins – belligerent defensive guilt about one's race or country upbringing or the physical handicaps of one's parents – or embarrassment about one's physical appearances: all these are promising signs. It may or may not be true that happy, well-adjusted children can become great novelists, but insofar as guilt and shame bend the soul inward they are likely, under the right conditions (neither too little discomfort nor too much), to serve the writers project." Many may think Gardner's phrase 'all these are promising signs' is an odd one to use, but those who write stories, at least of a certain kind, will understand the dry humour of his irony.

***"And when the woman that you wanted goes,
You can say to yourself, 'Well, I give what I give.'
But the women who won't wait for you knows
That, however you live,
There's a part of you always standing by,
Mapping out the sky,
Finishing a hat...
Starting on a hat..
Finishing a hat...
Look, I made a hat...
Where there never was a hat."***

From Stephen Sondheim's *Finishing the Hat*, a song about creative endeavour of the compulsive artist from the musical SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE



Some more thoughts on the role and nature of the storyteller and what it takes to be one...

"The theatre is a beautiful life but a harsh business. Just as the price of gold represents the thousands of unproductive work-hours spent seeking it, artistic fame and remuneration – though awarded to the individual – represent the society's depth to the many."

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

"Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind, is written large in his works."

Virginia Woolf, English writer

"I'm a very organised and rational and linear thinker and you have to stop all that to write a novel."

Hilary Mantel, author and novelist

"They who are most happy are they who have no story to tell."

Anthony Trollope, Victorian novelist

"I recognise myself to be an intensely naive person. Most novelists are, despite frequent pretensions to deep socio-political insight."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"I write plays about things that I can't resolve in my mind. I try to root things out."

Alan Bennett, English playwright

"The true young novelist has the stamina, patience, and single-mindedness of a draft horse."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"I don't really think that writers, even great writers, are prophets, or sages, or Messiah-like figures; writing is a lonely, sedentary occupation and a touch of megalomania can be comforting around five on a November afternoon when you haven't seen anybody all day."

Angela Carter, novelist

"I don't think most people realise – and there's no reason they should – the amount of demeaning garbage you have to take if you want a career in the arts. I mean, going off to med school is something you can say with your head high. Or being a banker or going into insurance or the family business – no problem. But the conversations I had with grown-ups after college... 'So you're done with school now, Bill.' 'That's right.' 'So what's next on the agenda?' Pause. Finally I would say it: 'I want to be a writer.' And then they would pause. 'A writer.' 'I'd like to try.' Third and final pause. And then one of two inevitable replies: either 'What are you going to do next?' or 'What are you really going to do?' That dread double litany... What are you going to do next?... What are you really going to do?... What are you going to do next?... What are you really going to do...?"

William Goldman, ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE

"Everything I've written is personal – it's the only way I know how to write."

Charlie Kaufman, screenwriter

“A few – a very few – writers seem to have an inborn awareness of the nature of human character. Most of us have to study and/or learn about it through experience.”

Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING

“It’s as difficult to become a professional writer as a professional athlete. It often depends on the ability to keep faith in yourself.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon this idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

“We cannot be all the writers all the time. We can only be who we are.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“Before we can talk about lore, skill, or practice, it may prove of use to discuss the most common occupational hazard of the writer – a bad mood. The indispensable element in craft is learning to live with the problem and the perils of the profession. They do weigh on one in a special fashion.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“You can’t sing the blues if you haven’t had the blues.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

“If nobody is looking for a story, and I have no reason to write a story, I would really much rather to do anything else because it’s no fun writing stories, particularly not for me. I just do it in order to sell them and make a couple of bucks.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“The very reason I write is so that I might not sleepwalk through my entire life.”

Zadie Smith, novelist

“A really good writer is an expert observer. Everything and everybody, whether routinely dull or exotically bizarre, is worthy of his attention. He will note and accumulate for the future use, odd or unusual names; he will also collect odd or unusual characters. But his greatest talent is his ability to scrutinise, without appearing to do so, all facets of human behaviour, no matter how mundane some might seem to be, for ordinary behaviour in one situation or environment may be totally eccentric in another.”

Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING

“Someone who has never tried fiction will hardly be quick to understand that in the study, a writer often does feel God-like. There one sits, ensconced in judgement on other people’s lives.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Drivenness is trouble for both the novelist and his friends; but no novelist, I think, can succeed without it. Along with the peasant in the novelist, there must be a man with a whip.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“I’ll tell you a secret. Old storytellers never die. They disappear into their own story.”

Vera Nazarian, Armenian-Russian (by ethnicity) American writer of fantasy and wonder fiction

“A reasonably dependable ego is crucial to a hardworking author, but an ego that is much more powerful than our literary needs is a superhighway straight into mediocrity. A good many best-selling authors can line-up for that one.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Self-confidence is the first requisite to great undertakings.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, critic, biographer, editor, lexicographer poet, playwright, essayist and oralist

“Artists don’t wonder, ‘What is it good for?’ They aren’t driven to ‘create art,’ or to ‘help people’ or to ‘make money’. They are driven to lessen the burden of the unbearable disparity between their conscious and unconscious minds, and so to achieve peace.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

“By the nature of his work it is important that one way or another the novelist learn to depend primarily on himself, not others, that he love without too much need and dependency, and look inward (or toward some private standard) for approval and support.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“It’s an accepted fact that all writers are crazy; even the normal ones are weird.”

William Goldman, ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE

“All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

“A person is a fool to become a writer. His only compensation is absolute freedom. He has no master except his own soul, and that, I am sure, is why he does it.”

Roald Dahl, writer and children’s author

“One of the cruellest remarks in the language is: Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach. The parallel must be: Those who meet experience, learn to live; those who don’t, write.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Writers would clearly be madmen if they weren’t so psychologically complicated (‘too complex,’ a famous psychiatrist once wrote, ‘to settle on any given madness’) – and some go mad anyway.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“If you’re trying a screenplay, you know it’s never going to be Bergman. If it’s a novel, well, what kind of a novelist can you hope to be when Dostoevski was there before you. And Dickens and Cervantes and all the other masters that led you to the prison of your desk. But if you’re a writer, that’s what you must do, and in order to accomplish anything at all, at the rock bottom of it all is your confidence. You tell yourself lies and you force them into belief: ‘Hey, you suckers, I’m going to do it this one time. I’m going to tell you things you never knew. I’ve – got – secrets!’”

William Goldman, ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE

“The good young writer, the potentially successful one, knows what he knows and will not budge – chiefly knows that the first quality of good storytelling is storytelling.... Stubbornness will prove useful, in later life as in college, in protecting the writer from those who give him bad advice.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



What writers and storytellers think of other writers and storytellers...

"The Harry Potter novels are just fun, pure story from beginning to end."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"We were put to Dickens as children but it never quite took. That unrelenting humanity soon had me cheesed off."

Alan Bennett

"Stephen King was a desperately clumsy and repetitive writer when he started, but best-seller book readers responded to his sincerity. That was present on every badly written page. The popularity of bad writing is analogous to the enjoyment of fast-food."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good."

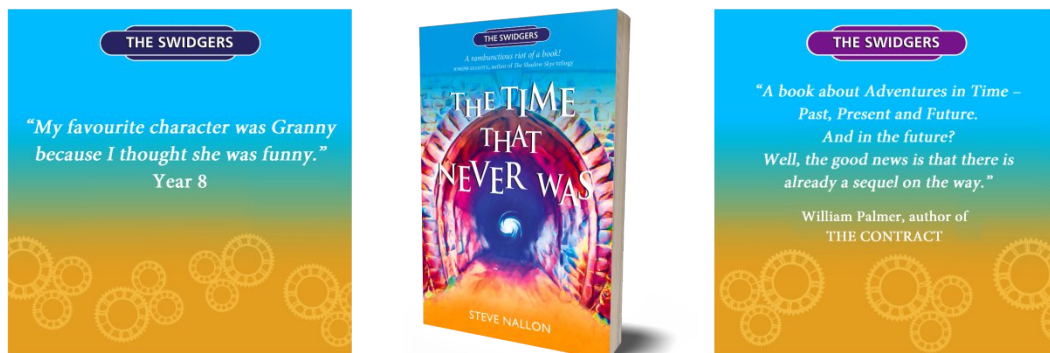
Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, poet, playwright, editor and lexicographer

“Now, with the bona fide Gospels in my hand, I thought, ‘Well, this may be the greatest story, but it is certainly being told abominably.’ Sayings popped out of the New Testament that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was poorly described. An ungainly prose pronged with golden nuggets. I thought, ‘There have to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I’m one of them.’”

Norman Mailer’s critique of The Bible in THE SPOOKY ART

“If one works really hard at doing a thing one considers important (telling a story extremely well), one is annoyed to see someone else doing it badly or, worse, fraudulently, while claiming to belong to the same high league.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



“It has been said more than once that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky divided the central terrain of the modern novel between them. Tolstoy’s concern – even in the final pessimism of THE KREUTZER SONATA – was with men-in-the-world, and indeed but the panorama of his books carries to us an image of a huge landscape peopled with figures who changed that landscape, whereas the bulk of Dostoevsky’s work could take place in ten closed rooms: It is not society but a series of individuals we I remember, each illuminating by the terror of exploring the mystery of themselves.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Even Aristotle, master of pure reason, said: ‘The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.’”

Bruno Bettelheim on Aristotle

“What chiefly astonishes us in the work of this highest class of novelists – Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Mann, Faulkner – is the writer’s gift for rendering the precise observations and feelings of a wide variety of characters, even entering the minds (in Tolstoy’s case) of animals. The beginning novelist who has the gift for inhabiting other lives has perhaps the best chance of success.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“I tend to write characters who are hyper-communicative. I really admire writers like David Mamet, Sam Shepard, and Harold Pinter, who are able to make absolute poetry out of characters who have difficulty communicating, who are hardly ever saying what they mean; it’s a fantastic thing to watch and a fantastic thing to listen to. It’s not something I’ve ever been able to do. My characters tend to use ten words when one would’ve sufficed. They say exactly what they mean in all different kinds of ways, and I try to make it fun.”

Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

“All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called HUCKELBERRY FINN.”

Ernest Hemmingway

“This is not writing, it’s typing.”

Truman Capote on Jack Kerouac

“PARADISE LOST is a book that, once put down, is very hard to pick up again.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson on John Milton’s PARADISE LOST

“Consider John Grisham’s breakout novel THE FIRM... using plainspun humour as a brilliant counterpart and never substituting cant for story, he sketches a world of Darwinian struggle where all the savages wear three-piece suits. And – here’s the good part – this is a world impossible not to believe.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING



“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

Helen Keller

Multipile Creators: Devising and Collaborting

If novel writing were a political system it would be a dictatorship. And as we’ve seen from looking at the psychology of the writer, its tyrannical rule would not necessarily be a benign one. But, as we know, there are other (and certainly better) political structures and, to keep the comparison going, other (and arguably better too) methods of creating stories. What we are talking about here is collaboration and devising, and these put us primarily in the world of theatre, cinema and video games.

The psychology of those who work in this, shall we say, ‘democratic’ environment is often vastly different from that of the obsessive scribbler with his candle and his papers in his garret, but

that doesn't mean such work is of lesser value. And, to that description of the lone writer you might add the words 'privileged', not only in the sense that it is normally a 'his' but also because the individual writer is usually presented as different or special or somehow uniquely capable. This is partly because of the gatekeepers of the literary world and partly too because of the literary cannon itself. Perhaps 'the novelist' and 'the playwright' do need to possess certain skills and have innate qualities and characteristics (not all of them, it should be said, necessarily that pleasant), but that needn't mean that the other creative ways of working, or indeed their results, should be devalued or excluded.

Some more thoughts on collaboration and working together...

"Some writers are strong on plot contrivance but weak on character development. Others assemble groups of exciting, sometimes profound characters but can't imagine what to do with them. Some find it impossible to write a single scene from scratch but are able to flesh out a script with dramatic skill when given a solid story skeleton containing an interesting plot and honest characters. Which, obviously, is why so many films carry multiple screenplay credits."

Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING

"I feel the theatre is the most unique one of all [the arts] for collaboration. I feel very fortunate to be in a field where I really do get to have long conversations with the visual artists, the actors,

the musicians. It's all art forms rolled into one and I feel very fortunate to be a part of it."

Susan Stroman, American theatre director, choreographer and film director

"Many designers, especially the busy ones, will skim scripts in search of their own particular areas. Lighting designers will look for such a phrases as 'Good morning' and 'Lovely sunny day.' Stage managers will scour the script for 'More tea?' and 'Let me take that heavy case from you.' Wardrobe are interested in 'Get those big muddy off, now.'"

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"I can talk endlessly about characters, or why someone did this or that, and what that dynamic and interaction is. I really love it, and I think that actors really respond positively to the fact that I like to talk about that stuff, because I'm not sure that all directors do."

Charlie Kaufman, film director and screenwriter

"Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than the one where they sprang up."

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr, American physician and poet

"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Isaac Newton, scientist

"I think Michael Caine is a perfectly good actor but it's obvious he's not going to be in one of my films."

Mike Leigh, film director

"No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it."

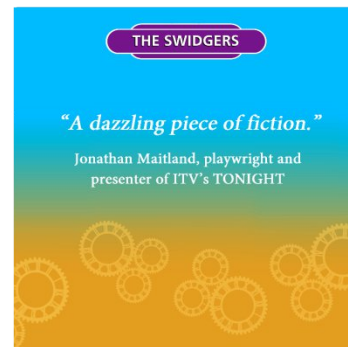
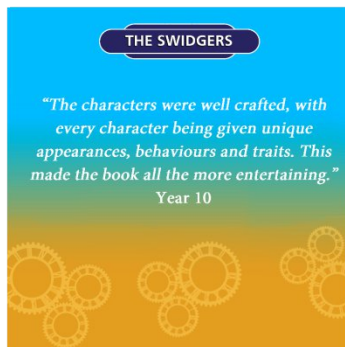
Halford E. Luccock, American Methodist minister and professor of homiletics at Yale Divinity School

“Casting is everything. It is my view that this process is the single most important action or series of actions that you will make on a production. Most things are reversible, but if you have the wrong actor, however good an actor they may be, in the wrong part, your job as director is reduced to one of a damage-limitation specialist.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Musicals are plays, but the last collaborator is your audience, so you’ve got to wait ‘til the last collaborator comes in before you can complete the collaboration.”

Stephen Sondheim, composer



thinking story

Where Do Stories Come From?

Some thoughts on the nature inspiration and the creative process...

“Surprisingly, considering this is an element that can never be taught, the question I am continually asked is, where do you get your ideas from? As if somewhere there is a pile of Extremely Good Ideas which I keep locked away in a cupboard ready for immediate use.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Reason cannot produce the poetry disorder does.”

Angela Carter, writer

“The question that all writers are asked is ‘Where do you get your ideas from?’, and usually there’s no real answer. Some people get ideas from newspapers. I do. I also get them just from gazing out of the window at nothing with a totally blank mind.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“People always ask me where I get my ideas. I always tell them that I think of them.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

“I am not interested in slice of life, what I want is a slice of the imagination.”

Carlos Fuentes, Mexican novelist and essayist

“In his imagination, [the writer] sees made-up people doing things – sees them clearly – and in the act of wondering what they will do next he sees what they will do next, and all this he writes down in the best, most accurate words he can find, understanding even as he writes that he may have to find better words later, and that a change in the words may mean a sharpening deepening of the vision, the fictive dream or vision becoming more and more lucid, until reality, by comparison, seems cold, tedious and dead.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“Ideas are all around me. If I wasn’t interested in them myself, I don’t think anyone else would be either.”

Jackie Collins, novelist

“Let’s get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn’t to find these ideas but to recognise them when they show up.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Over the years, I’ve found one rule. It is the only one I give on those occasions when I talk about writing. It’s a simple rule. If you tell yourself you are going to be at your desk tomorrow, you are by that declaration asking your unconscious to prepare the material...

Over and over again, I discover that my unconscious is going to disclose to me what it chooses, when it chooses. You can, to a limited degree, force it to respond, but that rarely occasions much happiness on either side. Sometimes I think you have to groom the unconscious after you’ve used it, swab it down, treat it like a prize

horse who's a finer animal than you... We live, you see, in an arm's length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced over and over again to believe in you..."

Norman Mailer, *THE SPOOKY ART*

"Ideas are never produced to order, they cannot be summoned. They simply arrive and present themselves. Or they don't. The knack is to recognise them when they do occur, for very often, they don't come already formed – behold, here I am, a full-length play compete with first-act curtain. On the contrary, they come as scruffy disjointed fragments, their potential barely visible. Nonetheless, you would do well too well to welcome them, for they are too precious to ignore, even the most unpromising of them."

Alan Ayckbourn in *THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING*

"I think that [ideas] come from programming your brain in advanced, by setting it a problem and then leaving your subconscious to mull over it without your supervision."

Jonathan Lynn, *COMEDY RULES*

"Inspiration is not altogether the flash of lightning out of a clear blue sky that it is assumed to be. Intense concentration on that problem may lead to its continuation by the unconscious."

Eugene Vale, *THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING* (1944)

"The dreaming part is angel-like: it is the writer's eternal, childlike spirit, the daydreaming being who exists (or seems to) outside time. But the part of the writer that handles the mechanics, typing or writing with pencil or pen choosing one word instead of another is human, fallible, vulnerable to anxiety and shame."

John Gardner, *ON BECOMING A NOVELIST* (1983)

"Initial inspiration – that essential starting point – comes in all shapes and sizes. Years ago I had the tiniest idea for a situation wherein a young would ask an older man whether he could marry

his daughter. The twist was that the older man didn't have a daughter... On the other hand, some years later, a rather heavier theme presented itself. It addressed the question I'd often asked over the years: what makes certain people in our society conclude they are fit to govern?"

Alan Ayckbourn in **THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING** talking about **REALTIVELY SPEAKING** And **WAY UPSTREAM**

"I believe stories are found things, like fossils in the ground... Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible."

Stephen King, **ON WRITING**

"I see myself in everything I write. All the good guys are me."

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

"To have ideas is paradise – to work them out is hell."

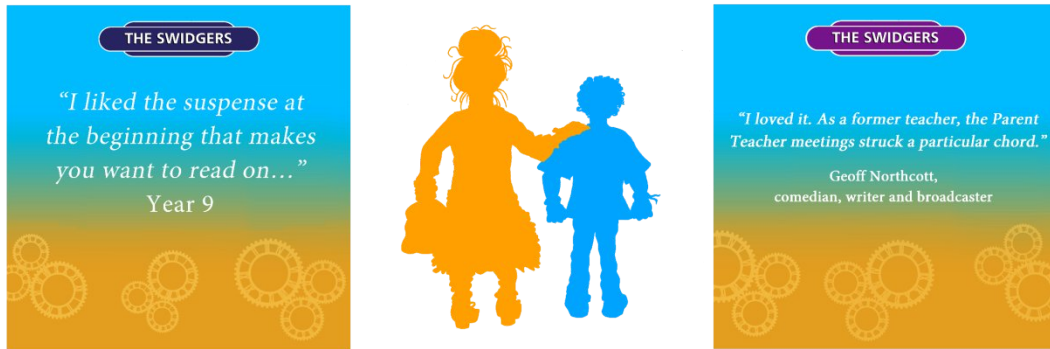
Maurice Maeterlinck, Nobel Prize Winner in Literature 1911

"In late 1985 and early 1986 I wrote MISERY (the title quite aptly described my state of mind), in which a writer is held prisoner and tortured by a psychotic nurse.... Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in MISERY. Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie's pet writer."

Stephen King, **ON WRITING**

"The best way to get good ideas is to work with someone who has them."

Jonathan Lynn, **COMEDY RULES**



Some thoughts on the importance of reading for a writer...

“Reading is the creative centre of a writer’s life.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Learning how to be a good reader is what makes you a writer.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist.

“The more you read, the better you’re going to become as a storyteller.”

Stan Lee, writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“Reading books – as opposed to the rush reading of emails, scrawling through social media or scanning online news content – was and is a very restful experience. My reading as a child was private – a solitary experience. I don’t remember talking about what I read, unless as part of English classes at school. It was good preparation for my future writing career. Perhaps the reason I’ve kept going over the decades as a writer is because I have an aptitude, and indeed hunger, for the interiority and introspectiveness writing requires, and this was cultivated from the moment I was able to read independently as a child.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

"Reading what you want, and having one book lead to the next, is the way I found my discipline."

Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

"Write. Rewrite. When not writing or rewriting, read. I know of no shortcuts."

Larry L. King, American playwright, journalist, and novelist, best remembered for his 1978 Tony Award-nominated play THE BEST LITTLE WHOREHOUSE IN TEXAS

"One of the best ways to learn how to write is read a lot of books. And not just brand new books. Old books as well. Books written long before you were born. Books written by authors who are now dead. Look at what they did well, and what they did wrong. Study how they develop their characters and pace their sentences."

Margaret Atwood, novelist

"The book to read is not the one that thinks for you but the one which makes you think."

Harper Lee, writer

"I just got out of the hospital. I was in a speed reading accident. I hit a book mark and flew across the room."

Steven Wright, comedian

"That's the thing about books. They let you travel without moving your feet."

Jhumpa Lahiri, American author of short stories, novels and essays

"A library is a good place to go when you feel unhappy, for there, in a book, you may find encouragement and comfort. A library is a good place to go when you feel bewildered or undecided, for there, in a book, you may have your question answered."

E.B. White, writer

"The world is a book, and those who don't travel only read one page."

Saint Augustine

"The greater the skill, the greater the gift that you give the artist and that the artist gives you. That's the incredibly unfashionable idea of reading. And yet when you practise reading, and you work at a text, it can only give you what you put into it... But the problem with readers, the idea we're given of reading is that the model of a reader is the person watching a film, or watching television. So the greatest principle is, 'I should sit here and I should be entertained.'"

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"I don't read in order to study the craft; I read because I like to read... Being swept away by a combination of a great story and great writing – of being flattened, in fact – is part of every writer's necessary formation. You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until that is being done to you."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"The young writer should read to see how effects are achieved, how things are done, sometimes reflecting on what he would have done in the same situation and on whether his way would have been better or worse, and why. He reads the way a young architect looks at a building, or a medical student watches an operation, both devotedly, hoping to learn from my master, and critically, alert for any possible mistake."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"Definition of a classic: a book everyone is assumed to have read and often thinks they have."

Alan Bennett

“The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading in order to write. A man will turn over half a library to make a book.”

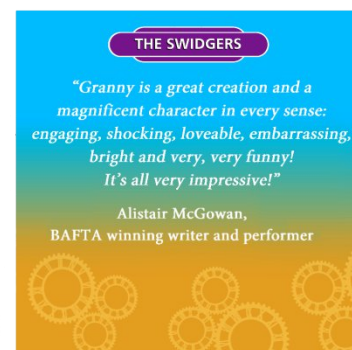
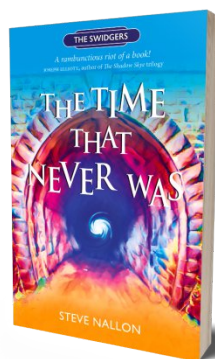
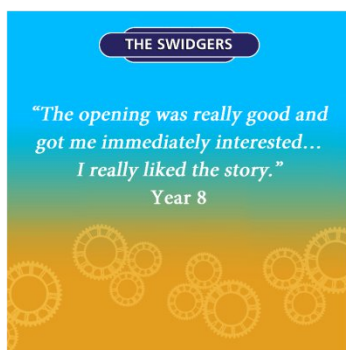
Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“If I had a nickel for every person who told me he/she wanted to become a writer but ‘didn’t have the time to read,’ I could buy myself a pretty good steak dinner. Can I be blunt on this subject? If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“I think of reading like a balanced diet; if your sentences are too baggy, too baroque, cut back on fatty Foster Wallace, say, and pick up Kafka as roughage.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist



Literary and Cultural Influences

“Literary influences are important, but we are carrying so much more within us that alchemizes into our creativity... I also wonder if my father’s broken English was an influence on my writing. Surely the voices we hear growing up influence our writing in some way. I have a natural propensity to lean towards the demotic, which can be more demanding than recreating standard speech. Capturing the essence of how we speak in anything other than Standard English, usually approximating to it rather than replicating it, and without resorting to caricature or becoming incomprehensible to the general reader, requires a sonic sensitivity that can be nurtured. It’s worth it because the demotic has democratic impulses whereby every community, every class, every region, every culture, every way of speaking is made hearable, valuable and worthy of inclusion.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“When I was twenty-one, I wanted to write like Kafka. But, unfortunately for me, I wrote like a script editor for THE SIMPSONS who’d briefly joined a religious cult and then discovered Foucault. Such is life.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; you also feel judged and held to account by them.”

Margaret Atwood, writer

“I was co-opted at an early age by Thomas Mann, who said that only the exhaustive is truly interesting. Trust Mann to make one a closet elitist.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“I credit the youth theatre with broadening my horizons in every way possible. It not only introduced me to the arts about also nurtured my individuality, empathy and the imagination within a collective, collegiate, non-competitive environment, as well as developing my self-esteem, self-conscious and self-knowledge.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“I’ve been drawn to dark stories in my writing. I blame my dad, honestly – he introduced me to horror films at a very young age, and they definitely rubbed off on me in terms of my fiction. It’s a rare day that I write something about the lighter side of life.”

Margaret Atwood, novelist

“All my books are made up of other books. They’re all deeply structured on other fiction, because I was a student in fiction and I didn’t have much actual living to draw on. I suspect a lot of other people’s novels are like that, too, though they might be slower to talk about it.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“I’ve noticed that many British writers claim Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Emily Dickenson or Henry James as literary influences, yet as a very young woman I felt I was writing against them. Reading was a pleasurable, immersive experience for me, but not when I had to read Woolf’s TO THE LIGHTHOUSE for school. I’m a fan now, but it took a long time to revisit her writing, such as ORLANDO or MRS DALLOWAY, because I’d had such a visceral reaction against her as a teenager.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

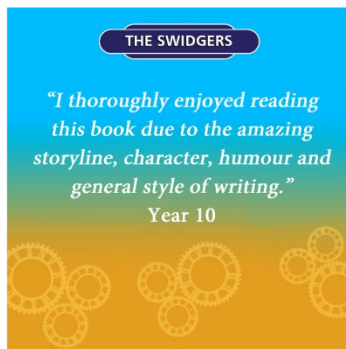
“Literary influence remains endlessly curious. I happened to pick up MOBY DICK. I hadn’t thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years, but as soon as I read the first page, I realised my later style was formed by Melville, shaped by his love of long, rolling sentences full of inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies

and exclamation points and dashes. Of course, to be as good as Melville – that’s another matter.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“English fiction was something I loved growing up, and it changed my life – it changed the trajectory of my life.”

Zadie Smith, writer



thinking story

The Human Processing of Story

“All readers come to fiction as willing accomplices to your lies. Such is the basic goodwill contract made the moment we pick up a work of fiction.”

Steve Almond, American short-story writer, essayist

The Willing Suspension of Disbelief

Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the phrase the “willing suspension of disbelief” in his BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA, published in 1817. The context and origin of the idea, however, comes from the discussion of the poetry he published with William Wordsworth in 1798. Coleridge basically suggested that if a writer could infuse a “human interest and a semblance of truth” into a tale of fantasy then the reader would suspend judgment as to the implausibility of that narrative. Coleridge was one of the beacons of the Romantic Age. Like many other of his time, he had an interest in the fantastical, such as witches and other supernatural beings, but he understood too that the Enlightenment had changed the way people thought about these things. Coleridge argued that for readers to accept a

fictional mystical landscape then he would need to employ certain techniques. To use modern terminology, the writer would have to find ways of allowing readers 'to buy into' his fantastical creations in a way that their reality would be believed even though they weren't 'real'. If he achieved this it would inspire "a willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." This is the full quote in context from chapter fourteen of BIOGRAPHIA

LITERARIA:

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and

feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves.

In this idea originated the plan of the LYRICAL BALLADS; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.

Note that the emphasis was for the writer to come up with the goods rather than the reader to do the work. But that was then, because now the concept has come to refer to the willingness of the audience to play along from the beginning of a fiction, be it a movie or play or a stage musical, that that fiction's unreality is somehow real, and so engage emotionally and intellectually with its made up characters and its made up world, thereby becoming open to its ideas and themes. In simple terms, 'What I'm watching is a pretence but while it lasts I will partake in that pretence by pretending it's real.'

One of the problems many professional theatre practitioners and other creative people have with the phrase “suspension of disbelief” is that it is negative in its thinking, for it’s essentially saying ‘I’m not going to not believe.’ And many think that the act of watching a play or even reading a book simply isn’t like that. It’s perhaps a shame then that the latter part of Coleridge’s phrase, “poetic faith”, wasn’t taken up, as this reflects more accurately the act of believing when you take your seat to watch a play or sit down to read a novel.

Some more thoughts on the willing suspension of disbelief...

“Faith in life is one thing and faith in literature is another.”
Gerald Weaver, American author and former lawyer and lobbyist

PLAYER: I had an actor once who was condemned to hang for stealing a sheep – or a lamb, I forget which – so I got permission to have him hanged in the middle of a play – had to change the plot a bit but I thought it would be effective, and you know – and you wouldn't believe it, he just wasn't convincing! It was impossible to suspend one's disbelief – and what with the audience jeering and throwing peanuts, the whole thing was a disaster! – he did nothing but cry all the time – right out of character – just stood there and cried... Never again.

From Tom Stoppard's ROSENCRANZT AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

“In the suspension of their disbelief – in suspending their reason, if you will – for a moment, the viewers were rewarded. They committed an act of faith, or of submission. And like those who rise

refreshed from prayers, their prayers were answered. For the purpose of the prayer was not, finally, to bring about intercession in the material world, but to lay down, for the time of the prayer, one's confusion and rage and sorrow at one's own powerlessness."

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

"What child is there that, coming to a play, and seeing 'Thebe's' written in large letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is Thebes?"

Sir Philip Sidney, IN DEFENCE OF POESY (1580)



"A book is a dream that you hold in your hands."

Neil Gaiman

Sub-conscious Workings and Story as Dream

David Mamet may be right in seeing psychological parallels between Story and Dream. Indeed it may be that Story in working its magic does help our unconscious mind in the solving of those questions which waking consciousness is unable to deal with. And in WRITING IN RESTAURANTS Mamet even casts the writer in the role of society's unconscious being. "The theatrical artist," says Mamet, "serves the same function in society that dreams do in our subconscious life – the subconscious life of the individual. We are

elected to supply the dreams of the body politic – and we are the dream makers of the society.”

David Mamet is also a disciple of Bruno Bettelheim and his seminal book on fairy tales. As Mamet observes, “Bruno Bettelheim, in *THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT*, writes that the fairytale (and, similarly, the Drama) has the capacity to calm, to incite, to assuage, and finally, to affect, because we listen to it non-judgementally – we identify subconsciously (non-critically) with the protagonist. We are allowed to do this, he tells us, because the protagonist and, indeed, the situations are uncharacterised aside from their most essential elements.” Mamet’s general point comes from his own preference for drama and characters that are paired down to a single central action. Mamet doesn’t like, for example, what he calls ‘inflected’ characterisation and his reasoning. As with Bettelheim, Mamet believes that the less specifically characterised the protagonist the more our unconscious mind will follow their journey as our own journey. In effect, in the sub-conscious, the protagonist’s action becomes *our* action – and *our* problem. As Mamet says in *WRITING IN RESTAURANTS*, “The essential task of the drama (as of the fairy tale) is to offer a solution to a problem which is non-susceptible to reason. To be effective, the drama must induce us to suspend our rational judgement, and to follow the internal logic of the piece, so that our pleasure (our ‘cure’) is the release at the end of the story. We enjoy the happiness of being a participant in the process of

solution, rather than the intellectual achievement of having observed the process of construction.”



All this is very interesting but ultimately this concept of Story and Story process is more speculation and metaphor than actual brain science. That said, Story clearly has the capacity to operate at a deeply psychological level because we’ve all experienced stories where that power took hold of us, moved us and perhaps even changed us in some way.

More thoughts on dreams and dreaming....

*“A dream is a wish your heart makes
When you’re fast asleep
In dreams you will lose your heartaches
Whatever you wish for, you keep.”*

A DREAM IS A WISH YOUR HEART MAKES, from Disney’s CINDERELLA, words and music by the songwriters Al Hoffman, Jerry Livingston and Mack David.

*"In a Wonderland they lie,
 Dreaming as the days go by,
 Dreaming as the summers die:
 Ever drifting down the stream –
 Lingerin in the golden gleam –
 Life, what is it but a dream?"*

Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) from the poem A BOAT
 BENEATH A SUMMMER SKY

*"We respond to a drama to that extent to which it corresponds to
 our dream life... The play is a quest for a solution. As in our dreams,
 the law of psychic economy operates. In dreams we do not seek
 answers which our conscious (rational) mind is capable of
 supplying, we seek answers to those questions which the conscious
 mind is incompetent to deal with... We cast ourselves (for in the
 writing and the production and the patronage of plays we cannot
 but identify with the protagonist) in dreams of wish fulfilment."*

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

*"Dream on, dream on, of bloody deeds and death:
 Fainting, despair; despairing, yield thy breath!"*

The Ghost of Buckingham to the sleeping Richard in Shakespeare's
 RICHARD III



*"We read five words on the first page of a really good novel and we
 begin to forget that we are reading printed words on a page; we
 begin to see images – a dog hunting through garbage cans, a plane
 circling above Alaskan mountains, an old lady furtively licking her*

napkin at a party. We slip into a dream, forgetting the room we're sitting in, forgetting it's lunchtime or time to go to work."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

Absorption and Immersion

When we watch a film or read a story our brains go into perceiving mode and what this means neurologically speaking is that our systems for acting and planning are switched off. So too our capacity to assess reality. In common parlance, we are 'transported into another world.' So much so that you will find any number of actors who'll tell you tales of audience members in the stalls shouting out warnings or advice or encouragement about what's happening in the story to those on the stage. And then the audience member suddenly recalls where they are and says, "Sorry, I got carried away!" '*I got carried away*' may not be the sort of phrase you'd read in a psychology journal but it sums up simply enough people's experience of believing in the reality of the fiction or pretence.

In relation to this, theatre practitioners talk about 'blood poisoning'. What they mean is that the effect of the play is so powerful the audience find themselves transfixed. It applies to all narrative arts but especially theatre because the theatre is a live medium where actors cannot be turned off.

Some more thoughts on absorption...

*“Making people believe the unbelievable is no trick; it’s work...
Belief and reader absorption come in the details: An overturned
tricycle in the gutter of an abandoned neighbourhood can stand for
everything.”*

Stephen King, author

*“I easily sink into mere absorption of what other minds have done,
and should like a whole life for that alone.”*

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans 1819 – 1880), English novelist, poet,
journalist, translator, and one of the leading writers of the
Victorian era.

*“Acting requires absorption, but not self-absorption and, in the
actor’s mind, the question must always be ‘Why am I doing this?’,
not ‘How am I doing it?’*

Maureen Lipman, actress

*“That’s the magic of art and the magic of theatre: it has the power
to transform an audience, an individual, or en masse, to transform
them and give them an epiphanal experience that changes their
life, opens their hearts and their minds and the way they think.”*

Brian Stokes Mitchell, American actor and singer



*‘You, ladies, you, whose gentle hearts do fear
The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,
May now perchance both quake and tremble here,
When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.*

***Then know that I, one Snug the joiner, am
A lion-fell, nor else no lion's dam;
For, if I should as lion come in strife
Into this place, 'twere pity on my life.'***
Snug in Shakespeare's MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

'Breaking the Spell'

But what of *Verfremdungseffekt* (the 'alienation effect' or the 'estrangement effect') as developed by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht ? Or those meta-forms or narrative such as pantomime which keep reminding you that you're in a theatre watching something that isn't real? Or the novels of David Lodge or John - which endlessly remind you they are novels? Well, what these suggest is that the process of talking in a story is an incredibly subtle one. In *Cinderella*, Buttons can make you laugh one minute by making fun of your granny's new hat but moments later you are crying because poor Cinderella gets her ticket to the ball torn up in front of her, or worse, made to do it herself by the Ugly Sisters. The in and out of partaking of the pretence is incredibly complex, with, seemingly, ever changing layers and levels involvement and participation.

"If Realism called it like it saw it, Meta-fiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it."

David Foster Wallace, American novelist, short story writer, essayist, and university professor of English and creative writing



“Stanislavski says there are two kinds of plays. There are plays that leave you, and you say to yourself, ‘By God, I just, I never, gosh, I want to, now I understand! What a masterpiece! Let’s get a cup of coffee,’ and by the time you get home, you can’t remember the name of the play, you can’t remember what the play was about. And there are plays – and books and songs and poems and dances – that are perhaps upsetting or intricate or unusual, that they leave you unsure, but you which you think about the next day, and perhaps for the week, and perhaps for the rest of your life. Because they aren’t clean, they aren’t neat, but there’s something in them that comes from the heart, and, so, goes to the heart.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

Later Processing and Repeated Viewings or Readings

The spell of a story does not end when the lights come on or the last page is turned or the curtain falls. Certain movies, books stay with you. You live with them, think about them, mull them over and in so doing stories stay with us and becomes part of us. In other words, we process the story involves assimilating it into ourselves.

Steven Spielberg often talks about what goes on in our heads after we’ve left the movie theatre. How we process the ideas and themes in our minds and hearts. And it’s better later than during. For what is the point of borrowing a book from a library or paying for an

expensive seat in a theatre if all the time you are reading or watching you sit consciously analysing and accessing. Leave your critic's hat at the door and enjoy the movie for what it is.

A note here about repeated viewing or readings. Of course we can enjoy stories again. Favourite moments and so on. But when you're a child repeated viewing are important because knowing the outcome of story already gives a child *safety* and allows them to explore all the characters and every aspect of the tale. Bruno Bettelheim suggests that with each viewing or reading a child subconsciously takes on and sees, as it were, the point of view every character, including the villain. Interestingly, as a child, Gregory Maguire, who wrote the novel WICKED: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST, was fascinated by the character of the Wicked Witch of the West because, Maguire observed, the witch is the only character in the story who doesn't lie. Wicked she may be, but she's honest. "One never learns how the witch became wicked, or whether that was the right choice for her – is it ever the right choice? Does the devil ever struggle to be good again, or if so is he not a devil?"

"We need narrative; it feeds us in a particular way, and deconstructing it completely before you've actually experienced it, I think it leaves us unfed."

Joss Whedon, American filmmaker, composer and comic book write, creator of BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER



“We the audience, with our personal prejudices and irrational preferences, are by our very own nature biased, invariably more concerned with how they’re saying it than with what it is they’re actually saying. We search for identifying characteristics, for clues which relate to us the performers. Even puppets we imbue with a sort of humanity. For unvarnished, untarnished facts, please read a book.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

The Practicalities

It’s always useful to remember in considering the processing of Story that it doesn’t happen in a vacuum. There can be distractions, plus there’s the fact that we all have our own personal way of thinking and of seeing the world. There is then no such thing as ‘The Reader’ or indeed ‘The Audience’. Both are made up of human beings, each has their own habits, quirks and peculiarities. And if that includes distracting hiccups, don’t expect any audience to be immersed or absorbed in Story. The brain can sometimes almost magically block out certain extraneous noise but a noisy and spasmodic contraction of the diaphragm and intercostal muscles is usually an exception.

“There must be something wrong with those people who think Audrey Hepburn doesn’t perspire, hiccup or sneeze, because they know that’s not true. In fact, I hiccup more than most.”

Audrey Hepburn, actress



Some thoughts on the experience of reading and the reasons why we read...

“Reading a book is like re-writing it for yourself. You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your own terms.”

Angela Carter, writer

“Do you know the feeling when you start reading a new book before the membrane of the last one has had time to close behind you? You leave the previous book with ideas and themes – characters even – caught in the fibres of your clothes, and when you open the new book, they are still with you.”

Diane Setterfield, author of THE THIRTEENTH TALE

“It is the nature of human perception to connect unrelated images into a story, because we need to make the world make sense.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

"I can't add. I don't understand basic science. Or anything else. But I can read anything. I've always been able to, and I've always liked to. Even if I didn't understand it, I liked to."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"When I want to read a novel, I write one."

Benjamin Disraeli, writer and politician

"Some readers read a book as if it were an instruction manual, expecting to understand everything first time, but of course when you write, you put into every sentence an overflow of meaning, and you create in every sentence as many resonances and double meanings and ambiguities as you can possibly pack in there, so that people can read it again and get something new each time."

Hilary Mantel, novelist

"When you find a writer who really is saying something to you, read everything that writer has written and you will get more education and depth of understanding out of that than reading a scrap here and a scrap there and elsewhere. Then go to people who influenced that writer, or those who were related to him, and your world builds together in an organic way that is really marvellous."

Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

"Nowadays, I know the true reason I read is to feel less alone, to make a connection with a consciousness other than my own."

Zadie Smith, writer

"When the reader hears strong echoes of his own life and beliefs, he or she is apt to become more invested in the story."

Stephen King, writer

"Some say life is the thing, but I prefer reading."

Ruth Rendell, A JUDGEMENT IN STONE

“What kind of knowledge do we hope to have derive from reading novels, which tell stories we know are not ‘true’? One traditional answer to that question is: knowledge of the human heart, or mind.

The novelist has an intimate access to the secret thoughts of characters denied to the historian, the biographer or even the psychoanalyst. The novel can, therefore, offer us more or less convincing models of how and why people act as they do. Post-modernism and post-structuralism have deconstructed but not demolished the Christian or liberal humanist ideas of the self on which this project is based – the unique, autonomous individual responsible for his or her own acts. We continue to value novels, especially novels in the classic realist tradition, for the light they throw on human motivation.”

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

“At heart, GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER is a polyphonic paean to black British womanhood and to non-binary people, in all our flawed complexity. If I had to choose just one of my books to give to my younger self to read, it would be this one. I think she’d get a lot from it.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“Book-buyers aren’t attracted, by and large, by the literary merits of a novel; book-buyers want a good story to take with them on the airplane, something that will first fascinate them, then pull them in and keep them turning the pages.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“Books that you carry to the fire, and hold readily in your hand, are most useful after all.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“Mr Hemingway says a lot of things I don’t understand’, Matilda said to her. ‘Especially about men and women. But I loved it all the same. The way he tells it I feel I am right there on the spot watching it all happen.’ ‘A fine writer will always make you feel that,’ Mrs Phelps said. ‘And don’t worry about the bits you can’t understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash around you, like music.’”

Roald Dahl, MATILDA

“The ability to read becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one’s life.”

Bruno Bettelheim, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY TALES

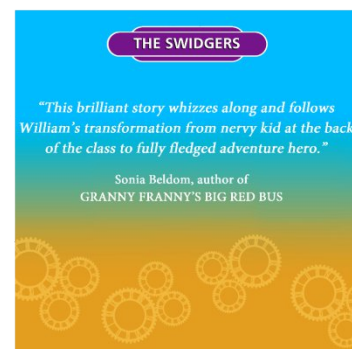
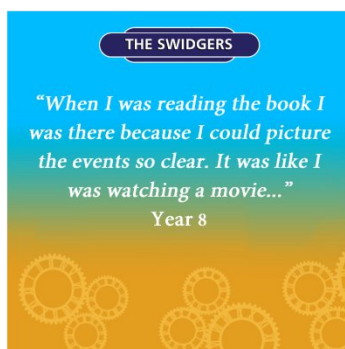
“Mega-best-seller readers want to be able to read and read and read – they do not want to ponder any truly unexpected revelations. Reality might lie out there, but it is not why they are reading.” Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“As a reader, I’m a lot more interested in what’s going to happen than what already did... I’m an A to Z man; serve me the appetiser first and give me desert if I eat my veggies.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“I like books that don’t give you an easy ride. I like the feeling of discomfort. The sense of being implicated.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist



Some thoughts on books and libraries...

"The library was the place I went to find out what there was to know. It was absolutely essential."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"There are a good many books, are there not, my boy?" said Mr. Brownlow, observing the curiosity with which Oliver surveyed the shelves that reached from the floor to the ceiling.

'A great number, sir,' replied Oliver. 'I never saw so many.'

'You shall read them, if you behave well,' said the old gentleman kindly; 'and you will like that, better than looking at the outsides,--that is, some cases; because there are books of which the backs and covers are by far the best parts.'"

Charles Dickens' OLIVER TWIST

"Closing a public library is child abuse, really, because it hinders child development."

Alan Bennett, English playwright

"Books are a uniquely portable magic."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"Every Saturday, from a very young age, I walked down to Woolwich Public Library and borrowed two or three books for free. Because I loved reading, my imagination developed through travelling into lives and environment beyond my own. I didn't register the whiteness of the characters in the books I read then, because I was too young to understand what I was missing. Today, I advocate for multi-cultural children's books because children need to see themselves reflected in books as a validation of themselves, to see they belong to stories and myths of their countries. As an adult, it was the absence of these stories that galvanised me to write my own."

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“Well-run libraries are filled with people because what a good library offers cannot be easily found elsewhere: an indoor public space in which you do not have to buy anything in order to stay.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“A book is simply the container of an idea-like a bottle; what is inside the book is what matters.”

Angela Carter, writer

“There will be books you read that are so goddamn amazing you might consider quitting, because there’s no way you could ever write anything that good. Resist this impulse, and get started on your writing anyway. Learn from the best, and see what happens.”

Margaret Atwood, novelist

“Books, like friends, should be few and well-chosen.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson

“‘What is the use of a book’, thought Alice, ‘without picture or conversation?’”

Lewis Carroll in ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

“No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“Books are not brands. Some people are very willing to see themselves as a brand, but you can’t be a certain type of writer to a certain type of person all the time. It will kill you.”

Zadie Smith, writer



Thoughts concerning audiences and the spectator...

“Neurologically, the experience of seeing something enacted feels as direct – and thus as powerful – as remembering something that’s happened to us.”

David Edgar, HOW PLAYS WORK

“The more determined an audience is to enjoy itself, the better. Monday nights can be wonderful. Saturday nights, though generally the fullest houses, are not usually the best. Saturday audiences tend to be people who just wanted to go out somewhere because it’s Saturday night; Monday night audiences tend to be people who specifically want to see your show.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“Theatre, when it is at its best, takes a lot of beating – the live experience and the shared collective experience of live storytelling is really special when it is good.”

Dan Stevens, actor

“The audience is continually busy, whether consciously or not, making personal comparisons with what it sees and hears on the stage.”

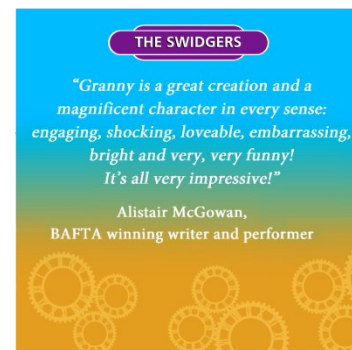
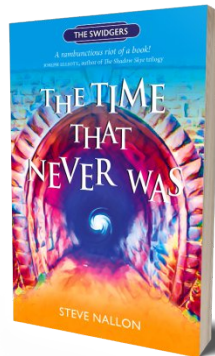
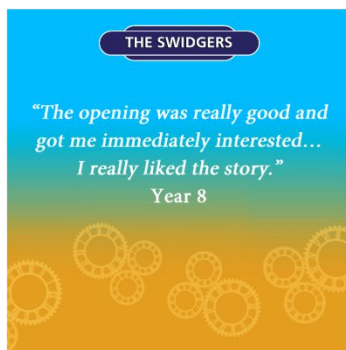
J.L. Styan in ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

“The most amazing thing for me is that every single person who sees a movie, not necessarily one of my movies, brings a whole set of unique experiences, but through careful manipulation and good storytelling, you can get everybody to clap at the same time, to hopefully laugh at the same time, and to be afraid at the same time.”

Steven Spielberg, film maker

“Sport, as I have discovered, fosters international hostility and leads the audience, no doubt from boredom, to assault and do grievous bodily harm while watching it. The fact that audiences at the National Theatre rarely break bottles over one another’s heads, and that Opera fans seldom knee one another in the groin during the long intervals at Covent Garden, convinces me that theatre is safer than sport.”

John Mortimer, barrister and writer



“Fortunately, our audiences are used to a kind of boredom in the theatre, and if the writer is skilful, he will flatter them into thinking: ‘Why, that’s us up there, and aren’t we - for all our little foibles - pretty nice guys and gals?’”

Gore Vidal, writer and essayist

“This film business, perhaps more so in America than in Europe, has always been about young sexuality. It’s not true of theatre, but in America, film audiences are young. It’s not an intellectual cinema in America.”

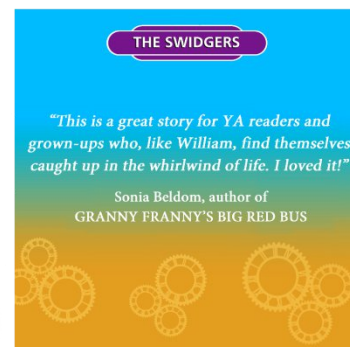
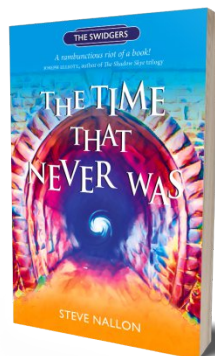
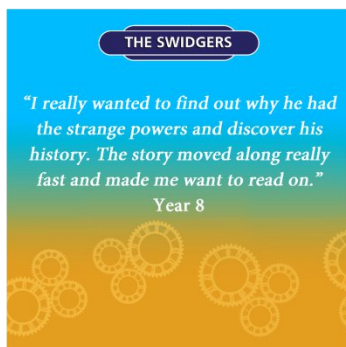
Jacqueline Bisset, British actress

“The theatre is an attack on mankind carried on by magic: to victimise an audience every night, to make them laugh and cry and suffer and miss their trains. Of course actors regard audiences as enemies, to be deceived, drugged, incarcerated, stupefied. This is partly because the audience is also a court against which there is no appeal.”

Iris Murdoch, novelist

“As the audience has pledged or loaned its attention, it is easy to interject the extraneous – an audience will accept it as essential until that point at which it has been proved otherwise (that point occurring after the end of the play, as people are on the way home – for which relief they may be counted on to forgive much).”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: Human Need and the Origins of Story

DOCTOR WHO: I'll be a story in your head. But that's OK. We're all stories, in the end. Just make it a good one, eh? Because it was, you know; it was the best.

From *The Big Bang* episode of DOCTOR WHO written by Steven Moffat

The Many Purposes of Story

At the end of the movie GODS AND MONSTERS, various characters watch James Whale's 1931 classic FRANKENSTEIN. It may be the same motion picture but as they take it in each viewer has a different reaction to it. The housekeeper finds in the story a simple moral message about right and wrong, a guy watching it in a bar sees it as a corny old movie but a good yarn. The protagonist, Clayton Boone (played by Brendan Fraser), who during the course of the story has been getting to know and understand the director James Whale, sees the tale as one about the outsider who can never fit in.

Who's right? Well, you could argue they all are. And in this sense the purpose of story could be said to be in the eye and heart

and mind of the watcher or reader. There is then never a single purpose for story, even in the same story.

Over the years, psychologists, critics, artists and even politicians have all put forward their way of seeing what a story is for and why it exists. They are varied and some overlap and others contradict, but all in their own way are valid. But before we even begin to ask the purpose of story, just let's remind ourselves that first and foremost human beings have a fundamental need for Story.

“Since prehistoric times, when the primitive hunter described his chase at the campfire, the profound human urge to participate in the experiences of others has continued to gather a crowd around the storyteller. The first man Knew only his own life and that of a few people in his clan, which were practically the same. Gradually this outlook became enlarged; people who lived different kinds of lives began to meet each other. Wanting information about one another, they began telling stories. By listening to the stranger’s tales, the time- and space- bound individual could enrich his own experience. A desire to live another life, or to reach beyond the limitations of his own, rose within him.”

Eugene Vale THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING



“If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.”

Margaret Mead

Story Origins - Anthropology

There are many theories as the origins of Story. One is what you might call the anthropological theory. Anthropology is the scientific study of humanity, particularly human behaviour, cultures and societies. And one area of study in ancient rituals. In *THE GOLDEN BOUGH* by James George Frazer, there are many descriptions of various ritual sacrifices, notably the sacrificial scapegoat. And attached to this action (or narrative) is the belief that by casting out the goat there will also be a casting out of sin and so the sacrifice of the goat will set things right. And you'll find this concept explored in many religions, particularly Christianity and the idea of sacrificial lamb. But it's there too in stories, both ancient and modern. Harry Potter, for example, lives so that he must die. As Snape says to Dumbledore, "You've kept him alive so that he can die at the proper moment. You've been raising him like a pig for slaughter!" And Anakin Skywalker is the 'Chosen One' who has been born to restore balance in the Force.

Another key point in the anthropological way of thinking about Story can be found in what you might call the 'staging posts' in human society. For example, there was a time in most human cultures when it gave up human sacrifice and replaced it with the sacrifice of animals. This gave us the story of Abraham and Isaac and, to some degree, Iphigenia at Aulis (Greek myths are often inconsistent and in some versions Iphigenia is replaced on the altar

by a deer and in others she herself is sacrificed). Another area of interest to anthropology are those rituals which connect the individual to society, for example, a rites of passage tale, where task must be undertaken before an individual is accepted into a group. These of course still exist today and young adult fiction often involves a rites of passage tale of some sort.



Then there is the transition of human society from wilderness to village, from village to town, from town to city and finally the transition of city to its dystopian opposite, the oppressive city. Here what stories do is concentrate on the transitional state. For example, the Western genre often set between the two stages of wilderness and village (THE SEARCHERS, SHANE, ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST). And related to this area of anthropology are the ideas of the 'Shame' culture and the 'Guilt' culture, and the social codes you live by. The shame culture is essentially external and concerns itself with physical capability, strength, ceremony, honour, symbols, remembrance and unspoken emotion. It's a world where 'A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do' otherwise he – and it usually is a he

– will forever live in shame. The guilt culture on the other hand is more concerned with accommodating others, tolerance, fairness, reliability and doing good – and if you don't do these things you will be consumed with guilt. Shame culture clearly belongs in the wilderness and guilt culture belongs to the town. If you want a very quick understanding of the two worlds just compare John Wayne movies to those of Jimmy Stewart.

The point then of the anthropological way of seeing Story is that Story like to mark or explore certain stages in human development. Hollywood's obsession with the Western is how American in a relatively short time went from wilderness to town.

More thoughts on anthropology...

“Anthropology demands the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder that which one would not have been able to guess.”

Margaret Mead, American cultural anthropologist, author and speaker

“I started out in anthropology, so to me how society works, how people put themselves together and make things work, has always been a big interest.”

George Lucas, film maker

“Studying anthropology, I developed a kind of holistic view of human existence, in which the dichotomies you listed are all necessary and vital aspects of life.”

Joan D. Vinge, American science fiction author



“Mythologies are in fact the public dreams that move and shape societies, and conversely one’s own dreams are the little myths of the private gods, anti-gods, and guardian powers that are moving and shaping oneself: revelations of the actual fears, desires, aims, and values by which one’s life is subliminally ordered.”

Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

Story Origins - Mythology

Another theory as to the origin of Story is in mythology.

Laurence Coupe in MYTH suggests that “myth is the language within which archaic humanity narrates its awareness of the discrepancy between sacred time and profane time, and in it projects their reconciliation.” In other words, humanity once had a sense of the divine or the cosmic or however you want to describe it, but this was lost and so Story helps us to reconnect to it. And belief in the divine may not necessarily be literal. As Joseph Campbell said, “God’s big problem in He forgot he was a metaphor”. Coupe’s other point about myth or *mythos* is that it advances thinking: “*Mythos* proceeds and informs *logos*. Without Homer there can be no Plato. The profane imagination expresses itself initially through the mythic narrative; the principles of philosophy, far from being eternal, are the result of a long process of reflection on, reaction to and rewriting of that initial imaginative expression.” Imagination not reason or rationalism

is the key to myth but reflection on myth – the later processing – is what gives birth to intellectual and philosophical thought.

Laurence Coupe in MYTH then goes on to explore what he considers modern mythological stories such as *Frankenstein* – a man-machine creation myth – and allegory, which he calls “domesticated myth.”

“The first function of mythology is showing everything as a metaphor to transcendence.”

Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES



“In THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT, Bruno Bettelheim says of fairy tales the same thing Alfred Hitchcock said about thrillers: that the less the Hero of the play is inflected, identified, and characterised, the more we will endow him with our own internal meaning – the more we will identify with him – which is to say the more we will be assured that we are that Hero.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

Story Origins – Psychology

Then there is the psychological theory for the origin of Story. Here we are in the world of Sigmund Freud and Bruno Bettelheim where the idea of Story and its purpose is to work out those problems which the conscious mind is unable or unwilling to deal

with. This is for both Freud and Bettelheim is particularly the case with the conflicts with the Eternal Triangle, meaning Father-Mother-Child. If in doubt as to these claims for Story perhaps just check which Disney films have proved the most popular and enduring across time...

“What cannot be borne in reality, becomes a source of pleasure when it is transposed into the visual and somatic fiction of the dramatic spectacle.”

Claude Calame, CRAFT OF POETIC SPEECH IN ANCIENT GREECE



***THE DOCTOR: He's waking because it's his time to wake. And feed.
On you, apparently. On your story.***

CLARA: She didn't say stories, she said souls!

***THE DOCTOR: Same thing. The soul's made of stories, not atoms.
Everything that ever happened to us – people we loved, people we
lost... people we found again against all the odds – he threatens to
wake, they offer him a pure soul.***

DOCTOR WHO, *The Rings of Akhaten* by Neil Cross

The Human Need for Stories

Stories are an essential part of our human survival kit. When we're children the need for Story is almost like an unquenchable thirst. And those tales we long to hear, watch or read come in many

forms – bedtime stories, repeat viewings of THE WIZARD OF OZ, Auntie Marjory’s yarn about the sparrow who took the marmalade rind, the books of Eve Garnett or funny songs that tell a story such as ERNIE by Benny Hill. As we grow up, the joy of Story is everywhere. And it needs to be because, well, we need it.



THE PRINCESS BRIDE, INTO THE WOODS and THE NEVERENDING STORY each explores the human need for Story. All in their own ways are fantasies, as is DOCTOR WHO, which has often explored the very nature of what a story is and what it is for. So when in *The Rings of Akhaten* Doctor Who says that the soul is made of stories and they are everything that has ever happened to us, he is expressing a belief in a truth shared by people such as Joseph Campbell, Bruno Bettelheim and Carl Jung. In this sense, the Doctor might also have added that Story is ultimately everything that has ever happened to anyone, as Story is in the end and the beginning a rich collective of a shared understandings and experiences. That’s what human beings are, even when we disappear into the night. As

the Doctor says to sleeping child Amelia Pond, “When you wake up, you’ll have a mum and dad, and you won’t even remember me. Well, you’ll remember me a little. I’ll be a story in your head. But that’s OK: we’re all stories, in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?”



Some more thoughts on our human need for stories...

“Inside each of us is a natural-born storyteller, waiting to be released.”

Robin Moore, American author

“You’re never going to kill storytelling, because it’s built into the human plan we come with.”

Margaret Atwood, Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, teacher and environmental activist

“We are all born as storytellers. Our inner voice tells the first story we ever hear.”

Kamand Kojouri, author

“It’s not just work, it’s your life. And it’s a human need to be told stories. The more we’re governed by idiots and have no control over our destinies, the more we need to tell stories to each other about who we are, why we are, where we come from, and what might be possible. Or, what’s impossible? What’s a fantasy?”

Alan Rickman, actor

“We are narrative creatures, and we need narrative nourishment – narrative catechisms.”

D. Wilson, DEATH BY LIVING: LIFE IS MEANT TO BE SPENT

“People need a narrative, and if there isn’t one on offer, they make one up.”

Jean Hanff Korelitz,

American novelist, playwright, theater producer and essayist

“If a nation loses its storytellers, it loses its childhood.”

Peter Handke, Austrian novelist, playwright, translator, poet, film director, and screenwriter

“Life isn’t a support system for art. It’s the other way round.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“The child, so much more insecure than an adult, needs assurance that his need to engage in fantasy, or his inability to stop doing so, is not a deficiency.”

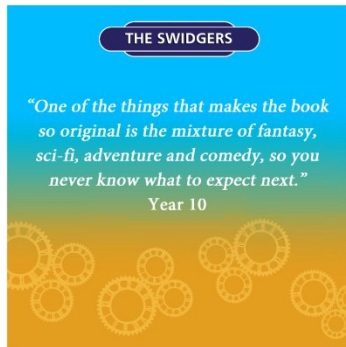
Bruno Bettelheim, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY TALES

“We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.”

Jonathan Gottschall, THE STORYTELLING ANIMAL

“Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution – more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to.”

Lisa Cron, WIRED FOR STORY



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: Empathy, Well-Being and Understanding Another's Truth

"If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives."

Bruno Bettelheim, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY TALES

'Life? What's it all about, eh?'

There's the famous story, almost certainly apocryphal, of the London taxi driver who tells the tale of when one of his fares was a famous British philosopher. "Ere," he would say, "I had that Bertrand Russell in the back of my cab once. I said to him 'Bert,' I said 'Bert – Life? What's it all about, then, eh?'" And I'll tell you something – he didn't know!"

So what *is* life all about? Well, if one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century can't tell you, perhaps Story can. Or at least try.

Some more thoughts on the purpose of Story...

"I discovered as a student: (1) every aspect of the production should reflect the idea of the play; (2) the purpose of the play is to bring to the stage the life of the soul."

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

"I'm writing my story so that others might see fragments of themselves."

Lena Waithe

"It is only through fiction that facts can be instructive or even intelligible."

George Bernard Shaw, playwright and essayist

"In a world of lies and liars, an honest work of art is always an act of social responsibility."

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

"Writing isn't about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end, it's about enriching the lives of those will read your book your work, and enriching your own life, as well."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact."

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

"His main principles were indeed as follows: everything it is possible to imagine can also exist."

Angela Carter, novelist

“Life is not simple, the truth is not simple, true art is not simple. True art is as deep and convoluted and various as the minds and souls of the human beings who create it.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

“It’s the role of narrative to bridge the gap between philosophy as abstract theory, ideas in the ether, and life as lived on the ground.”

Jacob M. Held

“A fine work of art – music, dance, painting, story – has the power to silence the chatter in the mind and lift us to another place.”

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

“Years ago, I wrote, ‘Experience, when it cannot be communicated to another, must wither within and be worst than lost.’ I often ponder that remark.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“To translate knowledge and information into experience: that seems to be the function of literature and art.”

Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

“The job of fiction is to find the truth inside the story’s web of lies, not to commit intellectual dishonesty in the hunt for the buck. Also, brothers and sisters, it doesn’t work.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

“A writer’s duty is to register what it is like for him or her to be in the world.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

***“When we want mood experiences, we go to concerts or museums.
When we want meaningful emotional experience, we go to the
storyteller.”***

**Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE
PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING**



“Identification with the protagonist makes catharsis possible... The spectator lives through events that would take years in real life. Primarily, he performs – together with the actor – intentions that he is prevented from executing in real life. Witnessing the motion picture, he has the chance to act out these deeds, as Walter Mitty did in his daydreams. Thereby he gains relief in a dimension beyond the obstructions of reality... The spectator would like to warn the actor; he would prevent him from going there; he would like to tell him the information which the actor lacks... The things done to the actor with whom we are indentified are things done to us. We experience fear and hope, love and hate, happiness and misery, as if we were going through the same things as the actor... It is not even necessary to ask, ‘How would I feel in such and such a situation,’ in order to follow the actors’ emotions, because we are actually in his situation. Through empathy we became part of the story; we partake personally in the struggle. Unconsciously, we may feel: ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

To Walk in Another’s Shoes

‘Empathy’ – noun: ‘the ability to understand and share the feelings of others.’ From *Em-pathos*, meaning ‘in-feeling with’.

What we're talking about here is the capacity to relate to another person's experience, be it pain or sadness, as if it were almost one's own. And what better way of doing that than through Story – learning to see the world from another's perspective, yet perhaps all the time unconsciously making comparisons with one's own life and experience, for, as Eugene Vale argues, "continuous comparison is an unconscious function of identification." Sympathy (*sun-pathos*, 'with feeling') is similar, of course, but 'sharing with', as sympathy means, lacks the unique nature of connection that is the key to empathy. An extreme form of sympathy is of course pity, which is about as far away from empathy as you can get.

Actors and writers are by nature incorrigible empathisers. It's how their brains work. And the physical nature of brains, with all those neurological interconnections, is an important point to raise here in that a brain lacking certain essential connections makes empathy impossible. The psychopath, for example, is usually born with such a brain and that lack of empathy is what makes him or her capable of such horrendous acts. And rarely if ever is such a brain fixable. However, for others, where a bad life experience has severed those neurological connections which make empathy possible, connections can be re-established through new and more positive life experiences. Both scientists and psychologists understand this principle and that's why many young offenders are now being sent to drama workshops rather than being given community service. Drama

workshops are about working together in a nurturing and non-competitive environment to create a shared experience. Of course, some young offenders may still see this as a punishment but it's possible too that through the act of performing/pretend/acting, their empathetic neurological links may well be going through a process of reconnection.



Some more thoughts on empathy in stories and in life...

"Theatre is like a gym for empathy. It's where we can go to build up the muscles of compassion, to practice listening and understanding and engaging with people that are not just like ourselves. We practice sitting down, paying attention and learning from other people's actions. We practice caring."

Bill English, San FRANCISCO: Playhouse

"If empathy is about entering the mind of a fictional character, then it helps if that mind contains feelings similar to our own... Our favourite characters are the ones who, at some silent level, embody what we all want for ourselves: the good, the bad and the ugly too."

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

“If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive.”

Brené Brown

“I like books that expose me to people unlike me and books that do battle against caricature or simplification. That, to me, is the heroic in fiction.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“On a bad day you also don’t need a lot of advice. You just need a little empathy and affirmation. You need to feel once again that other people have confidence in you.”

Anne Lamott

“When I was writing LAURA, I recall rocking myself on the floor as I tried to imagine what it was like for my slave ancestors in the Brazil. When my characters suffered, I suffered with them. When a character I was attached to died, I cried. I felt their fears and I felt their joy.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“It’s the recognition that other people’s problems, their pain and frustrations, are every bit as real as our own – often far worse. In recognising this fact and trying to offer some assistance, we open our hearts and greatly enhance our sense of gratitude.”

Richard Carlson

“Whether you know it or not, your desire to write comes from the urge to not just be ‘creative’, it’s a need (one every human being on earth has) to help others. A well-told Story is a gift to the reader/listener/viewer because it teaches them how to confront their own discomforts.”

Shawn Coyne, THE STORY GRID

“The main question is not ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ “

Henri J. M. Nouwen, THE WOUNDED HEALER

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

“Yup, I know how that feels.”

Eeyore in A. A. Milne’s WINNIE THE POOH

“O, I have suffered with those that I saw suffer.”

Miranda in THE TEMPEST by William Shakespeare



“Writing our stories helps us process emotions. Getting thoughts and feelings down on paper is an effective way of stopping those thoughts circling. When we are struggling to manage our emotions, we can become overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness. Writing can release those feelings and bring clarity. It’s a creative outlet that is healing. I have seen this in my own life and in the workshops I’ve run for refugees and people affected by cancer.”

Clare Stevens, author and creative writing tutor

Sharing Our Story and Writing for Well-Being

There is another key purpose to Story not touched on so far. It has nothing to do with the creation of popular fiction or the wring of

commercial theatre, and that is – telling our Story at the most personal level as a way to well-being. What we're talking about here can involve sharing the tale of our life in a professional therapy session as well as writing as a form of personal healing. Neither is likely to lead to that Story being published or turned into a blockbuster movie, but that's not the point. The reason we, you, I, tell our Story in a therapy setting is to get it heard and listened to. Sharing your story, how you see yourself and the world, gives you empowerment. And that's not all. For you may surprise yourself in what you say or write. As William observes in one of the early chapters of *THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS*, the first in *THE SWIDGERS*, it's "better to tell my tale as it happened and not as it came to be understood. And I do this as much for myself as for you. For isn't it sometimes in the very telling of our story that we come to understand it?"

And that's a key point. Our personal stories reveal things to us about ourselves as we share or write them. Strictly speaking then this aspect of storytelling has nothing to do with how a story works or how it is structured, but, as it is a very human part of the Purpose of Story, it is worth mentioning.

Some more thoughts on the power of Story to heal...

“When you stand and share your story in an empowering way, your story will heal you and your story will heal somebody else.”

Iyanla Vanzant, American inspirational speaker, lawyer, spiritual teacher, and author

“Think about the word destroy. Do you know what it is? De-story. Destroy. Destory. You see. And restore. That's re-story. Do you know that only two things have been proven to help survivors of the Holocaust? Massage is one. Telling their story is another. Being touched and touching. Telling your story is touching. It sets you free.”

Francesca Lia Block, author

“People often go to a group writing session in a therapy context because they love – or want to have a go at – writing, not because they want therapy. Sometimes they write to escape their circumstances but at others, they can find themselves sharing their experience through their writing. Where this has been difficult to talk about, writing can enable expression of difficult and complex emotions and situations. Going on to share this writing with a group of people who relate to it, has the added benefit of creating a shared experience; one where both the writer and listener can feel they are not alone in what they have gone through. For some people, a talent for writing is also found or rediscovered, which can lead to published work or even a new career.”

Jo Weston, writer and poet



“Pilate saith unto him, ‘What is truth’”
John 18:38, King James Version (1611)

Understanding Another’s Truth

Not all stories are true, but all stories carry a Truth. It may not be a pleasant Truth, or one we would agree with or even one the majority of people would agree with. But it is its own Truth. And if you disagree with it, fight and even destroy it with your own Story and its more powerful Truth.

But why tell our Truth in the first place? Well, we believe that we have something to say. That something is worth saying. And we express it in and with Story. For don’t we all wish to share our Truth – our way of seeing the world – with others? And this is especially the case for those voices that are often unheard and unspoken. They should be listened to, for if you’re not interested in someone else’s way of seeing things, someone else’s Truth, then why read or watch any tale?

Of course Story should never be about the message and be warned too that self-expression isn’t Truth. It’s ego, it’s vanity, it’s solipsism disguised as a truth. For Truth isn’t about ‘Me! Me! Me!’, it’s really about ‘Us, Us and Us’.

Some thoughts on the nature of truth in Story, plus an observation or two on self-expression...

“Tell the truth through whichever veil comes to hand – but tell it.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“I'm trying to tell a story and do it truthfully... I'm interested in trying to explore what I think is the truth at a given time in my life, and part of the process of being honest is - in my mind - talking about the idea that you're watching a movie. You're sitting here watching a movie. And I like that. It appeals to me intellectually, and also in a way I can't even explain.”

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director

“What happens is fact, not truth. Truth is what we think about what happens.”

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

“It is exhilarating, tremendous fun when audiences laugh at what you thought up, and gratifying because their laughter indicates that, at that moment at least, they share or understand your point of view.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“Art gives life to what history killed. Art gives voice to what history denied, silenced, or persecuted. Art brings truth to the lies of history.”

Carlos Fuentes, Mexican novelist and essayist

“When I was young I believed that ‘non-fiction’ meant ‘true.’ But you read a history written in, say, 1920 and a history of the same events written in 1995 and they’re very different. There may not be

one Truth – there may be several truths – but saying that is not to say that reality doesn't exist."

Margaret Atwood

"As a writer, or as a filmmaker, you have to present yourself, and part of what yourself is is what you're interested in, or what you think is funny, or what you think is sad, or what you think is horrible."

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director

"Novels are not about expressing yourself, they're about something beautiful, funny, clever and organic. Self-expression? Go and ring a bell in a yard if you want to express yourself."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"As I got dressed that morning, I had no answers, but there'd come a day when I would. Forgive me, I jump ahead again. Better to tell my tale as it happened and not as it came to be understood. And I do this as much for myself as for you. For isn't it sometimes in the very telling of our story that we come to understand it?"

William in THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS

"The worst thing that can be said about a literary work is that it can reduce itself all too easily to self-expression that is all too close to psychic excretion."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"All stories have a curious and even dangerous power. They are manifestations of truth – yours and mine. And truth is all at once the most wonderful yet terrifying thing in the world, which makes it nearly impossible to handle. It is such a great responsibility that it's best not to tell a story at all unless you know you can do it right. You must be very careful, or without knowing it you can change the world."

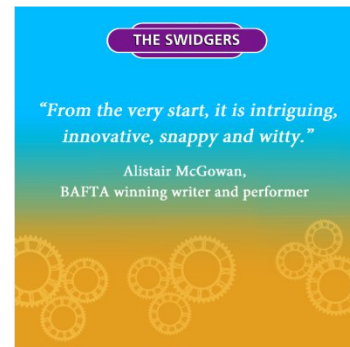
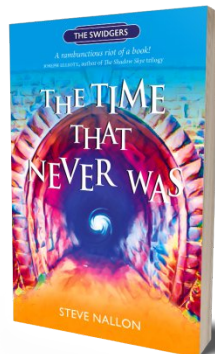
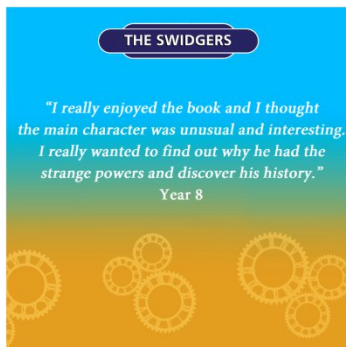
Vera Nazarian

“All stories ‘mean’ things – sometimes quite odd and surprising things – the temptation to talk about the meaning rather than the story may be nearly irresistible.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“In the end, your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth and your solution – is not my solution.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: The Story Funfair, Sensation and Escapism

“Children jump around at the end of the day, to expend the last of that day’s energy. The adult equivalent, when the sun goes down, is to create or witness drama – which is to say, to order the universe into a comprehensible form.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

The Story Funfair

Story is the playground of mind. And sometimes that playground has no need for a moral message or a truth or a purpose other than being fun, diverting and entertaining. Which, in a way, is its purpose. And so, after a long day at work, what’s wrong with a pleasure trip to the Story Funfair? A Gerard Butler movie – that’s your rollercoaster ride. The Mills and Boon novel – your trip in the Love Tunnel. The horror picture – your Ghost Train thrills. *Tom and Jerry* and *Bugs Bunny* cartoons – your amusement arcade. The Andrew Lloyd Webber stage show – your musical Carousel. And those *Carry On* classics – they offer you the absurdity of the House of Mirrors and the laughter that ensues. So eat your candy floss, enjoy

your popcorn and your hotdog, hardly nourishing perhaps, but when you return home, you will do so, if not wiser, at least exhilarated and smiling.

Some more thoughts on stories as entertainment...

“Some people like just sitting down and being taken for a ride. That’s a beautiful thing that fiction can do. But it’s not the only thing.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“In a lot of movies, especially big studio ones, they're not constructed in any other way than to get people to like them and then tell their friends. It's a product.”

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director

“I’m just somebody who tries to write things that entertain people. And if I can do it in a way that makes them prefer to emulate the good guy than the bad guy, I’m happy.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer



Some thoughts on ‘popcorn movies’, the idea of pure commercial entertainment (and even popcorn itself)...

“I understand what it’s like to work all week and on Friday night just want to go and leave your brain at the door, buy some popcorn and be thrilled by something.”

Don Cheadle

“Any role that’s proactive is a great role, and action roles are by their very nature proactive. You get to do stuff. I hate sitting in the corner – I’d much prefer an action role in a popcorn movie rather than pining in a movie not doing anything.”

Helen Mirren, actress

“I didn’t have any ambition to produce big mainstream popcorn movies.”

Jodie Foster, film director

“Humans love sex, we need sex, it’s how we connect, it reminds us we’re alive, it’s the third most basic human need, after food and good movie popcorn.”

Billy Crystal, actor and producer

“I almost choke on my popcorn when I hear film stars, who walk on red carpets as much as the rest of us do on zebra crossings, criticising youngsters who crave fame.”

Julie Burchill, writer and essayist

“When I was a kid, we’d go to the movies, and my parents would reach out to everyone around us in the theatre, most of whom could barely afford the movie ticket. They’d hand out popcorn and Milk Duds, strike up conversations with them, lend shoulders to cry on, learn their names, and smile at everyone.”

Daniel Lubetzky

“I love to go to a movie, get a Diet Coke and a barrel of popcorn, and sit there with my kids and watch a film.”

William Shatner, actor

“You can make a movie about anything, as long as it has a hook to hang the advertising on.”

Roger Corman, film maker

“Theatrical is fantastic. I don’t think anything will ever replace the big dark room, the screen and the popcorn. You can kind of do it in your home if you have a nice screen, but it’s not the same thing.”

Mel Gibson, actor

“THE GOLDEN COMPASS became a bad experience because the studio didn’t have faith in the strength of the ideas of the novel, which is ironic because it’s one of the greatest fantasy novels ever written, if not the greatest, and they took the religion out of it and tried to turn it into a popcorn movie.

Chris Weitz

“Usually I’ll just eat popcorn, but if theatres would sell me goat cheese and garlic with Triscuit crackers, I’d give them all my money.”

Cecily Strong

“A great trick for frying is to put a popcorn kernel in the oil, and when it pops, you’re ready to fry.”

Zac Posen



PROFESSOR HENRY JARROD: I'm rebuilding my exhibition from the ground up. I'm going to give the people what they want. Sensation. Horror. Shock. Send them out in the streets to tell their friends how wonderful it is to be scared to death.

From HOUSE OF WAX (1953), directed by André De Toth, screenplay by Crane Wilbur from a story by Charles Belden

Sensation

Forget about intellectual curiosity. Forget understanding ourselves and others. Forget as well truth, politics, empathy, that unfathomable stuff about Aristotelian *catharsis* and the rest, for, you see, some stories simply exist to produce sheer sensation. Horror is an obvious example. Terror. Shock. Revulsion. Repulsion. Nothing intellectual to see here, but such stories make us feel *alive*. That's the point, ironically, of horror tales of the dead – with their adrenalin rush remind us we are living.



And the same can be said for erotic yarns too. Except they makes us feel alive in a very different way. Erotica, which in the movies is simply pornography with better lighting, aims essentially at

arousal. Like horror tales, erotica is only truly successful if it produces sensation. Stirrings below.

But be warned. Over exposure to horror and erotica can result in the very opposite of feeling. For too much pure sensation can, ironically, result in de-sensitivity, creating a strange empty numbness. An unfeeling deadness that makes us far from alive. At least to our fellow human beings.

NICK: You're saying that that's a real person... underneath?
From HOUSE OF WAX (2005) directed by Jaume Collet-Serra,
screenplay by Chad Hayes from a story by Charles Belden



"I just met a wonderful new man. He's fictional but you can't have everything."

Cecilia in Woody Allen's PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO

Escapism

Don't mock escapism if you've never lived a life where you needed to escape. People have difficult domestic situations, often abusive and painful, and a book, a musical or a movie offers a few hours in another world where you can forget the cruelty of your own. In fact, the need to escape from some trauma or other into a

Story World is often to be found in the childhood of many an author or dramatist. Indeed John Gardner in *ON BECOMING A NOVELIST* argues that “often one finds novelists are people who learnt in childhood to turn, in times of distress, to their own fantasies or to fiction, the voice of some comforting writer, not to the human beings near at hand.” And escapism certainly doesn’t end in childhood. And it’s the nature of emotional escapism for the adult that is explored in Woody Allen’s *THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO*.



The title *THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO* comes from the title of the movie Cecilia goes to see repeatedly in order to escape the domestic violence of her abusive husband. And she sits through the movie so often that it suddenly becomes real. The lead actor begins speaking to Cecilia sitting in the movie theatre, and then leaves the movie screen to join her. Later, the lead actor takes Cecilia into his fictional world – literally into the projected image and that escapist world becomes ‘real’. Of course the dilemma of the plot is that Cecilia eventually has to choose between the two – and, reluctantly,

reality wins. All prints of THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO are destroyed and Cecilia goes back to the real world and her abusive husband. An unhappy ending? Not quite. For Cecilia is soon back at her favourite movie theatre watching Fred and Ginger in TOP HAT singing *Cheek to Cheek*:

*Heaven... I'm in heaven,
And the cares that hung around me through the week,
Seem to vanish like a gambler's lucky streak,
When we're out together dancing cheek to cheek.*

Hollywood isn't called The Dream Factory for nothing and perhaps escapism is an opiate of the people. What people need is 'consciousness raising' not 'bread and circuses' or a life lived vicariously through someone else. Yet the people who say such things are rarely those people who live endless days of hard slog embedded with emotional turmoil, who, at the end of the day, simply need respite in the form of a simple and entertaining tale to help them get through life. Besides, what we're talking about isn't an actual opiate – it's a story opiate. Yes, it's often pure wish-fulfilment, yes, it's not 'real', yet in some ways it's no more 'not real' than the hundreds of misery endings in plays that have been doled out by the Royal Court Theatre pretty much every night of its existence.

Some thoughts on the nature of escapism from writers...

"I'd like to say a few words about escapism. I hear the term bandied about as if it's a bad thing. As if "escapist" fiction is a cheap opiate used by the muddled and the foolish and the deluded, and the only fiction that is worthy, for adults or for children, is mimetic fiction, mirroring the worst of the world the reader finds herself in. If you were trapped in an impossible situation, in an unpleasant place, with people who meant you ill, and someone offered you a temporary escape, why wouldn't you take it? And escapist fiction is just that: fiction that opens a door, shows the sunlight outside, gives you a place to go where you are in control, are with people you want to be with (and books are real places, make no mistake about that); and more importantly, during your escape, books can also give you knowledge about the world and your predicament, give you weapons, give you armour: real things you can take back into your prison. Skills and knowledge and tools you can use to escape for real. As JRR Tolkien reminded us, the only people who inveigh against escape are jailers."

Neil Gaiman, THE VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

"I do like escapism. I like going to the movies on a Friday night and seeing something fun."

Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director

"No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality."

Shirley Jackson, THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE

"Humans had built a world inside the world, which reflected it in pretty much the same way as a drop of water reflected the landscape. And yet ... and yet ... Inside this little world they had taken pains to put all the things you might think they would want to escape from — hatred, fear, tyranny, and so forth. Death was

intrigued. They thought they wanted to be taken out of themselves, and every art humans dreamt up took them further in. He was fascinated."

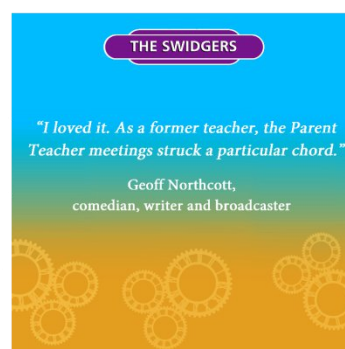
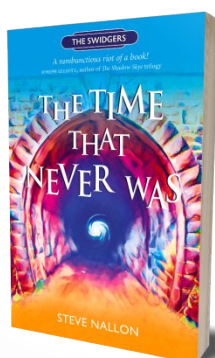
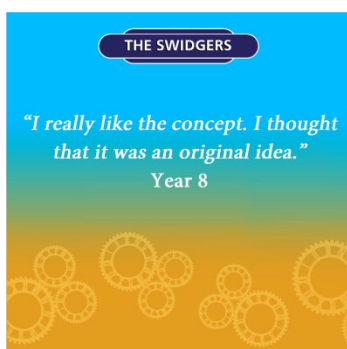
Terry Pratchett, WYRD SISTERS

"People talk about escapism as if it's a bad thing... Once you've escaped, once you come back, the world is not the same as when you left it. You come back to it with skills, weapons, knowledge you didn't have before. Then you are better equipped to deal with your current reality."

Neil Gaiman

"Each book was a world unto itself, and in it I took refuge."

Alberto Manguel, A HISTORY OF READING



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: The Safe Space, Catharsis, Assimilation and Maturation

“The child intuitively comprehends that although these stories are unreal, they are not untrue ...The unrealistic nature of these tales (which narrow-minded rationalists object to) is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales’ concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner process taking place in an individual... Maybe if more of our adolescents had been brought up on fairy tales, they would (unconsciously) remain aware of the fact that their conflict is not with the adult world, or society, but really only with their parents. Further, threatening as the parent may seem at some time, it is always the child who wins out in the long run.”

Bruno Bettelheim, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY TALES

The Safe Space

It’s a dangerous world out there and for many of life’s emotional and moral conflicts we have little preparation. Except through Story. And this is perhaps the key message in Bruno

Bettelheim's seminal book *THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT*, where he argues that it is through fairy tales that young minds can learn to deal with the complex conflicts going on inside them:

The fairy tale offers the child hope that someday the kingdom will be his. Since the child cannot settle for less, but does not believe that he can achieve this kingdom on his own, the fairy tale tells him that magic forces will come to his aid. This rekindles hope, which without such fantasy would be extinguished by harsh reality. Since the fairy tale promises the type of triumph the child wishes for, it is psychologically convincing as no 'realistic' tale can be. And because it pledges that the kingdom will be his, the child is willing to believe the rest of what the fairy story teaches: that one must leave home to find one's kingdom; that it cannot be gained immediately; that risks must be taken, trials submitted to; that it cannot be done all by oneself, but that one needs helpers; and that to secure their aid, one must meet some of their demands. Just because the ultimate promise coincides with the child's wishes for revenge and a glorious existence, the fairy tale enriches the child's fantasy beyond compare.

Conflicts and problems go on throughout life and one purpose of story, whether it be in drama or fiction, could be said to be to create an imaginary space where moral dilemmas can continue to be encountered, addressed and grappled with.

Some more thoughts on the nature of the safe space of Story...

"The stage is a magic circle where only the most real things happen, a neutral territory outside the jurisdiction of Fate where stars may be crossed with impunity. A truer and more real place does not exist in all the universe."

P.S. Baber

"To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world. This is the consoling function of narrative — the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time."

Umberto Eco, SIX WALKS IN THE FICTIONAL WOODS

"We do on stage things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else."

The Player in Tom Stoppard's ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD



MISS PRISM: *Do not speak slightly of the three-volume novel, Cecily. I wrote one myself in earlier days.*

CECILY: *Did you really, Miss Prism? How wonderfully clever you are! I hope it did not end happily? I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much.*

MISS PRISM: *The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.*

From THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST by Oscar Wilde

‘And the Moral is...’

He who penned the Book of Samuel and the Book of Kings, the so-called Deuteronmist Historian, told his stories – essentially morality tales – and then offered a tag at the end that said either “And David did what was wrong in the eyes of the LORD” or “David did which was right in the eyes of the LORD” – and usually it was the former, as King David could often be a naughty boy, as Bathsheba could vouch.



Perhaps the preachy tut-tut-tutting Deuteronmist Historian wouldn't stand much of a chance these days of a publishing deal, but we shouldn't forget that historically many stories were told with the primary purpose of conveying of a moral message or warning. The Brothers Grimm, for example, certainly understood that.

But Miss Prism's sanctimonious observation that the good end happy and the bad unhappy still has some life in it. Of course, not all

people in stories get their 'comeuppance', but some sense of 'natural justice', or even 'divine justice', remains a key feature in many stories. For the film maker Alfred Hitchcock it was prerequisite. This, for example, is a typical afterthought from his 1955 television series ALFRED HITCHCOK PRESENTS: "Those of you who like to see nasty people receive their comeuppance, will be delighted with the results of tonight's tale. Gil took his story to the police, and he and Rosine were promptly punished. She for murder and he for intent to murder" adding, perhaps a little tongue in cheek, "There is, however, a brighter side to all this. Both have become model prisoners."

Some more thoughts on morality in a tale...

"It seems that if you put people on paper and move them through time, you cannot help but talk about ethics, because the ethical realm exists nowhere if not here: in the consequences of human actions as they unfold in time, and the multiple interpretive possibility of those actions."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"If you're going to write something, that's going to be read by people, a lot of people, you hope it will not only entertain them but maybe do them some good in some way."

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

"The moment you moralise in your novel, your book is no longer moral. It has become pious. Piety not only corrodes morality but

consorts with corruption. Piety and corruption go together like hot dogs and mustard."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"Writing is my way of expressing – and thereby eliminating – all the various ways we can be wrong-headed."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"Take all those messages and those morals and stick 'em where the sun don't shine, all right?"

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"I think the novel at its best is the most moral of the art forms. You are exploring the interstices of human behaviour... Novels that reinvigorate our view of the subtlety of moral judgements are essential to democracy. Americans were affected for decades after THE GRAPES OF WRATH."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



"Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before – more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle."

Philip Pirrip – 'Pip' – in Charles Dickens' GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The Emotional Gym

Story is a workout for the mind and, perhaps more importantly, the emotions. Those neurological connections that make us feel and cry and care sometimes need a boost – and Story is the sure way to

give ourselves that boost. And here, in some respects, we are in the territory of the dramatic theory of Aristotle and *POETICS*. Whatever Aristotle meant by *catharsis* – and there is still much dispute on that – there is no doubt he considered the arousing/awakening of pity and fear as a good thing to experience and go through. Whether that *catharsis* be, as it were, ‘exorcise’ or ‘exercise’. And you might also add that a drama in the theatre is rightfully called ‘a play’ because that’s what we are doing – we’re playing. And ‘play’ comes from Old English *pleg(i)an* ‘to exercise’ and *plega* ‘brisk movement’.

“Think about the word ‘destroy’. Do you know what it is? De-story. Destroy. Destory. You see. And restore. That’s re-story. Do you know that only two things have been proven to help survivors of the Holocaust? Massage is one. Telling their story is another. Being touched and touching. Telling your story is touching. It sets you free.”

Francesca Lia Block



“We are like warriors of old who, upon vanquishing our opponent, must rip the warm heart from his body and immediately eat it, and thus absorb his strength. The eating of the heart is a very real attempt to understand.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

Assimilation

By watching, hearing, seeing or reading Story we are in some way or other taking it inside ourselves. And afterwards we may think about it, mull it over, consider it, question it and in so doing the story stays within us. This process is far more than simple fascination with its plotting or its structure, for the tale during that time becomes part of us.

Perhaps David Mamet's comparison with eating the heart of the vanquished to give us strength is a little grotesque in its language, yet there is an element of truth in the simile. In fact, you'll find the concept explored all the way through Joseph Campbell's *THE HERO HAS A THOUSAND FACES* where the protagonist first 'takes on' the antagonist and then, in victory, 'takes in' the power gained from his enemy. This could be done in a literal way, as in the eating of the heart, or achieved in a more symbolic sense, as in the gaining of self-confidence and maturity.

"If myth is translated into literal fact, then myth is a lie. But if you read it as a reflection of the world inside you, then it's true. Myth is the penultimate truth."

Joseph Campbell



“But there was one other thing that the grown-ups also knew, and it was this: that however small the chance might be of striking lucky, the chance is there. The chance had to be there.”

From CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY by Roald Dahl

Hope

Give us sadness, give us misery, give us horror, give us pain, give us bleakness, give us despair and even give us death – but please, please, give us a little bit hope. That’s surely the writer’s duty? Otherwise, what’s the point?

Hope shouldn’t be confused with a ‘happy ending’, for Hope is simply the belief and feeling that life, however grievous, is still worth the battle. Edward Bond’s *SAVED* (1965) is one of the bleakest plays ever written, yet the final image, Len mending a chair while the others sit and the curtain falling quickly, offers a degree of hope that is hardly found in the rest of the drama. And when Edward Bond heard about one production where the director chose a slow laborious blackout instead of the one directed by the text, believing a bleaker message was necessary for today’s bleaker world, the writer threatened to have it taken off unless the quick snap blackout was reinstated. And sometimes it is in such details that hope can be found.



Some thoughts on positivity in Story...

"When I think of the books I love, there's always a little laughter in the dark."

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"When you're writing something extremely dark or disturbing or scary, or whatever, you need to remember that your reader will only go on the journey so far until you bring something back out to the light. Your stories can't be nihilistic to the point where it becomes a chore to read all the way to the end. Illuminate the darkness, take your characters to Hell if you want, but you need to bring them back at some point. You need to match the darkness with the light."

Margaret Atwood

"The fiction that lasts tends to be 'moral', that is, it works with a minimum of cynical manipulation and it tends to reach affirmations favourable rather than opposed to life."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



“Tell someone to do something, and you change their life – for a day; tell someone a story and you change their life.”

N.T. Wright

The Importance of Change and Changing

Transition. Maturation. Becoming. If story can be summoned up as ‘change through conflict’, then the central Story Purpose of the dramatic conflict it explores can be found in the change it brings. The Purpose of Story is, therefore, at least in part, to give us an understanding of that change. And witnessing change in others can offer insights and prepare us for potential change in ourselves.



When looking at Story and the nature change in this way we are entering the world of Joseph Campbell and his theory of myth (*mythos* means ‘story’) as set out in his seminal book *THE HERO HAS A THOUSAND FACES*. As Campbell says, “The agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth. Art, literature, myth and cult, philosophy, and ascetic disciplines are instruments to help the individual past his limiting horizons into

spheres of ever-expanding realisation. As he crosses threshold after threshold, conquering dragon after dragon, the stature of the divinity that he summons to his highest wish increases, until it subsumes the cosmos. Finally, the mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to a realization transcending all experiences of form – all symbolizations, all divinities: a realization of the ineluctable void.”

Another key theorist here is Victor Turner who spoke of what he called ‘liminality’, which he defined, somewhat paradoxically, as ‘neither here nor there’. “The attributes of liminality,” wrote Turner, “are necessarily ambiguous... liminal entities are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial... liminality may perhaps be regarded as the ‘Nay’ to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.” Rarely do human beings stay in one world, for our worlds change and we mature as they do. Or at least they should.

What we are dealing with here in dramatic terms are those areas of our lives where we find ourselves in ‘liminal’ space and mind. Puberty and coming-of-age, for example. The very title of the television comedy series THE INBETWEENERS sums up that world and the people in it – no longer children, but not yet adults. Who can forget Neil’s line “I’ve never loved anything before, apart from a car or a sandwich” or Will saying “Just because you’ve had a puff on your

first joint, doesn't make you Kurt Cobain." But throughout our lives we encounter liminality – for throughout adulthood, time moves on and our bodies and our minds transition with it. Or they should.

Interestingly, Victor Turner also notes that “prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edgemen’, who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination. In their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure.” The Storyteller in other words.



Some more thoughts about change and changing...

“All play there about decay. They are about the ends of a situation which has achieved itself fully, and inevitable disorder which ensues until equilibrium is again established. This is why the theatre has always been essential to human psychic equilibrium. The theatre exposes us to the notion of decay, to the necessity of change: in comedy to the tenuousness of our social state, in tragedy to the inevitability of death.”

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

"You're always you, and that don't change, and you're always changing, and there's nothing you can do about it."

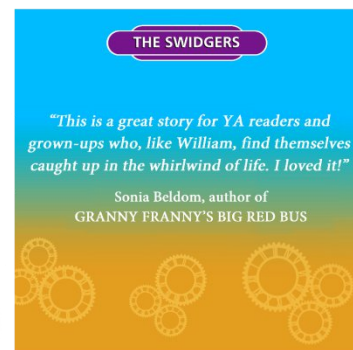
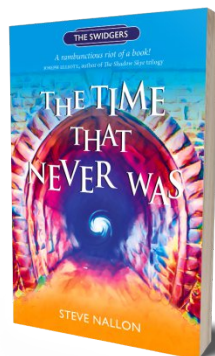
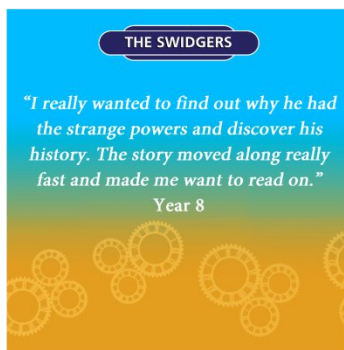
Neil Gaiman, THE GRAVEYARD BOOK

"Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change."

Mary Shelley, FRANKENSTEIN

***"As wave is driven by wave
And each, pursued, pursues the wave ahead,
So time flies on and follows, flies, and follows,
Always, for ever and new. What was before
Is left behind; what never was is now;
And every passing moment is renewed." —Ovid, Metamorphoses***
***All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;***

***His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."***
Jaques in William Shakespeare's AS YOU LIKE IT



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: What is Laughter?

“Analyzing humour is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it... The innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind. It won’t with stand much poking. It has a certain fragility, an evasiveness which one had best respect.”

E.B. White, author of *STUART LITTLE* (1945), *CHARLOTTE’S WEB* (1952), and *THE TRUMPET OF THE SWAN* (1970), writing in ‘The Saturday Review of Literature’ in 1941

Laughter

Comedy as genre is complex and wide-ranging. The stories that comedy covers range from sweet and gentle romances, the ‘rom-com’ (*WHEN HARRY SALLY*, *NOTTING HILL*, *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT*), to the bizarre comedies about death, the so-called ‘back comedy’ sub-genre (the Evelyn Waugh novels *BACK MISCHIEF* and *THE LOVED ONE*, for example). However, you could argue that comedy’s central purpose is very simple – to make us laugh.

But it’s not quite so simple as that, is it? Because it raises one of the great mysteries of life – and that is ‘Why do we laugh?’

Hello? Hello there... I've just read that quote by E.B White at the top of the page. About 'poking the frog.' Well, isn't asking 'Why do we laugh?' doing exactly that?

Perhaps, but most people who work as comic writers rewrite and rewrite until they get it as funny as can be. And doesn't that involve a lot of poking?

Well, yes, I suppose so. But all most of us just want to read a funny book or watch a funny film – we laugh and that's it. Can't we simply leave it there? Tick that box and move on.

But human beings have enquiring minds and what laughter is and why we do it are certainly questions worth asking. And the answers may well prove helpful to story creators, for if you are writing a comedy you might as well at least have an appreciation of what it is you're doing, what you're creating and an understanding of the end result.

Fair enough, but I'm staying here and if I think these chapters on Laughter get a bit too much I'm going to butt in and say so.

You're welcome. But remember the main aim here is demystify to at least some degree the strange mystery of human laughter. And that, hopefully, will help a writer both in the structuring of plot and the making of character. And remember as well the words of Democritus of Abdera (460-370 B.C.) who was known as the Laughing Philosopher.

What did he say?

“Life unexamined, is not worth living.” So let’s poke that frog
and do some examining...

***“If I had no sense of humour, I would long ago have committed
suicide.”***

Mahatma Gandhi



***“If you put it up there on the screen and they laugh, it’s funny. If
they don’t laugh, it’s not funny.”***

Carl Reiner

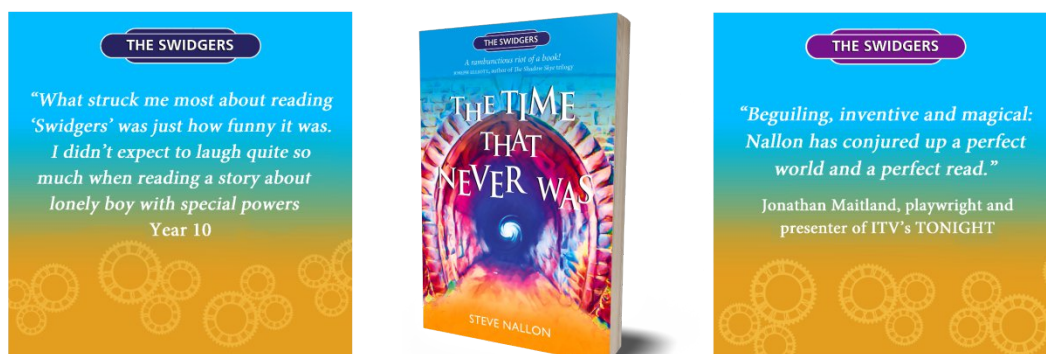
What is ‘Funny’?

Comedy is an objective art because if people find it funny, well,
it’s funny. You may not get why they laughing but if they *are*
laughing, it’s funny. Simple.

***“If I go to a film and everyone in the audience laughs but me, I don’t
say it’s not funny, I say that I didn’t find it funny.”***

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES





“If you would not be laughed at, be the first to laugh at yourself.”
Benjamin Franklin

The Laughter Spectrum

Comedy and the laughter it produces both have an incredibly wide spectrum and so it's not surprising therefore that there's never been a particular theory that works for all comedy or indeed all laughter. Humour after all ranges from self-depreciation, gentle irony and teasing through to sarcasm, disparagement and savage put-downs. Comedy as a genre covers the gentile world of P.G. Wodehouse and Jane Austen thorough to the movies of Woody Allen, Adam Sandler and Mike Myers and onto to the dark comic mind of Martin McDonagh the writer of *THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE* (2001 *IN BRUGES* (2008), *SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS* (2012) and *THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN* (2022). Why we laugh at Wodehouse will be very different to the reason we laugh at the stories of McDonagh. Laughter can be cruel, but it can also be

affectionate and loving. Yes, laughter can make us feel superior, but it can be empathetic as well.

And you can often hear that difference in the sound itself.

Exactly. Laughter may physiologically be one noise, but there can be any number of reasons behind it, ranging from pure meanness to genuine fondness. And as very observant and attuned social animal we human beings learn to recognise the difference in those sound and those reasons.

“The best comedy springs from the utterly serious.”

Alan Ayckbourn



***“Laughter is a noise that comes out of a hole in your face.
Anywhere else and you’re in trouble!”***

Ken Dodd

‘Ha-ha-ha!’ – The Sound of Laughter

Robert R. Provine’s book LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION is one of the best books around on the nature and origins of laughter. Provine trained in behavioural neuroscience and is now Professor of Psychology at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and his in depth book covers not only his

own scientific studies on laughter but also those from around the world.

One question discussed is whether human beings are the only creatures to laugh. It has often been claimed that chimpanzees, gorillas, orang-utans and other primates laugh when engaged in rough-and-tumble tickling play. Provine's studies however show that the panting sound a chimp makes is in fact very unlike human laughter. The 'laugh rhythm' of chimps is about as twice as fast as human laughter and chimp 'laughter', as people call it, "lacks the clear harmonic structure typical of the human laughter spectrum." Then there is the fact that our human laughter is created by chopping up an exhaled breath (the *Ha-ha-ha!* sound), whereas a chimp's breath, because of their physiology, is more an in-and-out breath (or panting as in *ha-ah-ha-ah-ha-ah*). Our human capacity to break up exhaled breath is what allows us to form word-sounds in a continuous flow. Speech, in other words. Provine proposes that we probably gained this advantage when we stood upright on two legs: "the evolution of speech and bipedal locomotion are causally related, the basis of what I call the Bipedal Theory of speech evolution." This has now become known as the 'Walkie-Talkie' Theory.

You mean that our ability to talk began when we stood upright?

Yes. And that ‘gruff’ noise that our ancestors made when at play with each other – laughter, in other words – could be how language began.

None of us were there, but it’s an interesting idea. I’m beginning to like this guy Robert R. Provine.

Well, Provine also looks at the musicality of laughter pointing out that “[the] most striking feature of the laugh-note spectrum is the vertical stack of horizontal stripes that immediately recognisable as a harmonic series, meaning that each stripe is multiple of a low fundamental frequency.” Provine’s studies also takes him to musical notation and its accuracy in artistically creating the sound of laughter concluding that “[whether] due to artistic constraint (musical context) or perceptual error, composers usually made laughter slower (longer) than it really is... in opera, too many concessions are made to the tyranny of the musical moment” in a musical score.



Can I ask a question? What about funny songs? And funny music?

Well Provine looks at recordings with infectious laughter on them such as ‘The Okeh Laughing Record’ by Lucie BERNARDO: and Otto Rathke (1920) featuring a German tavern keeper and his wife, ‘Hyena Stomp’ (1927) by Jelly Roll Morton and his Red Hot Peppers, plus Spike Jones’s ‘Flight of the Bumblebee’ also known as ‘The Spike Jones Laughing Record’ (1946).

What about ‘I Love To Laugh’ from the film MARY POPPINS?

Yes, Provine mentions that as well. He says that “When we hear laughter, we tend to laugh in turn, producing a behavioural chain reaction that sweeps through a group, creating a crescendo of jocularity or ridicule. The contagious laugh response is immediate and involuntary, involving the most direct communication between people – brain to brain – with our intellect just going along for the ride.” Provine also looks at laughter tracks on television shows and whether they help or not – and it turns out they do.

I just about remember ‘The Laughing Policeman’ on seaside piers, where you put in your coin and a puppet policeman laughs and then you start laughing.

Incidentally there was some research done elsewhere about the piece of music that is most conducive to a laughter making and that was judged to be ‘Yakety Sax”, the novelty instrumental composed by James Q. “Spider” Rich and Boots Randolph.

Benny Hill! That’s his chase music.

Yes, it's become his theme song in a way. But back to Provine's laughter studies. He also looks at laughter around professional and social status, the use, for example, of self-deprecation or self-humbling in situations where people use humour to ingratiate themselves (sometime called affiliation humour). Then there's the use of humour in gender in mating strategies. From his studies of nearly four thousand Personal Ads Provine concludes that "Women seek men who make them laugh, and men are anxious to comply with this request" and from another study that "the laughter of the female, not the male, is the critical positive index of a healthy relationship."

Provine considers laughter from tickling, looking at the importance of tickling in social bonding, but also its role in dominance and sexual play. Provine also explains why it is impossible to tickle ourselves. It turns out that when we intend to touch our own skin our brain sends a command (efferent) to our muscles to touch our body at a specific place. This triggers a corresponding sensory event from the touched area (afferent) that is sent back to the brain for comparison with the original command. If they match up, they essentially cancel each other out and there is no tickle response.

Well, if you know what you're about to do there's no surprise.

Exactly! Social bonding is key part in Provine's study and he quotes Susan Jones's observation that the use of a smile as a social

display develops early in life and that babies at play tend not to smile until they look around and make eye contact with their mother.

Provine goes on the remark that eye contact between adults later in life is what often prompts laughter in a group situation and that solitary laughter, other than we responding to a book or movie, is not exactly normal.

What about that stud they call Laughing Gas?

Nitrous oxide. Yes, that was discovered in 1770 by Joseph Priestley, but it wasn't until 1799 when the chemist Humphrey Davy recklessly inhaled the gas and experienced an agreeable sense of well-being and giddiness that its 'laughing' qualities were discovered. Other substances that induce laughter include marijuana, hashish, alcohol, ether and LSD. By the way, have you heard the phrase 'going weak at the knees with laughter'?



Yeah. Well, it turns out there's some truth in it for in some research done by S. Overeem and his colleagues in a study of the H-reflex, a neural mechanism regulating muscle tone, they found that laughter almost totally blocked out the reflex prompting Provine ask

whether laughter should be avoided immediately before or during athletic competitions.

“I was irrevocably betrothed to laughter, the sound of which has always seemed to me to be the most civilised music in the world.”

Peter Ustinov



“Laughter is a ‘top-down’ concept: in other words, it comes from higher, cognitive levels of the nervous system, as opposed to the other involuntary actions [such as sneezing or blushing] which attack the nervous system from the ‘bottom up’.”

Jonathan Miller, LAUGHING MATTERS: A SERIOUS LOOK AT HUMOUR

The Involuntary Nature of Laughter

The involuntary nature of laughter is also discussed by Provine. Laughter he says and concludes that laughter essentially bypasses our intellectual and conscious control. There’s a key point about laughter made by Jonathan Miller in his book LAUGHING MATTERS and that laughter is to a degree involuntary. At least when it comes to comedy. His proof was an exercise he did with patients who had suffered a stroke preventing them from voluntarily moving the left or right side of their face.

We say, ‘Grin please,’ and they grin on just one side. We say for the second time, ‘Grin, please, on both sides of your

face.’ Again, they respond by grinning on just one side. In other words, the patient does not have access to the other side of their face; not, that is, until we amuse them. Once amused, then there is bilateral symmetry in their performance. In other words, they do not have a total lack of access to their own face. They have access to their face with respect to a particular cognitive situation. If you amuse them, if they see a joke, they smile; but they cannot smile at will... This goes back to the question of how we gain access to the involuntary performances like blushing and laughter, which seem to be things over which we have partial and incomplete control.

What’s happening here, as Robert R. Provine points out in his book *LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION* is that “ongoing social stimuli activate intact neuronal pathways that are beyond conscious control.” Again, this point in a way goes back to the ‘truth-in-disguise’ theory of laughter in that that comedy smuggles in an idea that takes us so by surprise that we hardly even know we are laughing or smiling. And the involuntary nature of laughter can sometimes be so extreme that we cannot stop ourselves from laughing. If this happens on stage, Actors call it ‘corpsing’, because, like a corpse giggling, it shouldn’t really be happening. And when a laughing fit does take hold, like the hiccups, another involuntary action of human physiology, we often have to have to almost shock ourselves out of it.

It can be a bit awkward when you start laughing and you can’t help it or stop. And it’s infectious.

Yes it is. But on the subject of those human actions that are involuntary, it's worth pointing out how difficult some of them are to be reproduced at will. Feigned sneezes never sound remotely authentic. And no one, not even a trained actor, can produce a blush from nowhere. Laughter is in this category of the involuntary action. With a great deal of practice an actor can just about make a character's laughter sound real, but, as said, human beings are sophisticated social animals who are very much attuned to spotting what is simulated and false with the result that we are rarely fooled.

"Are you using 'yes' here in the affirmative sense?"

Jonathan Miller in 'The Philosopher's Sketch' with John Cleese



Agelast, noun. One who never laughs.

From the Greek 'agélastos' meaning 'not laughing, grave, gloomy,' becoming 'agelaste' (Rabelais, born between 1483 and 1494 and died 1553) in Middle French.

First use in English 1877 by George Meredith writing in 'The Times', "Men who Rabelais would have called agelast or non-laughers."

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The Agelast, Laughspeak and the Pseudobulbar Affect (PBA)

There are those who go through life not laughing. The Mitford sisters, who gained much attention in the 1930s for their beauty as

well as their polarised political beliefs, were told by their mother never to laugh as this would end up wrinkling their near perfect complexions. Then there are certain people, usually men, who take the view that one should 'never crack your face', not for the purpose of prolonging flawless facial skin tone, but rather that laughing is somehow a sign of a weakened masculinity.

Laughter is a joy. Why deny yourself that? Get a life. Or some face cream.

There are those nervous people on the other hand who constantly 'laughspeak', which, as Robert R. Provine puts it in his book *LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION*, is when there is a "hybrid of laughing speech that communicates emotional tone [which] is especially notably in talk-show hosts, public relations professional, and others who attempt to defuse a delicate inquiry by posing it in a laughing voice." Provine adds that laughspeak "is also common when there is a power imbalance between conversants, as when one person is trying to ingratiate themselves to another."

On the far extreme of laughter there is something known as the Pseudobulbar Affect (PBA), which is a condition marked by frequent, involuntary and uncontrollable outbursts of exaggerated laughing that often turn to tears. PBA occurs in people with neurological conditions and it can also be a sign of depression (as can not laughing or not being able to laugh).

Pseudobulbar Affect (PBA), noun. A condition that is marked by episodes of uncontrolled crying or laughing which is inappropriate or of disproportionate intensity and that is associated with various neurological disorders (such as multiple sclerosis, traumatic brain injury and stroke).

Merriam-Webster Dictionary



“There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humour and hurt.”

Erma Bombeck, author and humorist

The Relationship between Comedy and Tragedy

Jonathan Lynn was once asked by Peter Hall, then the artistic director of the National Theatre in London, if there were any play he'd like to direct. As Lynn says in his book *COMEDY RULES*, “I proposed a double production of *MACBETH*, a play that I know well and love: there would be two different views of it, playing alternate nights or alternates weeks, one as a tragedy, one as a farce.” Lynn’s idea was to have the same set and same costumes but the Macbeths would be different. Brian Cox for the tragedy, and John Cleese for the farce. “I explained,” Lynn goes on, “my *MACBETH* to Peter Hall. Peter stared at me for about a minute, in complete silence. Then he

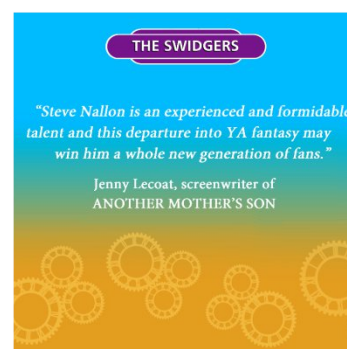
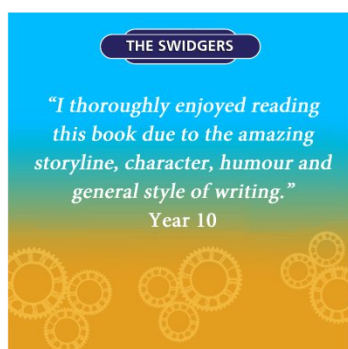
simply changed the subject and never referred to the idea again. I think he pitied me. “

I’m not surprised. It’s a weird idea.

Perhaps. Except there was an infamous production of *MACBETH* starring Peter O’Toole that unintentionally became funny. Partly this was because of O’Toole’s old nineteenth-century style of declamatory delivery, but also because of the massive amount of the blood and gore. Of all people it was Princess Margaret who, after a visit to rehearsals, suggested lots of fake blood. Only under the lights it dried out and became sticky under foot, resulting in incongruous squelching noises.

I’m beginning to think now that the artistic director at the National Theatre should have said “Yes”.

“Well all I hope now is that the dog hasn’t been sick in the car.”
An audience member overheard by the critic Sheridan Morley after leaving the 1980 production of *MACBETH* starring Peter O’Toole at the Old Vic



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: What Does Laughter Do?

HEADMASTER: *Mark my words, when a society has to resort to the lavatory for its humour, the writing is on the wall.*

From Alan Bennett's FORTY YEARS ON

The Truth in Disguise

Groucho Marx was once asked, "What's the difference between the sense of humour of a normal person and a sense of humour of a comedian?" Groucho replied that a normal person would laugh at a man dressed up as a little old lady careering down a hill in a wheelbarrow and then crashing into a brick wall. "But for a comedian to laugh," explained Groucho, "it had to be a real old lady."

That's weird! What did he mean?

The point Groucho Marx was making wasn't that he and his fellow comedians were sadists, but rather that those who work and deal in comedy see through the pretence of the disguise and recognise the reality behind the joke or situation. In other words, comedians know the Truth behind the comedy. Writers of comedy,

whether it be farce, sit-com or sketches, work every day with its subterfuge and its tricks. And the idea of comedy being a deception is important because in order to produce laughter the comedy must smuggle in a Truth – often a Truth we’d rather not talk about, be it violent, sexual or some scatological bodily function – through the mechanisms of its form.

Okay, but what exactly is this ‘mechanism’?

Well, take the ‘mechanism’ of a simple play-on-word joke, where the joke occurs when a word’s assumed meaning is turned round in a surprising way. Academics, incidentally, call this mechanism ‘a migration of meaning’. One form of this mechanism is the comic technique of the ‘Literal Truth’, where figurative meanings are transformed in the joke into something more real. The comedian Tim Vine has made a career of the ‘Literal Truth’ technique and here’s a couple of typical Tim Vine gags: “I had a dream last night that I was cutting carrots with the Grim Reaper – dicing with death’ and “I saw this bloke chatting-up a cheetah and I thought: ‘He’s trying to pull a fast one.’” But of course it’s not a new formula for here’s an old Tommy Cooper gag: “A man said to me, ‘I’m going to chop off the bottom of one of your trouser legs and put it in a library.’ I thought ‘That’s a turn-up for the books!’ The main appeal of these jokes is the clever word play, made possible by the inventiveness and malleability of the English language, that suddenly becomes a fun mind game.

Yes, I get that, but where's that 'Truth' you mentioned we'd rather not talk about?

Well migration of meaning becomes a bit more complicated when we introduce the comic form known as the 'double entendre', where there is a double meaning in the word or phrase, and where one meaning is obvious and innocent, but the other is sexually suggestive. The sexual act, something most people don't like to talk about, is sneaked in in that alternative meaning. Watch any *Carry On* film and you'll see that many of the jokes involve , shall we say, a migration of meaning that takes you well below the waist. From CARRY ON DICK there's this line:

CAPTAIN DESMOND FANCEY: I cannot believe it's Jake the Woodcutter for he is the only one around here with a big chopper."

And from CARRY ON CAMPING there's this exchange:

MRS. FUSSEY: Joan may think you're a gentleman but personally I've got sore misgivings.

SID BOGGLE: You ought to put some talcum powder on them.

It was often said, though this is probably apocryphal, that when the *Carry On* team were working at Pinewood Studios there was available in the bar the 'Double Entendre' cocktail. "Oh yes," Kenneth Williams cast would say to visitors, "go to the bar and ask the barmaid for a 'Double Entendre' – *and she'll give you one.*"

Ha! Ha! At last! A funny joke! Well all this stuff is supposed to be about laughter, isn't it?

Another example of the double entendre is when there a transforming phrase is added that creates an alternative meaning. In other words, there's a surprise twist at the end.

"As the actress said to the Bishop!"

Very good!!! You're getting it!

And so was the Bishop!

Boom! Boom! But the point is though that most comedians and writers of comedy are aware of the structures, mechanisms and formulas of their art. They have to be, or they wouldn't be able to write comedy. Ray Cooney, the writer of popular commercial farce, always said that the only subject he was good at school was mathematics. That makes perfect sense because the construction of a farce is more like a complex mathematic equation than a worthy piece of literary writing. But the central point here is that farceurs such as Ray Cooney, Alan Bennett, Joe Orton and Alan Ayckbourn know that what they're doing is smuggling into the manufactured situation something a little racy and risqué. For what farceurs do is put socially awkward people – and the British specialise at this – in situations of complete social and sexual embarrassment. And the more extreme the embarrassment – dropped trousers or whatever – the greater the laughter. Well, as long as the situation is kept on the right side of credibility. Such farces don't always find favour with the

critics, but the public tend to like them. For example, NO SEX PLEASE, WE'RE BRITISH, written by Alistair Foot and Anthony Marriott ran in London from June 1971 to September 1987, clocking up 6,761 performances.



But why exactly do we laugh at farces? And what sort of laughter is it?

Well, the most honest answer is we laugh because it could have been us, but, like that man (or lady) in the wheelbarrow careering down the hill, it isn't. For slapstick and farce are arguably the cruellest forms of comedy. And that sort of laughter starts early. Thinking of the gleeful anticipatory laughter of that audience of children at the circus when the clown holds a large custard pie in his hands and says "Shall I?" As for farce, George Bernard Shaw famously called Oscar Wilde's play THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST 'heartless'. But that's the point: Laughter in farce is heartless. Compare, for example, the laughter you experience when

watching FAWLTY TOWERS or FAMILY GUY to that more gentle laughter you make when watching EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND or DAD'S ARMY. Of course, people rarely admit the meanness of their laughter, though one exception is Barry Humphries' creation Dame Edna May Everage, who often says that "I was born with a priceless gift... the ability to laugh at the misfortunes of others." And she does it very loudly and with great pride. Which makes it even funnier.



I liked it when Dame Edna said to the novelist Jeffery Archer, "Never be afraid to laugh at yourself. After all, you could be missing out on the joke of the century." Ha! Ha! We guffawed like crazy...

Katagelasticism, incidentally, is the psychological condition in which a person excessively enjoys laughing at others. And katagelasticians would then be pranksters whose main aim is embarrass others.

"Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people."
Angela Carter



“Stand-up comedy is a science. Every comedian is a psychology major, naturally.”

Eddie Griffin, American comedian

The Psychology of the Comedian

There are three basic types of comedy performer. There are those who ‘do funny’, ventriloquists, jugglers, impressionists and so on, those who ‘say funny’, gag tellers and the more traditional comics, and those who, by nature, ‘are funny’. The latter are rare and to be cherished, for there are very few of these in any generation. Spike Milligan, Lucille Ball, Kathy Burke, Jack Benny, Tina Fey, Eric Morecombe, Robin Williams, Peter Cook, Phyllis Diller, Joan River, Dora Bryan, Melissa McCarthy. Just saying their names brings a smile to the face.

I’ve heard of some of them. I’ll check out the ones I don’t know on YouTube.

Great! Do that. They’re all very different but what we’re interested in here is their psychology. Plus, since this is ultimately all about Story Craft, have the lives and natures of comedians been a source of inspiration for writers? Here’s a list of some films you might have seen: THE KING OF COMEDY (1983), PUNCHLINE (1988),

THE SUNSHINE BOYS (1975), CHAPLIN (1992), FUNNY BONES (1995), LENNY (1974), TALKIN' DIRTY AFTER DARK (1991), THE ENTERTAINER (1960), THIS IS MY LIFE (1992), MR. SATURDAY NIGHT (1992), FUNNY PEOPLE (2009), SLEEPWALK WITH ME (2012), OBVIOUS CHILD (2014), TOP FIVE (2014), THE COMEDIAN (2016), THE BIG SICK (2017) and DOLEMITE IS MY NAME (2019). In the majority of cases the comedian is a troubled soul, the outsider who finds human connection difficult. THE COMEDIAN, for example, is a 1957 television drama written by Rod Serling from a novella by Ernest Lehman, starring Mickey Rooney as a lecherous, vicious comedian who tears down everyone around him was widely praised. Not all are like that but it's not unusual when you meet comedians face to face many of them have difficulty maintaining eye to eye contact for very long.



Neil Simon's LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR (1993) explores writing comedy for television in 1950s and was inspired by Simon's own early career experience as a writer on YOUR SHOW OF SHOWS and CAESAR'S HOUR. It is a character study of the various

psychologies of the comedy writer (the hypochondriac Ira Stone was based on Mel Brooks) and the writing craft of comedy itself.

There's a fascinating novel worth mentioning called *THE COMIC* by Brian Glanville. In it a traditional gag-telling comic has a nervous breakdown when he comes to realise the true nature of the material he has been dishing out all his life. He sees at last, if you will, the truth behind the mechanism. There there's the play *COMEDIANS* by Trevor Griffiths, where a former comic, Eddie Waters, runs a workshop for aspiring newcomers. It is revealed in the play that the old-timer, once toured Germany after the war. After visiting Dresden and a nearby former concentration camp he then had to do a concert in Bielfeld. "That exercise we do," Waters tells Price, the young comic, "thinking about something deep, personal, serious ... then being funny about it ... That's where it came from. And I discovered ... there were no jokes left. Every joke was a little pellet, a ... final solution."

You're getting me depressed now. Can we get back to some funny stuff?

I agree. All that does sound a bit bleak, so let's end this look at the psychology of the comedian by remembering that there are comedians who are happy and what makes them happy most is making people laugh and bringing joy into their lives. I'm thinking here of British comedians past and present such as Bill Bailey, Dawn French, Tommy Cooper, Linda Smith, Eric Morecombe and Billy

Connolly, but you might also add Laurel and Hardy, plus any others that when you think of them always makes you smile.

***'Bring me sunshine
In your smile
Bring me laughter
All the while
In this world where we live
There should be more happiness
So much joy you can give
To each brand new bright tomorrow.'***

Written by Arthur Kent and Sylvia Dee and sung at the end of most of their shows by Morecombe and Wise



"I laugh, so that I may not cry."
Beaumarchais, THE BARBER OF SEVILLE

What Does Laughter Do?

In considering the nature of laughter in his book **LAUGHING MATTERS**, Jonathan Miller asks, "Could it be that there is an evolutionary pay-off in the pleasure which is associated with the cognitive situations which seem to induce this activity?" After considering the Freudian theory of repression and release, the social conformist model outlined by Henri Bergson, plus those aspects of laughter inherited from our ancestral primates put forward by Desmond Morris (herd-bonding and so on), Miller observes that not

one theory covers the whole topic. “There is,” he says, “almost always a series of exceptions which can be made to what purports to be a comprehensive theory of laughter.” And Miller adds “it may be possible to look at the motor performance of laughter and trace it back to certain primate roots; but at a cultural level I believed it has becomes latched on to something elaborate, and so elaborately moral that it is no longer useful to consider it in crude ethological terms.”

That makes my brain hurt!



Well that’s nothing. Wait till you hear Jonathan Miller’s own take on laughter, which is, not surprisingly perhaps, is at an intellectual level. “In my view,” he writes, “the value of humour may lie in the fact that it involves the rehearsal of alternative categories and classification of the world in which we find ourselves... to reconsider categories and concepts so that we can redesign our relationship to the physical world, to one another, and even to our notion of what it is to have relationships.”

Could you put that in English?

Miller's basic point is that the production of laughter is essentially a cognitive experience that requires brain power. Comedy, in other words, makes the brain work hard and, more importantly, think in an unorthodox way. This, in Miller's theory at least, encourages us to be open to new possibilities and alternative ways of seeing. Put simply, a laughing brain results in a flexible mind. Even, with absurdist comedy, experimental thought. And perhaps, given that we as a species are very much social animals, that may be enough of an evolutionary pay-off.

"Lord, what fools these mortals be!"

William Shakespeare, A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM



"Always laugh when you can. It is cheap medicine."

Lord Byron

Laughter: The Best Therapy?

But aren't we missing a simple truth here and that is that there is great pleasure in laughter? Plus laughter is good for us both physiologically and psychologically.

Yes, I always feel better after a good laugh.

Like *catharsis* in tragedy that exercises our capacity for compassion and feeling, laughter is tonic for both the human body and the human soul. Isn't that its true evolutionary pay-off? The physical nature of laughter is good for the lungs, the heart and the muscles. As for the psychological aspect of laughter, well, it's a coping mechanism, for what life throws at us such woes, such pain, such sadness – and laughter is the light that helps us through it. Put simply, laughing at failure helps us get past that failure. And so you could argue that that's the ultimate evolutionary pay-off: for Laughter is what helps us survive.

In that case, I'm going to start laughing more often! But is it true laughter can cure ills and make us better?

Well, there is a well known book by Norman Cousins called THE ANATOMY OF ILLNESS where Cousins tells of his recover from injury through laughter. He certainly tells a good tale, as they say, but according to G. Neil Martin's book THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COMEDY actual scientific studies into the idea of 'Laugh Yourself Well' are more sceptical. Self-enhancing humour according to a study found by Martin can lead to greater persistence on a tough laboratory task and humour generally can moderate depression (but not anxiety).

“I have not seen anyone dying of laughter, but I know millions who are dying because they are not laughing... If laughter cannot solve your problems, it will definitely dissolve your problems; so that you can think clearly what to do about them”

Dr. Madan Kataria



INSPECTOR CLOUSEAU: I did not know the bank was being robbed because I was engaged in my sworn duty as a police officer.

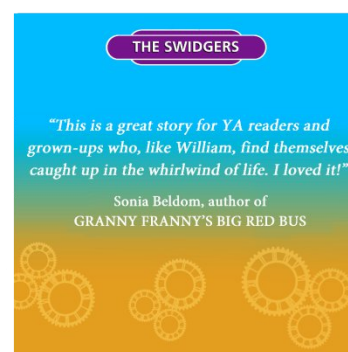
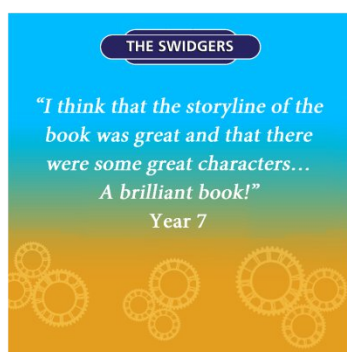
From THE RETURN OF THE PINK PANTHER, directed by Blake Edwards, and written by Frank Waldman and Blake Edward

‘The Comic Gap’

A word here about what those who work in comedy call ‘The Comic Gap’. Essentially the Comic Gap is the difference between what we want and what we get. Between what should have happened and what did. The Comic Gap is what separates aim from achievement and expectation from result. And that’s ultimately where comedy lives. In that difference.

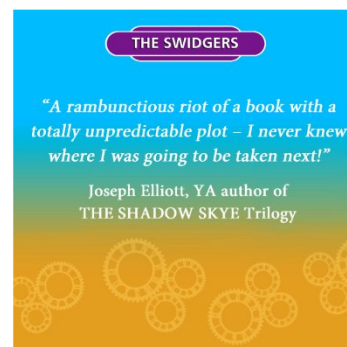
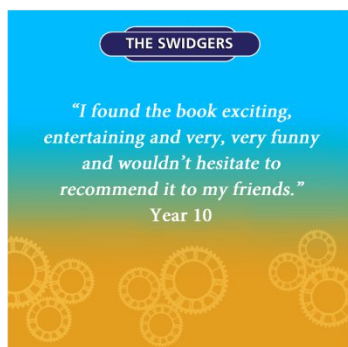
A quick illustration of the Comic Gap can be found in the Egyptian Military Band, who, like the comedian Les Dawson at the piano, always manages to play the melody out of time and out of tune. What’s funny, of course, about Les Dawson at the piano is his

apparent unknowingness that the notes he's playing are so wrong. He jovially smiles thorough it all, as if he thinks he's Vladimir Ashkenazy. The hilarity that comes from the Egyptian Military Band is that these are not just tunes, they are National Anthems. And more importantly, as Egyptian Military Band massacres their beloved anthems, the national leader has to stand there and take it. It's excruciating but very funny, for you suspect that not many of Presidents or Prime Ministers are inwardly smiling. Rather the opposite. Only they can't show it.



But most of us ordinary mortals do laugh when things go wrong or we face failure. We have the capacity to cope with the Comic Gap. And we call that capacity our sense of humour. And we develop it very young when we're toddlers trying to walk. We fail and fall over – and go for a cry. But then a grown-up runs over and begins to smile and laugh. *Why, I've fallen on my bum?* Yet the grown-ups continue to laugh. So what's the appropriate response? *Not sure. Maybe if*

mummy's laughing, I should too? Falling hurt a bit but not that much. Besides, laughing is nice. Yes, I'll give up that cry and go for a laugh instead...



As for the psychology of the comic writer, well, the 'Comic Gap' can explain why so many comedians tend to be angry people. Anyone who has ever invited a comedy writer to a party expecting them to jolly things along is a naïve fool. Comedy people see 'The Gap' not just from a comedy perspective. They see that 'Gap' too in social justice and political systems.

"Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps: for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be."

William Hazlitt in ON WIT AND HUMOUR



“If you can laugh at yourself, you are going to be fine. If you allow others to laugh with you, you will be great.”

Martin Niemoller

‘Laughing At’ or ‘Laughing With’?

If you read BRIDGET JONES’S DIARY and have the attitude *‘Oh no, she’s not doing that! Oh but that’s exactly the sort of thing I would have done!’* and then laugh, well, that would be ‘laughing with’ because you are also laughing at yourself. If, however, you laugh when two men, say called Laurel and Hardy, attempt to take a piano up a long flight of steps to a house at the top of hill and fail because it keeps failing down each time, then you are probably laughing at them. Gelotophobia, incidentally, is the fear of being laughed at, and gelotophilia is the joy of being laughed at. In fact gelotophiles, those who actively seek situations in which others may laugh at them, are relatively rare, but Norman Wisdom, that loveable idiot from the movies, might be said to be an example. The classic example of gelotophobia is Malvolio in TWELFTH NIGHT where he is cruelly set up to be a fool to be laughed. There’s was no sequel to TWELFTH NIGHT but be warned Malvolio’s exit line – “I will be revenged on the whole pack of you.”

Hello again! What about that scene with Ray Liotta and Joe Pesci in GOODFELLAS where the Pesci character Tommy DeVito gets all serious about being called ‘a funny guy’?

Yes, that's a perfect example of the 'at/with' question being explored dramatically in a scene. And a great scene it is. Henry Hill (played by Ray Liotta) and Tommy DeVito (played and Joe Pesci) develop a potential misunderstanding about what being called funny means:

HENRY HILL: You're a pistol, you're really funny. You're really funny.

TOMMY DEVITO: What do you mean I'm funny?

HENRY HILL: [LAUGHING] It's funny, you know. It's a good story, it's funny, you're a funny guy.

TOMMY DEVITO: What do you mean, you mean the way I talk? What?

HENRY HILL: It's just, you know. You're just funny, it's... funny, you know the way you tell the story and everything. [IT BECOMES QUIET]

TOMMY DEVITO: Funny how? What's funny about it?

ANTHONY STABILE: Tommy no, you got it all wrong.

TOMMY DEVITO: Oh, oh, Anthony. He's a big boy, he knows what he said. What did ya say? Funny how?

HENRY HILL: Jus...

TOMMY DEVITO: What?

HENRY HILL: Just... ya know... you're funny.

TOMMY DEVITO: You mean, let me understand this cause, ya know maybe it's me, I'm a little f***ed up maybe, but I'm funny how, I mean funny like I'm a clown, I amuse you? I make you laugh, I'm here to f***in' amuse you? What do you mean funny, funny how? How am I funny?

HENRY HILL: Just... you know, how you tell the story, what?

TOMMY DEVITO: No, no, I don't know, you said it. How do I know? You said I'm funny. How the f*** am I funny, what the f*** is so funny about me? Tell me, tell me what's funny!

HENRY HILL: [LONG PAUSE] Get the f*** out of here,
Tommy!

[EVERYBODY LAUGHS]

TOMMY DEVITO: Ya mother***er! I almost had him, I
almost had him. Ya stuttering pr**k ya. Frankie, was he
shaking? I wonder about you sometimes, Henry. You may
fold under questioning.

GOODFELLAS (1990) was directed and written by Martin
Scorsese and was based on the Nicholas Pileggi book WISEGUY.

“Laugh at yourself first, before anyone else can.”

Elsa Maxwell



***[Humanity] has unquestionably one really effective weapon –
laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution –
these can lift at a colossal humbug – push it a little – weaken it a
little, century by century, but only laughter can blow it to rags and
atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can
stand.”***

Mark Twain

The Power and Sheer Joy of Laughter

But with all this talk about failure and coping mechanisms it's
important not to forget that laughter is very powerful. And joyful.

That's what I keep saying!

As for laughter and power, let's look at two contrasting examples from the world of politics.



In the House of Commons in London, government ministers are obliged by tradition to sit and listen to opposition speech from what is called the Front Bench Shadow Minister. One such debate had Nigel Lawson for the government on one side and John Smith for the opposition on the other. John Smith's speech about Lawson's distant relationship from the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was incredibly funny but Nigel Lawson wasn't smiling at all. The opposite. And so he resigned soon after. Asked later by one friend why he had resigned and Lawson said, "The simple truth is I don't like being laughed at." Gelotophobia, incidentally, is the fear of being laughed at. And Lawson's resignation arguably began the ending of Mrs Thatcher's own political career.

A slightly different perspective on the power of laughter can be found in President Mikhail Gorbachev's collection of political jokes. Gorbachev was wise enough to know that all jokes reveal a truth.

And the truths Gorbachev saw in the jokes about the Soviet system led him, at least in part, to his political reforms. The world has never quite been the same since.

But suppose unlike Nigel Lawson you don't take yourself so seriously. Whatever it is suppose you can laugh it off and so shake it off? Wouldn't that in away make you stronger? You would have, so to speak, an immunity in laughter. That's becomes more than just a survival instinct but a entire philosophy of life.

And what about the joy of laughter? We see this every day, especially when there is a family celebration. And especially when there is a new born baby. Laughter that is joyful unites and bonds like nothing else on earth. So just keep loving and sharing that laughter...

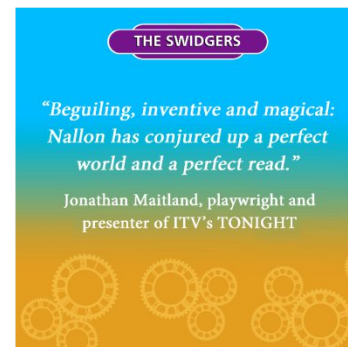
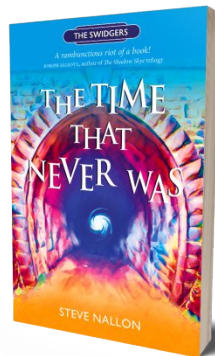
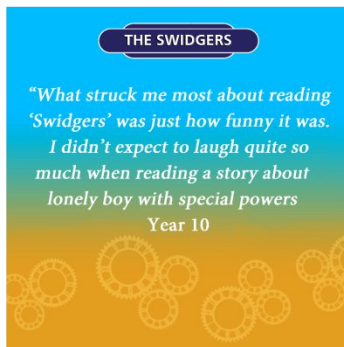


“A tragedy is a tragedy, and at the bottom, all tragedies are stupid. Give me a choice and I’ll take A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM over HAMLET every time. Any fool with steady hands and a working set of lungs can build up a house of cards and then blow it down, but it takes a genius to make people laugh.”

Stephen King

“In comedy laughter settles all arguments.”

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: Laughter Theories

“I’ll tell you what’s unnatural in the eyes of God – contact lenses.”
Zoe Lyons

Surprise and Release

The comedy writer John Langdon used to say that the basic joke involves taking the listener down the garden path and surprising them at the end. How you do that gives you your style of comedy. One of the key theories then as to why we laugh is Surprise and closely related to the idea of Surprise is Release. In fact, it’s the sudden release of muscular tension that results in that strange noise we make in our throats which we call laughter.

So how does Surprise work in terms of laughter? Well, let’s begin with the game ‘Peekaboo’, which is one of our first experiences of laughter as a result of surprise. The game is played with very young children and in it you hide your face, especially with your hands, and then suddenly take your hands away and say “Peekaboo!” The game works because babies have very limited spacial awareness, meaning what they see in front of them is all they

know there is. They haven't yet worked out the concept of 'behind'. What this means is that when you put your hands in front of your face, you have, to the baby, essentially disappeared. *Mother gone! Where is mother?* But then take your hands away and say "Peekaboo!" *Mother's back from nowhere! I'm surprised but happy! So I'll laugh!* Surprise and laughter then become closely associated in our very early experiences, especially our social experiences with our close family.



As we mature and develop language skills, laughter from surprise can take the form of a word-play joke, where a word suddenly turns its meaning and that new way of seeing it brings about a surprise. Puns, in other words. *Can February March? No, but April May!* or *Vampires aren't real. Unless you Count Dracula.* And just that twist of meaning can itself produce laughter. Well, if you like puns, that is. And Sigmund Freud certainly did. In fact he spends pretty much an entire book on them in his 1905 treatise WIT AND ITS RELATION TO THE UNCONSCIOUS. A famous example of which can be found in the middle-class Hirsch-Hyacinth of Hamburg and his

encounter with the extremely wealthy Baron Rothschild – “I sat beside Salomon Rothschild,” said Hirsch-Hyacinth, “and he treated me quite as his equal – quite famillionairely.’ Freud likes this joke because it has a condensed composite structure of different and compressed elements – familiar/millionaire – not only Freud’s other obsession, which is dreaming. The British comedian Ken Dodd famously said that the problem with Freud’s theory of laughter was that he had never played second house at the Glasgow Empire on Friday night. However, to be fair to Freud, Freud does acknowledge that ‘famillionairely’ is not just word-play pun, it also has the context of social difference and a sense of inferiority. There’s more going on here than simple word play.

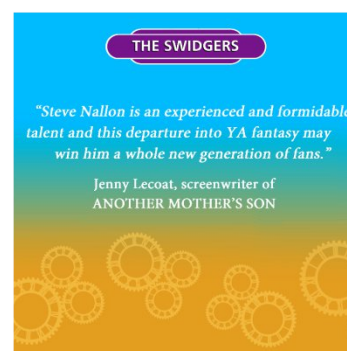
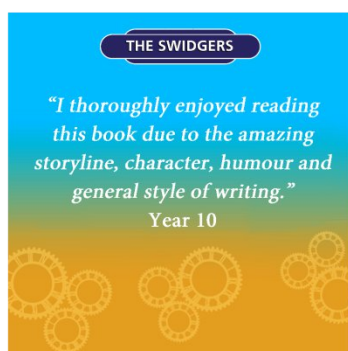
Structurally, of course, puns are not jokes in the sense that in the standard joke there is usually longer set-up that builds tension in the body. And this brings us to the idea of Release.

As said, physiologically laughter is the sudden involuntary relaxing of the tautness and tightness of the muscles throat. Going back to our baby who thought its mother had disappeared, there is a certain degree of tension built up in its body as result of both worry and puzzlement. But the release comes with the sudden and unexpected appearance of the mother. And that release brings laughter. For Release and Surprise are closely connected.



Anyway, let's now look the build-up of tension in what comedians commonly call 'The Rule of Three' gag. The shortest example of this is the old joke about the man lost his belief in God after the birth of his second child – and so his daughters were called Faith, Hope and Doris. However, in the more typical 'Rule of Three' joke of the '*There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman...*' variety, there is usually a longer run up to the punch line. The first character establishes the situation and the idea, and the second reinforces it and perhaps develops it in some way. And as the joke is being told, a certain rigidity is created in the body, especially around the throat muscles. And since the *Englishman, Irishman and Scotsman* formula is usually a sociological joke about the perceived differences in various nationalities, that tension is not only physical but psychological. It's in the third part of the joke that the surprise comes, be it an unexpected turn of meaning or whatever. We 'get the joke' and what follows is that involuntary release of tension, namely, the noise of laughter.

And the involuntary nature of that release is important. The sudden uncovering of what the joke is saying, even if we don't agree with it, can put us off our guard. We are, in effect, tricked into laughter. In a way that's a good thing, for laughter that is knowing or forced offers little reward. However, there is the question of what exactly we are laughing at and what kind of laughter it is. Well, that depends on joke and what it's saying. As suggested, the tension release is psychological as well physiologically. And as it's a Truth (or at least the joke's Truth) about national differences, the joke will deal with and ultimately reveal our preconceptions, our prejudices and even our bigotry. The joke's Truth may reinforce a national stereotype or somehow subvert it. If it subverts then what we have is Jonathan Miller's idea that laughter can introduce to us new ways of thinking. If it reinforces, well, the laughter could be seen as a way of bonding with those of a similar view. There is as well the aspect that here that laughter could be seen as a kind of coping mechanism, acting like a valve letting off steam, which helps us to be less disliking, as it were, to those different from ourselves.



What we have here, in the many different reasons for laughter, exemplifies Jonathan Miller's point that laughter has, at a cultural level, "latched on to something elaborate, and so elaborately moral that it is no longer useful to consider it in crude ethological terms."

DR. TINKLE (Kenneth Williams): You may not realise it but I was once a weak man.

MATRON (Hattie Jacques): Once a week is enough for any man.

**From CARRY ON DOCTOR (1967), directed by Gerald Thomas,
screenplay by Talbot Rothwell**



"Incongruity is the mainspring of laughter."

Max Beerbohm

Incongruity

Another key theory of laughter is Incongruity, which, in academic terminology, would be expressed as 'a concurrence of meaning within a singularity'.

And here we should first mention pareidolia, which is the tendency of human beings to see meaningful images in that which is actually random. We look to the sky and say, "*That cloud! It looks like Tom Cruise!*" We may even laugh where that prominent nose of the cloud sticks out. And the idea of pareidolia leads us to apophenia, which is the general human capacity to perceive connection between

unrelated things, both in terms of objects and ideas. A simultaneity of thought, if you will. And apophenia is a key component of comedy. It's there, for example, when a comedian sets up the idea that one thing is like another and then develops the similarities between the two different concepts.



There is also what comedians call the 'Internal Contradiction' format, where incompatible or conflicting concepts, actions, objects or states of being exist simultaneously. "How is it," says the comedian, "that undertakers can look so sad when they know they are making all that money?" Many Internal Contradiction gags are part Incongruity, part Comic Gap. For example, the comic song 'Yes! We Have No Bananas' by Frank Silver and Irving Conn, where 'yes', in the context of the situation, essentially means the same as 'no'. A more sophisticated example of the Internal Contradiction is that famous line from DR. STRANGELOVE OR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BOMB – "Gentlemen, you can't fight in here! This is the War Room!" Then there's Sergeant Bilko's line "All I've ever wanted was an honest week's pay for an honest day's

work” and, given the context of an armless and legless fighter, that brilliant and often quoted remark of the Black Knight in MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL “It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Wit is the clash and reconciliation of incongruities; the meeting of extremes round a corner.”

Leigh Hunt



“I’m Elsa. Do you like my name? O hope you do like it or Els’ll get upset. Do you get the joke? I made it up myself. I’m always cracking jokes. People don’t often laugh though.”

From Jacqueline Wilson’s THE BED AND BREAKFAST STAR

Configuration

As suggested already, production of laughter is connected to an intellectual process in brain. And this we might call Configuration. Or, to put it as simply as possible – ‘Did you *get* the joke?’ The idea is that, in part at least, laughter is the reward we give ourselves for our cleverness in understanding the joke. Especially if it’s a witty word play that gives us brain pleasure.

A classic example of Configuration in comedy can be found in the two-way conversations sketches written and performed by Bob

Newhart where the audience only hears Newhart's side of discussion and so has to work out for themselves what was said or happened at the other end. These included The Air Traffic Controller, The Driving Instructor and, most famously, the imagined telephone call between England and Sir Walter Raleigh in America and his discoveries in the New World:

Tob-acco... er, what's tob-acco, Walt?... It's a kind of leaf, huh?... And you bought eighty tonnes of it?!... Let me get this straight, Walt, you've bought eighty tonnes of leaves? This may come as a kind of a surprise to you Walt but come fall in England, we're kinda upto our... It isn't that kind of leaf, huh?... Oh!, what kind is it then... some special kind of food?... Not exactly?... Oh, it has a lot of different uses, like, what are some of the uses, Walt?... Are you saying 'snuff', Walt?... What's snuff?... You take a pinch of tobacco... and you shove it up your nose. ha! ha! and it makes you sneeze? Ha! ha! ha!... Yeh, I imagine it would, Walt! Hey, Goldenrod seems to do it pretty well over here! It has other uses though, huh?... You can chew it!... or put it in a pipe!... or you can shred it up... and put it in a piece of paper. Ha! ha! ha!... and roll it up. Ha ha ha... Don't tell me, Walt, don't tell me. Ha! ha! ha! you stick it in your ear, right? Ha! ha! ha!... Oh! between your lips!... Then what do you do, Walt? Ha! ha! ha!... You set fire to it! ha! ha! ha!...

The absurdity when you think about it of smoking is laid bare. However, if the subject matter becomes too obscure or elitist then this type of comedy can and the laughter it produces can get too knowing. I can sound smug, self-satisfied and rather pleased with itself. And you'll hear that kind of laughter in any theatre that's

playing a Tom Stoppard comedy, a playwright who tends to flatter his audience into thinking that they're cleverer than they actual are. And they show this cleverness by laughing very, very loudly at all at his very clever jokes.

"The size of a man's understanding can be justly measured by his mirth."

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer



Socrates: Did we not say that pleasure in the misfortunes of friends was caused by envy?

Protarchus: There can be no other cause.

Socrates: Then our argument declares that when we laugh at the ridiculous qualities of our friends, we mix pleasure with pain, since we mix it with envy; for we have agreed all along that envy is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is a pleasure, yet these two are present at the same time on such occasions.

From Plato's PHILEBUS

Superiority

One of the first jokes we here as children is 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' You answer 'I don't know, why did the

chicken cross the road?’ and your friend says ‘To get to the other side!’ It’s a formula known by comedians as ‘The Obvious Truth’, where something very evident is presented as that which was foolishly missed. And you are a fool if you don’t know that the chicken crossed the road to simply get the other side, but I did know and that makes me clever and superior. Hence the Superiority Theory is sometimes referred to in terms of disparagement humour.

In 2001, this joke was submitted to the University of Hertfordshire and later judged to be the world’s funniest joke:

Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson went on a camping holiday. In the middle of the night, Holmes woke Watson and said, “My dear, Watson, look up and tell me what you see.” Watson replied, “I see millions and millions of them.” “And what,” said Sherlock Holmes, “do you deduce from that?” “Well,” said Watson, “if there are millions of stars then perhaps there’ll be millions of planets. And what that means, if some are like Earth, that there could be life out.” “No, Watson, you idiot, “what those stars is that someone has stolen our tent.”

It’s ‘The Obvious Truth’ format. But notice the use of ‘idiot’, because it’s also a joke about another’s intellectual superiority. Of course the ‘Superiority Spectrum’ of laughter is wide and ranges from gentle teasing through to disparaging sarcasm and then on to out and out aggressive ridicule. And the purpose in making comic remarks at the expense of others may range from simple one-up-

man-ship through to undermining someone and onto total subordination and dominance.

“Laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.”

Thomas Hobbes, HUMAN NATURE (1650)



“Laughter connects you with people. It’s almost impossible to maintain any kind of distance or any sense of social hierarchy when you’re just howling with laughter. Laughter is a force for democracy.”

John Cleese

Social Bonding or Social Correction

Two very different theories of laughter are Social Bonding and Social Corrections. Let’s look first at Social Bonding.

The first obvious point to make about laughter and social bonding is that people laugh more when there’s other people around them. Especially when those other people are in close physical proximity. And the Social Bonding side of laughter is important when we meet new people and observe whether they laugh at the same things that we do we. If they do laugh when we laugh, we know

there's a reasonable chance we'll get on. In the movie *NAKED GUN: FROM THE FILES OF POLICE SQUAD* (1988) there's a scene where a couple who have just got together are seen laughing hilariously together as they leave the cinema. Only the movie they have been enjoying is then revealed to be the massacre blood-fest that is *PLATOON*. A strange sense of humour this couple share, but who are we to judge?



An important point in Social Bonding is that we should sometimes allow the laughter to be aimed at ourselves. Politicians who depend on popularity more than intellectual respect know this. President Ronald Reagan, for example, was an expert in self-depreciation, often joking about his foibles and his age. But laughing at one's self goes beyond politics. In fact it's an essential part of family bonding and any social group. From a Story perspective this is an important point to remember, for such instances and situations would immediately tell the reader or audience that these people love and trust each other.

The origin of Social Bonding laughter is thought to come from our cavemen ancestors, who, when they knew they were at last safe from the sabre-tooth tiger, probably made a pleasurable grunting noise that indicated their collective relief at being safe from harm. This is the 'False Alarm' theory of laughter and we still see it today when we have a near accident. We trip, someone looks to see if we're okay, we laugh and that's the code to say '*No harm done*'. Likewise this False Alarm laughter is put to work in awkward social situations. For example, encountering someone walking down a narrow pathway where both parties do that on side-step shuffle that nearly but not quite ends in collision. But again a quick smile or laugh soon says '*No harm done*' and we move on. What we have here then is laughter as social signal.

A quick point worth mentioning here is that comedians prefer their audiences to sit as close together as possible. This is why a show at a packed Edinburg Festival venue is likely to go better than at one in a large half-full theatre. Contagious laughter is like electricity: it needs a physical conductor. And that comes from the shoulders of the person sat next to you shaking with laughter.

A very different kind of social laughter theory can be found in the work of Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and that we might call Social Correction. Bergson's treatise LAUGHTER argued that comedy (and the laughter that ensues) was essentially a 'corrective'. Here we are definitely laughing *at* people and not *with* them. Bergson's overall

theory is that what we are laughing at is their ‘inelasticity of character’, meaning those people who have a particular characteristic or perspective that they are unable to change no matter what the circumstances. This singular and often obsessive nature results in inflexibility of action, and, not surprisingly, a comic situation.



Bergson's point was that society can't function properly with such people, and so their way of behaviour should be mocked and, as a result, corrected. But, of course, that does depend on the prevailing social attitudes. Ours in general is a society that is far more welcoming and tolerant of difference in a way that Bergson's was not. 'Otherness', if you want to call it that, is now celebrated in our society. Especially if you're funny.

However, Bergson's theory does raise the issue that comedy usually needs a target. And this brings us back to the theory that one of the purposes of laughter is to make us feel superior. This is achieved either by 'attacking up' – mocking people who are

perceived as our social betters (the royal family for example) – or ‘hitting down’ – laughing disdainfully and disparagingly at people who perceived to be of lower social status (so-called ‘chavs’ or ‘trailer-trash’). Either way, each group is a target for our laughter with the purpose of making us think ourselves better than others.

“However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary... Our laughter is always the laughter of a group.”

Henri Bergson



“If we laugh because we recognise something about ourselves, we are owning up. Frequently when we laugh we are admitting: I’ve said that, I’ve done that, I’ve thought that or I wish I’d that or done that... You will laugh more if you are surrounded by other people who are laughing because they share your view. They’re owning up too.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

Observation Comedy and ‘Owning Up’

A quick word here about what comedians call ‘Observational Comedy’. “Have you ever noticed that roundabouts aren’t always round...” begins the comedian. Then there’s a few comic

observations made driving round the non-round roundabout or whatever it is. The comedian is essentially inviting you to share with her that experience because you've noticed whatever it is too. And so has the person sitting next to you and indeed all the people at the gig. And that means you're now a group. Observational comedy helps creates 'the herd'.

But suppose that observational humour then moves on to look at the human behaviour, including human sexual behaviour. The laughter changes. It's no longer just 'I recognise that behaviour' to 'I do that too'. And this is what Jonathan Lynn in his book COMEDY RULES calls 'owning up' laughter. In a way it's part of the 'Bonding Theory' of laughter, but it's more than that because it's would you could even call 'Confessional Laughter'.

"Audiences are more likely to own up if they are in the dark. Apart from the obvious reason that lights focus their attention, the audience laughs more if they are in the dark because they are not owning up in public. Being in the dark takes the potential embarrassment out of it for the audience."

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



“Tomorrow and on every anniversary as long as the Happier Hunting Ground existed a postcard would go to Mr Joyboy: ‘Your little Aimée is wagging her tail in heaven tonight, thinking of you.’
From THE LOVED ONE by Evelyn Waugh (where Aimée is cremated as a pet but was in fact the loving girlfriend of Mr Joyboy.)

Moral Abdication

One purpose of comedy not looked at so far is what some laughter theorists call ‘Moral Abdication’. What happens in this sort of comedy is that everyday ethical mores and rules are suddenly relaxed or abandoned and we get to see and enjoy a world without them. We temporarily, as it were, ‘abdicate’ our moral codes and values. But don’t think of this moral abdication as necessarily nihilistic and anarchist. It can be very subtle. Consider, for example, that seemingly innocent and charming old music hall song *The Lion and Albert*, written by George Marriott Edgarm and made popular in performance by Stanley Holloway:

*There’s a famous seaside place called Blackpool
 That’s noted for fresh air and fun
 And Mr. and Mrs. Ramsbottom
 Went there with young Albert, their son
 A grand little lad were young Albert
 All dressed in his best, quite a swell
 With a stick with an horse’s head handle
 The finest that Woolworth’s could sell
 They didn’t think much to the ocean
 The waves they were piddlin’ and small
 There was no wrecks and nobody drowned*

'Fact, nothin' to laugh at at all!

Really? Surely death is not to be laughed at, yet here, in this apparently harmless popular music hall recitation, laughing at people drowning in the sea is the norm. We're now in a world where our normal moral values have been relinquished. And this sets up our reaction to what happens later to poor young Albert, who, in the poem's comic narrative, is eaten by a lion in a zoo:

*The manager wanted no trouble
He took out his purse right away
Sayin' "How much to settle the matter?"
Pa says "What do you usually pay?"*

And this is what this sort of comedy does: it creates a new world where normal morality is no longer in play. Especially around Death – think of the Evelyn Waugh novels BACK MISCHIEF and THE LOVED ONE, the play LOOT by Joe Orton and the movies HAROLD AND MAUDE written by Colin Higgins, THE LADYKILLERS written by William Rose and ARSENIC AND OLD LACE with screenplay by Julius J. Epstein and Philip G. Epstein and based on Joseph Kesselring's 1941 play of the same name.

The point of Moral Abdication is that since morality and social mores can be somewhat restrictive, we enjoy this new world while we're in it. It's how John Gardner summed up the way people read the novels of Evelyn Waugh. "Waugh," he suggests, "allow[s] us the pleasure of a moral holiday: we relax our fair-mindedness and civility

and for a brief period, take nasty delight in hearing the worst said of people and institutions we, too, in our childish moments, love to scorn.”

A word here about *Saying the Unsayable*. There are certain comedians who push the boundary of what can be said to the extreme. Not so much the comedy of surprise but shock. Think of Ricky Gervais, Frankie Boyle, Richard Prior, Jerry Sadowitz and Eddie Murphy. Sometimes there’s not even a joke or gag format in what they say for we laugh simply as a result of the disbelief that someone has dared to say it. The shock value, if you like. Here we are in the Release Theory of laughter territory but there is a clearly a degree of Moral Abdication too.



And on the subject of saying the unsayable a quick mention here of King Lear’s “all-licensed fool”, as Goneril calls the court jester in KING LEAR. The Fool, who in Shakespeare’s play is given special permission by the monarch to say those things no one else would dare, acts as the king’s conscience, reminding his master that he may

be royal but he's still flesh and blood. The Fool in KING LEAR essentially functions as a kind of Greek Chorus, commenting on the action and those around him. And that's not fundamentally different from the modern day jester or stand-up comedian, except now the license to say what they do is more about where than who. We give certain places, such as cellar bars in Soho comedy clubs, special status where the unsayable can be and should said. And laughed at too.

A word here as well about Gershon Legman's remarkable study *RATIONALE OF THE DIRTY JOKE: AN ANALYSIS OF SEXUAL HUMOUR* (1968). This two volume book, not for the fainthearted, analyses more than two thousand jokes and folk tales from a Freudian perspective.

In layman's terms Freud thought of the mind in three parts. There was our everyday consciousness (the *Ego*), but then there was the sub-conscious mind (the *Id*) where repressed primary wants lurked. Separating the two and specifically keeping the *Id* under lock and key was the mind's guard (the *Super-Ego*). When we sleep that guard goes off duty and so those hidden away repressions can rise to the surface and manifest them in our dreams. And when it comes to jokes, the comic structure (the 'wit' part of the pun) somehow catches the gatekeeper off guard and in so doing the joke smuggles those repressed primal wants (sexual, oral, anal or whatever) past the *Super-Ego* and on into the conscious mind. And with that sudden

freedom comes a release of energy which we call laughter. That's a bit of 'back-of-a-cigarette-pack' summary of Freud's thinking. To be fair his theories are far more nuanced and complicated but fundamentally that is Freud's premise of how the mind works.



As for Gershon Legman, well, he exclusively looks at 'dirty jokes', which, oddly enough, were not considered at any length in Freud's own *WIT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNCONSCIOUS* (1905). Nor incidentally in Freud's book will you find any reference to Id, Super-Ego and Ego for these were terms Freud developed later in his theories. Anyway, Legman concentrates his analysis on what he sees as the joke's subliminal sexual (and scatological) aggression. Curiously, comedians themselves often use strongly hostile phraseology when talking about performance and audiences. '*I slaughtered them!*' '*I killed them!*' '*I murdered them!*' And when it doesn't go well, '*My God, I died the death out there.*'

Anyway, *RATIONALE OF THE DIRTY JOKE: AN ANALYSIS OF SEXUAL HUMOUR* is a fascinating read, with many insights and digressions, and the book ends with the most famous of all 'Moral

Abdication' jokes, the transgressional and notorious 'The Aristocrats!' gag. This joke, the most unsayable of all, even became the subject of a 2005 American documentary comedy film called THE ARISTOCRATS.

"The oldest source of comedy is the Ten Commandments. This is because comedy is about breaking of taboos. It involves saying things that are not normally said, or admitted."

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



"Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar. But can a joke ever be 'only a joke'?"

A quote often attributed to Sigmund Freud, though there is no evidence he actually said it

'Poking the Frog'

The main aim of these chapters on Laughter has been to offer insight to story creators and their readers as to that sometimes mystifying and rather odd human phenomenon we call Laughter. The hope is that by raising and bringing an awareness as to what laughter is and why it is we do laugh, can aid with both the structuring of plot and the making of character. Especially the psychology of a character.

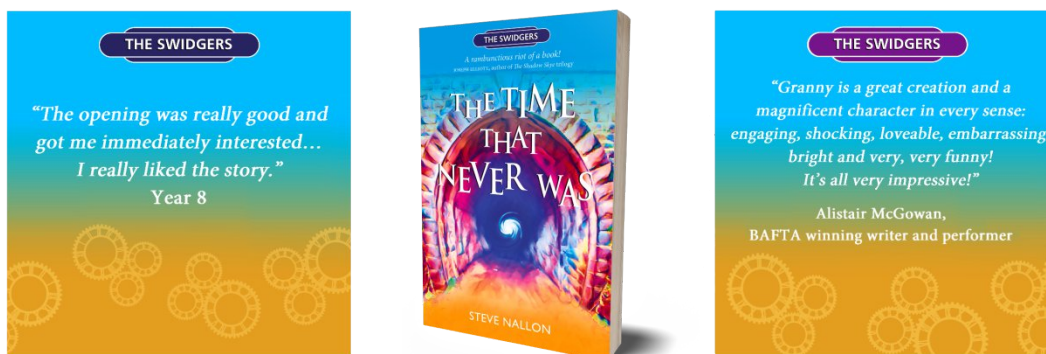
The craft of comedy writing involves certain skills and tools. These include unexpected juxtapositioning, the 'Comic Drop' (where an image suddenly plunges to something more mundane), comparison through exaggeration, the 'Rule of Three', bringing together two ideas as one and abrupt introduction of black comedy. To illustrate these here are some lines from the British comedian Victoria Wood – "She did some really interesting break dancing. It's not easy in an ambulance" (unexpected juxtapositioning); "I've quite fancied regressing to my previous lives so I got Mr Culverhouse to hypnotise me. So I'm lying down – he hasn't got the right watch so he's dangling a rubberised plug" (the 'Comic Drop' to the more mundane); "She said if I wanted to give a present they'd made out a little list. Little! It made the Doomsday Book look like a raffle ticket!" (comparison through exaggeration); "Why is it all coming back? Flares, platform shoes, T.B." (the 'Rule of Three'); "It's not a great preparation for a mutually fulfilling sex life, bell ringing. All that tugging, it's not good. The first proper boyfriend I had I nearly killed him. He didn't mind that so much as being expected to do it in a circle with seven other people" (bringing together two ideas as one) and "It's poisoned. The confetti. They won't get far" (abrupt black comedy). These comic devices and more are explored in Comedy in the Genre chapters of THE STORIES.



Apart from learning comedy craft the other most useful aspect is understanding and being able to apply what comedy professionals call the 'Comic Gap', meaning the difference in life between what should be and what actually is. The classic application here are those comic situations where an inappropriate boss finds themselves in charge of an organisation, institution or group. Rarely are they completely incompetent, as that would challenge credibility, but they are usually psychologically unsuited to be in control of whatever it is they run. For example, Basil Fawlty, the rude hotel manager in *FAWLTY TOWERS*, Captain Mainwaring, the uninspiring leader of the Home Guard in *DAD'S ARMY*, David Brent the self-obsessed boss of the employees in the Slough branch of the fictional Wernham Hogg paper company in *THE OFFICE* and the ineffectual Jim Hacker in *YES, PRIME MINISTER*. But the real skill is knowing it's the right sort of wrongness and the wrong right job. Plus making sure, as they say in televisions, that it 'has legs', meaning, if it's a sit-com, that there are many episodes and indeed series to be had from the idea.

Comedy is a fascinating craft. Its reward is laughter and that can be a joy to give someone. Beyond that is its commercial value. Successfully comedy books, film and plays can go on to make millions. And humour helps sell in advertising. But neither comedy nor laughter proffer their secrets too easily, for comedy and laughter are elaborate and complex. It takes years before they are understood and even then both still remain something of a mystery.

E.B. White the author of *STUART LITTLE* and *CHARLOTTE'S* famously said in 'The Saturday Review of Literature' in 1941 that "Analyzing humour is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it... The innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind. It won't with stand much poking. It has a certain fragility, an evasiveness which one had best respect." To some degree we've been 'poking that frog', which is a phrase many comedians use when they start analysing comedy. Ultimately getting comedy to work is about knowing what is and isn't the right sort of wrongness. And to get the wrong right takes a certain kind of comedy brain. Some writers talk about comedy writing in terms of 'brain dislocation' others compare themselves to Janus, the two-headed Roman god of transitions, duality and passageways, for that need in comedy to think and see the world in a completely different way.



Of course there are those comic writers who, in public at least, refuse to analyse their work or their working methods. Comic geniuses like Spike Milligan and Peter Cook. For them it's more intuition than skill. Yes, they may understand the mechanisms of the joke and the comedy but how they come up with ideas, well, that is on instinct alone. Comedians call this 'having funny bones'. But such people are very rare. And we should be thankful for them.

"Dying is easy – it's comedy that's hard."

Supposedly said by the nineteenth-century actor Edmund Kean on his deathbed, but the line has also been attributed to many actors over the years, especially Edmund Gwenn and Groucho Marx



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: Thoughts on Laughter and Comedy

"The purpose of a comedy is to make the audience laugh."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"Prepare for mirth, for mirth becomes a feast."
William Shakespeare

*'Our mouths were full of laughter and our tongues sang allowed for
joy.'*
Book of Psalms 126:2

*"There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter
and good humour."*
Charles Dickens

*"From there to here, from here to there, funny things are
everywhere."*
Dr. Seuss

'He that is of a merry heart has a continual feast.'
Book of Proverbs, 15:15

Some definitions of some words, both familiar and unfamiliar, associated with laughter and comedy...

gelotophobia – Fear of being laughed at.

gelotophilia – The joy of being laughed at.

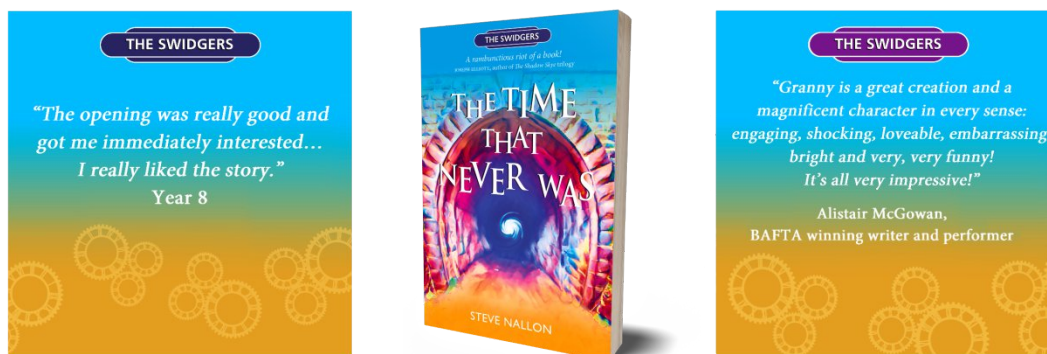
gelotophiles – Persons who actively seek and establish situations in which others may laugh at them.

katagelasticism – The psychological condition in which a person excessively enjoys laughing at others.

coulrophobia – The irrational fear of clowns.

humour – 1. The quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech. 2. The ability to express humour or amuse other people. 3. A mood or state of mind. 4. An inclination or whim. Historically each of the four chief fluids of the body – blood, phlegm, yellow bile (choler) and black bile (melancholy) – were thought to determine a person's physical and mental qualities by the relative proportions in which they were present. Hippocrates believed our health depend on a balance of four humours. From Latin 'humere' meaning 'moisture'.

ridicule (verb) – Subject to contemptuous and dismissive language or behaviour. From Latin 'ridiculum' meaning 'laughable'.



A few more thoughts on the idea that laughter is good for our health and helps us to keep going in life....

"Laughter is a form of internal jogging. It moves your internal organs around. It enhances respiration. It is an igniter of great expectations."

Norman Cousins, political journalist and author

"If you don't learn to laugh at trouble, you won't have anything to laugh at when you're old."

Edgar Watson Howe

***'Seeing too much sadness hath congeal'd your blood,
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy:
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.'***

From THE TAMING OF THE SHREW by William Shakespeare

"A smile is a curve that sets everything straight."

Phyllis Diller

***'A merry heart doeth with good like a medicine: but a broken spirit
drieth the bones.'***

Book Proverbs 17 22

“Humour is mankind’s greatest blessing.”

Mark Twain

“Laughter is a tranquilizer with no side effects.”

Arnold Glasow, humorist

“One of the endearing features of the human race is that we can’t generally keep serious for long. Be thankful for it. If we could we’d probably have been extinct long ago.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“A good laugh is the best pesticide.”

Vladimir Nabokov in STRONG OPINIONS

“A good laugh heals a lot of hurts.”

Madeleine L’Engle

‘As soap is to the body, so laughter is to the soul.’

An old Jewish Proverb

“A good laugh is a mighty good thing, a rather too scarce a good thing.”

Herman Melville

“Even the gods love jokes.”

Plato

“It is bad to suppress laughter. It goes back down and spreads to your hips.”

Fred Allen

“He who laughs, lasts!”

**A popular saying recorded Mary Pettibone Poole in 1938 in A GLASS
EVE AT THE KEYHOLE**

“The person who has a sense of humour is not just more relaxed in the face of a potentially stressful situation, but is more flexible in his approach.”

John Morreall

“We are all here for a spell. Get all the good laughs you can.”

Will Rogers

“Those who do not know how to weep with their whole heart don’t know how to laugh either.”

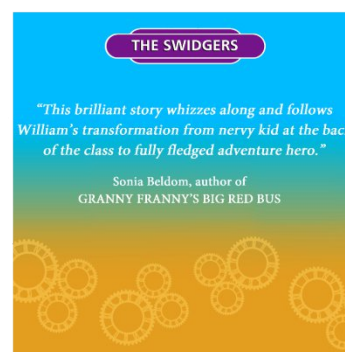
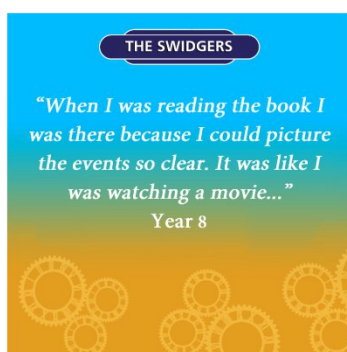
Golda Meir

“To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it.”

Charlie Chaplin

“We don’t laugh because we’re happy, we are happy because we laugh.”

William James



Some more thoughts on the psychology of the comedian...

There's a famous story told that in 1806 a man goes to visit a doctor who supposedly has the ability to treat melancholia. 'I can't eat, I can't sleep,' says the unhappy gentleman. I feel so, so miserable. Please help me, if you can, doctor.' The doctor smiles

and says, 'Laughter, friend, is the best medicine. So take yourself off to Covent Garden Theatre where you will find The Great Grimaldi performing in HARLEQUIN AND MOTHER GOOSE. I'm told it's very funny and that will cure you of all your ills without potions from my cabinet.' The gentleman looks at the doctor for a moment and then says, 'I'm sorry,' he says, 'that won't help. You see I am Grimaldi.'

A 'joke' learned early by most who work in comedy

"All comedians and comedy writers are angry. They may not realise it. They may be in denial. They may repress their anger or they may release its full destruction power. They may not show it if they're getting older, have had therapy or simply mellowed with age of success. But they are or were angry: I have made hundreds, worked closely with many and lived with myself. In my experience it's invariable."

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"A lot of comedians suffer from depression, and then there's a very jolly bunch of comedians who play golf."

Victoria Wood

"It helps to be an outsider. You can come from the wrong class, the wrong culture, the wrong ethnic background, the wrong religion, the wrong colour or the wrong sexual intention. It helps you to see the hypocrisy, the lies, the cheating and therefore the comedy."

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

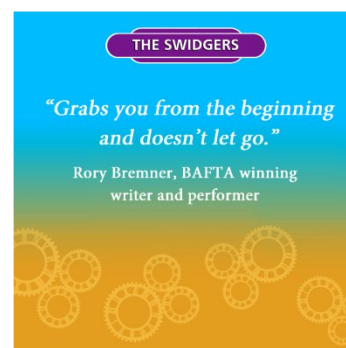
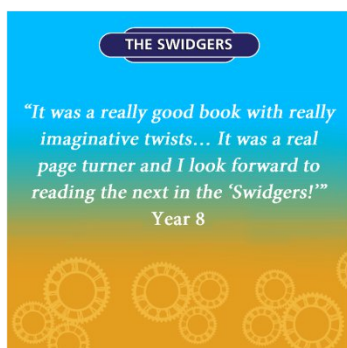
*'She was safe
Behind the whitened face
and red nose of the trade,
vocation more than certain
than a doctor's or priest's
to cheer and heal.
Hidden away from herself
she could always make us laugh*

*turning troubles like jackets
 inside out, wearing
 our rents and patches.
 Tripping up in trousers to long
 she made us all feel tall;
 and when we watched her
 cutting herself down,
 missing the ball.
 we knew we could cope
 What we never knew
 was the tightrope she walked
 when the laughter had died.
 Nowhere to hide in the empty night,
 no one to catch her fall.*

The poem 'The Clown', by Phoebe Hesketh

*"Some people who are aggressive, or prone to depression,
 melancholy and despair become comedians: they are trying to
 express their rage in a way that doesn't make them feel guilty. Thus
 anger can be healthier than sadness. But it runs the big risk of
 upsetting people. This is why it is usually transmuted into comedy.
 It's safer that way."*

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



Some more thoughts on 'agelasts', those who cannot laugh
or choose not to...

ROSALINE: *You shall this twelvemonth term from day to day
Visit the speechless sick and still converse
With groaning wretches; and your task shall be,
With all the fierce endeavour of your wit
To enforce the pained impotent to smile.*

BIRON: *To move wild laughter in the throat of death?
It cannot be; it is impossible:
Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.*

Act Five of LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST by William Shakespeare

*"Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humour itself is
not joy but sorrow. There is no humour in heaven."*

Mark Twain

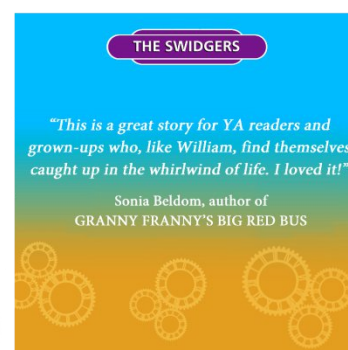
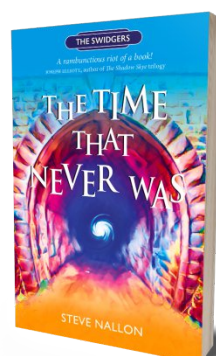
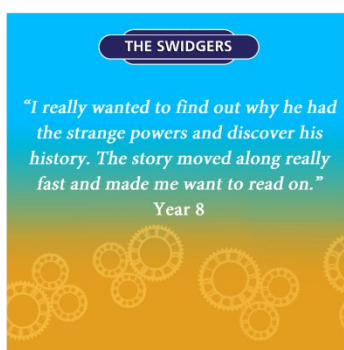
*'His voice was soft, his manner mild.
He seldom laughed but he often smiled.
He'd seen how civilized men behaved.
He never forgot and he never forgave.*

Not Sweeney...

Not Sweeney Todd...

The Demon barber of Fleet Street.'

'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' from SWEENEY TODD, music and
lyrics by Stephen Sondheim



Some more thoughts on laughter and comedy as new ways of thinking...

“At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities... Laughter is the loaded latency given us by nature as part of our native equipment to break up the stalemates of our lives and urge us on to deeper and more complex forms of knowing.”

Jean Houston, writer on human behaviour and adviser to Bill Clinton

Some more thoughts on concurrence of meaning, incongruity and laughter...

“The cause of laughter is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real project.”

Arthur Schopenhauer

MISS HAGGERD: (Hattie Jacques) Don't rush me. I think you'll find it's worth waiting for.

DR. KENNETH SOAPER (Kenneth Williams): So's Christmas but you won't find me stuffing your turkey.

From CARRY ON CAMPING, directed by Gerald Thoma, with screenplay by Talbot Rothwell

“Errors are comical, and are all to be explained by the contradiction involved.”

Søren Kierkegaard

“In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This

transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reflex effect of this upon the mind."

Immanuel Kant

"Ingenuity and incongruity always cheer me up."

Terry Pratchett

"On a throne at the centre of a sense of humour sits a capacity for irony. All wit rests on a cheerful awareness of life's incongruities. It is a gentling awareness, and no politician without it should be allowed near power."

George Will

"Wit is the fetching of congruity out of incongruity."

Joseph Addison

"Humour may be defined as the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof."

Stephen Leacock

"To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art, if my position is correct."

Mark Twain

"One question about a joke is, how well is the strangeness of the situation resolved? At 'The New Yorker', we retain a lot of incongruity, tapping the playful part of the mind – Monty Python-type stuff. We also try to use humour as a vehicle for communicating ideas. Not editorial comment, but observation."

**Robert Mankoff, cartoonist, editor, author, and cartoon editor at
The New Yorker for nearly twenty years.**



**Some more thoughts on laughter as a social bonding and
 laughter as a social correction....**

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”
Victor Borge

***“Group behaviour changes people. It reduces their inhibitions and
 frequently makes them react with less empathy and more cruelty.
 We see this tribal or group behaviour in football crowds, gangs,
 armies, politically inspired mobs... and audiences.”***
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

***“A story well told, containing conflicts and resolutions, gestures and
 expressions, and thoughts flavoured with emotion, connects people
 and integrates neural networks.”***
**Louis Cozolino in THE NEUROSCIENCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY:
 HEALING THE SOCIAL BRAIN**

***“Tragedies and comedies both say the same thing: terrible things
 will happen to you, and to the society, if you break our rules and
 taboos.”***

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“Guffaws, chuckles, and giggles are not arbitrary sounds, but types of innate acoustic code that have priority access to our brains and trigger behaviour.”

Robert R. Provine, LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

“If you wish to glimpse inside a human soul and get to know the man, don’t bother analysing his ways of being silent, of talking, of weeping, or seeing how much he is moved by noble ideas; you’ll get better results if you just watch him laugh. If he laughs well, he’s a good man... All I claim to know is that laughter is the most reliable gauge of human nature.”

Feodor Dostoyevsky

“If a play is a tragedy, the audience is asked to empathise with the protagonist. If the play is a comedy, the audience is asked to laugh at him.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“Laughter, like speech, is a vocal signal that we seldom send unless there is an audience.”

Robert R. Provine, LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

“The best way to cheer yourself is to try to cheer someone else up.”

Mark Twain

“Laughter is the corrective force which prevents us from becoming cranks... In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbour.

Henri Bergson

“It’s funnier to see a funny movie in a full theatre than at home on video: laughter is, from an evolutionary standpoint, a group activity. There is safety in numbers. It heightens the effect if we all react together.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can: all of them make me laugh."

W.H. Auden

"Laughter has no foreign accent."

Paul Lowney

Some more thoughts on the 'Release Theory' and the
'Surprise Theory' of laughter...

"The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged upon their constrainers."

Lord Shaftesbury in AN ESSAY ON THE FREEDOM OF WIT AND
HUMOUR (17090

"The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh."

Cicero, in ON THE ORATOR

"If the [clown's] movement is exaggerated and inexpedient, my increased expenditure in order to understand it is inhibited in statu nascendi, as it were in the act of being mobilized; it is declared superfluous and is free for use elsewhere or perhaps for discharge by laughter."

Sigmund Freud in WIT AND ITS RELATION TO THE UNCONSCIOUS
(1905)

“Laughter is a release from the tension of tragedy, an ironic counterpoint; or it can be a reminder of the depths of a character’s despair, as it is throughout WAITING FOR GODOT. Here again we see the thinnest of the line between tragedy and comedy.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“[Laughter] marks the ending ... of a period of suspense, or expectation... It is a sudden relaxation of strain, so far as occurring through the medium of the breathing and vocal apparatus... The laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief.”

John Dewey



Some more thoughts on the craft of comedy...

“I never wrote a joke in my life. I just get on stage and let it flow.”

Eddie Griffin

“Concentrate on the truth of the scene. Let the comedy take care of itself... When directing a comedy search for the serious. When directing a drama, on the other hand, seek out every scrap of legitimate humour.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Some more thoughts on the contagious and infectious nature of laughter...

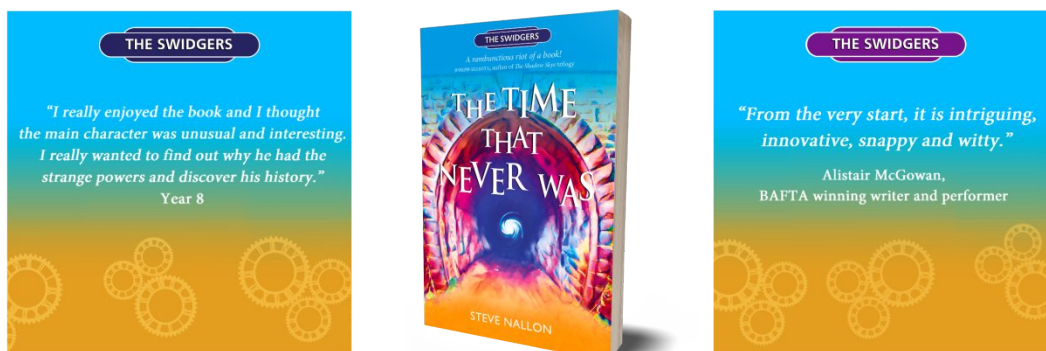
*'Smiling is infectious,
you catch it like the flu,
When someone smiled at me today,
I started smiling too.
I passed around the corner
and someone saw my grin.
When he smiled I realized
I'd passed it on to him.
I thought about that smile,
then I realized its worth.
A single smile, just like mine
could travel round the earth.
So, if you feel a smile begin,
don't leave it undetected.
Let's start an epidemic quick,
and get the world infected!'*
'Smile', a poem by Spike Milligan

"Contagious laughter is a compelling display of Homo sapiens, the social mammal. It strips away of veneer of culture and language and challenges the shaky hypothesis that we are rational creatures in full conscious control of our behaviour."

Robert R. Provine, LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

*"Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone;
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
But has trouble enough of its own.
Sing, and the hills will answer;
Sigh, it is lost on the air;
The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
But shrink from voicing care."*

From the poem 'Solitude' by Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1895-1919)



Some more thoughts on laughter as a coping mechanism...

"If we couldn't laugh we would all go insane."

Robert Frost, poet

"Perhaps I know best why it is man alone who laughs; he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter."

Frederick W. Nietzsche

"I think the next best thing to solving a problem is finding some humour in it."

Frank Howard Clark, screenwriter of LAUGHING AT DANGER (1924)

"Humour is one of the most serious tools we have for dealing with impossible situations."

Erica Jong, author

"It is impossible for you to be angry and laugh at the same time. Anger and laughter are mutually exclusive and you have the power to choose either."

Dr. Wayne Dyer, writer and speaker

“Laughter gives us distance. It allows us to step back from an event, deal with it and then move on.”

Bob Newhart, comedian

“A person without a sense of humour is like a wagon without springs. It’s jolted by every pebble on the road.”

Henry Ward Beecher, minister and nineteenth century social reformer

“Comedy is defiance. It’s a snort of contempt in the face of fear and anxiety. And it’s the laughter that allows hope to creep back on the inhale.”

Will Durst, comedian and satirist

Some more reflections on and examples of the ‘Rule of Three’ format, ‘The Comic Gap’, ‘The Internal Contradiction’, ‘The Obvious Truth’, and ‘The Comic Drop’....

“Only three people have spoken in Westminster Hall before: The Queen, Nelson Mandela and Winston Churchill. Which is either a high bar or the beginning of a good joke.”

President Barack Obama at the opening of his speech at The Palace of Westminster

“Humour is laughing at what you haven’t got when you ought to have it.”

James Langston Hughes

“When someone had declared that he was fond of walking alone, an Austrian said to him: ‘You like walking alone; so do I: therefore we can go together.’ He starts from the conception, ‘A pleasure which two love they can enjoy in common,’ and subsumes under it the very case which excludes community.”

Arthur Schopenhauer in *THE WORLD AS WILL AND IDEA (DIE WELT ALS WILLE UND VORSTELLUNG)* 1818

"There are only two things I can't stand in this world: People who are intolerant of other people's cultures, and the Dutch."

Nigel Powers in *AUSTIN POWERS IN GOLDMEMBER*

'Making tiger soup is easy. First catch your tiger...'

Popular joke

SUSAN: Geoffrey concludes, when we put our money in the plate it is a symbol of everything in our lives we are offering to God and that includes sex. I could only find 10p.

From Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* play *BED AMONG THE LENTILS*

Some more thoughts on the moral abdication theory of laughter...

"There is no such thing as bad taste. Something is funny, or it's not funny. When comedy is funny, it tells the truth that might not otherwise be told. 'Bad Taste' is simply a way of describing when a joke has crossed the line into 'not funny'."

Jonathan Lynn, *COMEDY RULES*

*'Oh, Mademoiselle from Armenteers,
Parlez-vous.*

*Oh, Mademoiselle from Armenteers,
Parlez-vous.*

*Men went to the front and met their death
To get away from her garlic breath!
Inky-pinky, parlez-vous.'*

From the traditional barrack-room ballad, *Mademoiselle from Armenteers*

***“Comedy is an outlet for rage, a way to say or do things that
‘shouldn’t’ be said or done.”***

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



**Some more thoughts on the range and the spectrum of
laughter and comedy, from observational humour to moral
abdication...**

***“Tom Stoppard, I read, called laughter the sound of comprehension.
I have always thought of it as the sound of recognition. We laugh
when we see something on stage or screen that rings true: there,
but for the grace of God, go I!”***

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

***“I bought myself some glasses. My observational comedy
improved.”***

Sara Pasoe

***“On average, an infant laughs nearly two hundred times a day; an
adult, only twelve. Maybe they are laughing so much because they
are looking at us. To be able to preserve joyousness of heart and
yet to be concerned in thought: in this way we can determine good
fortune and misfortune on earth, and bring to perfection everything
on earth.”***

I Ching

“When I explained to a friend recently that the subject matter of most comedy is tragic (drunkenness, overweight, financial problems, accidents, etc.) he said, ‘Do you mean to tell me that the dreadful events of the day are a fit subject for humorous comment?’ The answer is ‘No, but they will be pretty soon.’ ... Tragedy plus time plus the will to be amused equals comedy. If you don’t have the will to laugh, you won’t be amused – whether it’s by a Chaplin or anyone like him.”

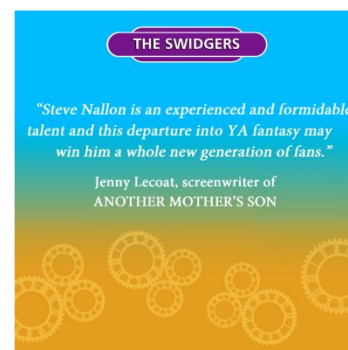
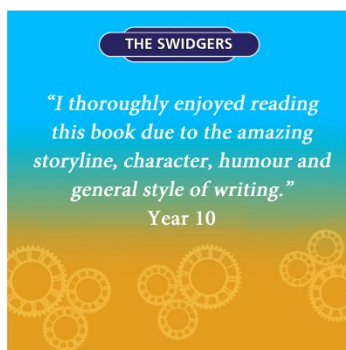
Steve Allen

“A well-balanced person is one who finds both sides of an issue laughable.”

Herbert Procknow

“The child’s laughter is pure until he first laughs at a clown.”

Angela Carter, novelist

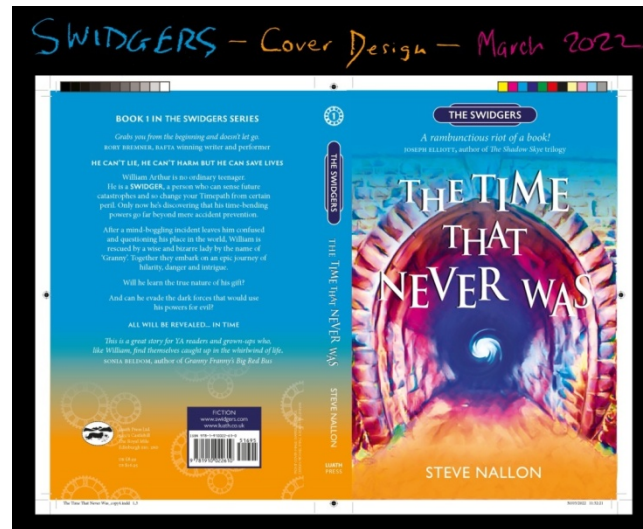


Some more thoughts on the physiological, ethological, evolutionary and ancestral nature of laughter...

“The vowel-like ‘ha-ha-ha’s that parse the outward breath in modern human laughter is one step removed from the archetype

huffing and puffing that signalled laughter and play in our ancient ancestors.”

Robert R. Provine, LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION



Some more thoughts on strange or inappropriate laughter...

“Mrs. Fairfax!” I called out: for I now heard her descending the great stairs. “Did you hear that loud laugh? Who is it?” “Some of the servants, very likely,” she answered: “perhaps Grace Poole.” “Did you hear it?” I again inquired. “Yes, plainly: I often hear her: she sews in one of these rooms. Sometimes Leah is with her; they are frequently noisy together.” The laugh was repeated in its low, syllabic tone, and terminated in an odd murmur. “Grace!” exclaimed Mrs. Fairfax. I really did not expect any Grace to answer; for the laugh was as tragic, as preternatural a laugh as any I ever heard; and, but that it was high noon, and that no circumstance of ghostliness accompanied the curious cachinnation; but that neither scene nor season favoured fear, I should have been superstitiously afraid. However, the event showed me I was a fool for entertaining a sense even of surprise.

The door nearest me opened, and a servant came out – a woman of between thirty and forty; a set, square-made figure, red-haired,

and with a hard, plain face: any apparition less romantic or less ghostly could scarcely be conceived." Too much noise, Grace," said Mrs. Fairfax. "Remember directions!" Grace curtsied silently and went in.

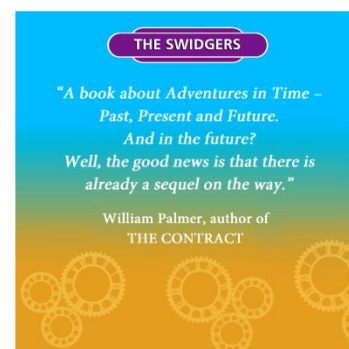
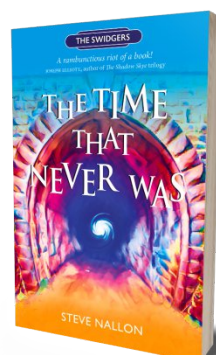
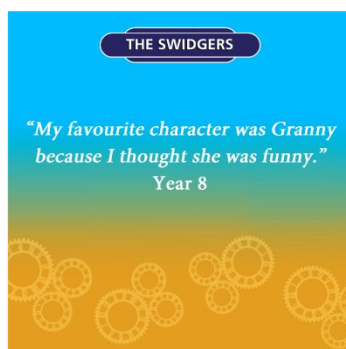
From JANE EYRE by Charlotte Brontë

MARCUS ANDRONICUS: Now, farewell, flattery: die, Andronicus;
 Thou dost not slumber: see, thy two sons' heads,
 Thy warlike hand, thy mangled daughter here:
 Thy other banish'd son, with this dear sight
 Struck pale and bloodless; and thy brother, I,
 Even like a stony image, cold and numb.
 Ah, now no more will I control thy griefs:
 Rend off thy silver hair, thy other hand
 Gnawing with thy teeth; and be this dismal sight
 The closing up of our most wretched eyes;
 Now is a time to storm; why art thou still?

TITUS ANDRONICUS. Ha, ha, ha!

MARCUS ANDRONICUS: Why dost thou laugh? it fits not with this hour.

TITUS ANDRONICUS: Why, I have not another tear to shed.
 From Act Three of TITUS ANDRONICUS by William Shakespeare



Some more thoughts laughter and tickling...

“Laughter evoked by jokes is the vocal acknowledgement of verbal play, a response several steps removed from the primal stimulus of tickle.”

Robert R. Provine, LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

“If a young chimpanzee be tickled – the armpits are particularly sensitive to tickling, as in the case of our children – a more decided chuckling or laughing sound is uttered; though the laughter is sometime noiseless.”

Charles Darwin in THE EXPRESSION OF EMOTION IN MAN AND ANIMALS (1872)

SHYLOCK: If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”

From William Shakespeare’s THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, Act III, scene I

“A human’s inability to tickle herself is due to a neurological cancellation of the sensory consequence of self-produced movements... explainable by the action of a non-self detector, a neurological comparator that distinguishes self-stimulation of our body (proprioception) from that produced by motile, external objects, or organisms (exteroception). The less predictable the stimulus, the greater its nonselfness and otherness.”

Robert R. Provine, LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

“Death from violent laughter has been recorded, but in this instance it is very probable that death was not due to the emotion itself, but to the extreme convulsion and exertion used in the laughter. The Ephemerides mentions a death from laughter, and also describes the death of a pregnant woman from violent mirth... Strange as it may seem, Saiut-Foix says that

the Moravian brothers, a sect of Anabaptists having great horror of bloodshed, executed their condemned brethren by tickling them to death."

ANOMALIES AND CURIOSITIES OF MEDICINE (1896) G. M. Gould
and W. L. Pyle

"[On the subject of self-control] There are men who, like those who tickle themselves beforehand to get rid of ticklishness, having felt and seen beforehand the approach of temptation, yield not to passion."

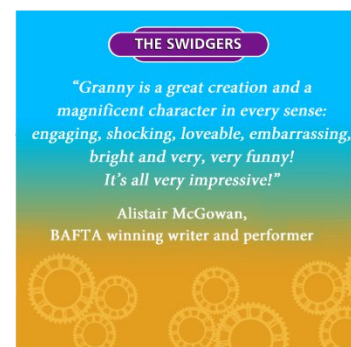
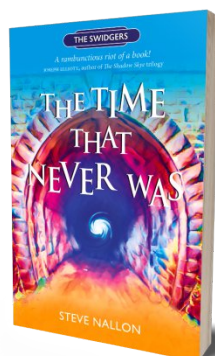
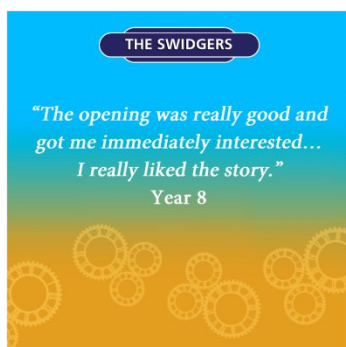
Aristotle in THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS (written approximately 335 BC)

"A young child, if tickled by a strange man, would scream from fear."

Charles Darwin in THE EXPRESSION OF EMOTION IN MAN AND ANIMALS (1872)

"Imagine your strong defensive reaction to a scorpion crawling up the side of your neck, or one wriggling its way around your crotch. The heritage of tickle as a defensive reaction is suggested further by the tendency of even pleasurable tickle to trigger squirming, withdrawal of the tickled appendage, huddling and a defensive, fending-away reaction."

Robert R. Provine, LAUGHTER: A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION



Some more thoughts on the tears of the clown and relationship between comedy and tragedy, their similarities and their differences...

“The world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think.”

Horace Walpole

“Comedy is objective. Tragedy is subjective. The structural difference is that, whereas tragedy ends in the death of the protagonist, a farce usually ends in the restoration of the status quo ante, reassuring the audience that society’s values are still intact and survival is possible once punishment and humiliation have been inflicted.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

“The best place to begin is at a point when your story is already up and running, but not so far advanced that you can’t fill them in about what’s already happened as you go. As to the ending, I once coined a phrase (I think it was me) that tragedy was merely comedy interrupted. Or vice versa. Our lives go up and down like ships on the ocean, and as authors, we have the choice of ending on a peak or a trough. Or, more interestingly, of ending midway between the two – leaving the audience to conjecture: are the characters still on the way up or on the way down again?”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“The clown may be the source of mirth, but – who shall make the clown laugh?”

Angela Carter, novelist

“The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction... The comic apprehension

evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by having in mind the way out, which is why the contradiction is painless. The tragic apprehension sees the contradiction and despairs of a way out."

Søren Kierkegaard

"There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humour and hurt."

Erma Bombeck, author and humorist

"If you have no tragedy, you have no comedy. Crying and laughing are the same emotion. If you laugh too hard, you cry. And vice versa."

Sid Caesar

"The wit makes fun of other persons; the satirist makes fun of the world; the humorist makes fun of himself, but in so doing, he identifies himself with people – that is, people everywhere, not for the purpose of taking them apart, but simply revealing their true nature. The wellspring of laughter is not happiness, but pain, stress, and suffering."

James Thurber

"Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die."

Mel Brooks

LORD ILLINGWORTH: *The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.*

MRS ALLONBY: *And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.*

From Oscar Wild's A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

"I liked Mama's saying... 'Most comedy is tragedy plus time'...Tragic then, funny now."

Carol Burnet

“Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.”

Attributed to Charlie Chaplin by Richard Roud, director of the New York Film Festival

“The young man who has not wept is a savage, and the old man who will not laugh is a fool.”

George Santayana

“Life itself is a comedy – a slap-stick comedy at that. It is always hitting you over the head with the unexpected. You reach to get the thing you want – slap! bang! It’s gone! You strike at your enemy and hit a friend. You walk confidently, and fall. Whether it is tragedy or comedy depends on how you look at it. There is not a hair’s breadth between them.”

From CHARLIE CHAPLIN’S OWN STORY (1919)

“The comic and the tragic lie inseparably close, like light and shadow.”

Socrates

“Despair is the constant companion of the clown.”

Angela Carter

“Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh.”

George Bernard Shaw



Some more thoughts on the joy and power of laughter...

“Laughter serves as a blocking agent. Like a bulletproof vest, it may help protect you against the ravages of negative emotions that can assault you in disease.”

Norman Cousins

“In this country, vices are without consequence, but ridicule can kill.”

The Duke of Guines in RIDICULE, directed by Patrice Leconte and written by Rémi Waterhouse, Michel Fessler and Eric Vicaut

“Mirth is like a flash of lightning that breaks through a gloom of clouds and glitter for the moment. Cheerfulness keeps up daylight in the mind, filling it with steady and perpetual serenity.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

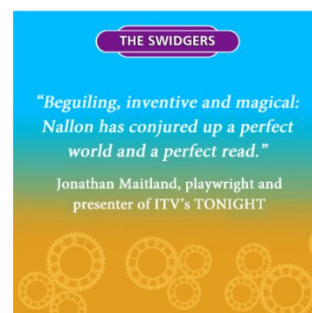
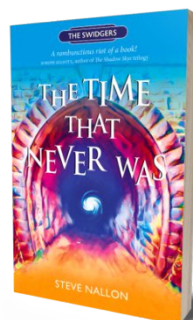
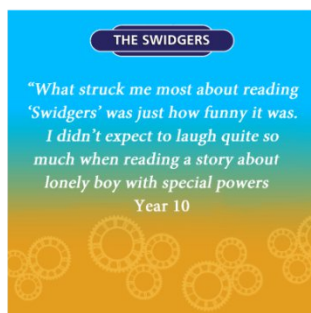
“In comedy laughter settles all arguments.”

Robert McKee

“Trouble knocked at the door, but, hearing laughter, hurried away.”

Benjamin Franklin

***“Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face”* Victor Hugo**



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: Changing the World

“Political purpose – using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.

Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude... Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

‘I Want to Change the World’

George Orwell never went as far as saying his stories could or would change the world, yet he was explicit in the purpose of his writing. And that was to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Orwell was a campaigning democratic socialist but, as he says in WHY I WRITE, “anyone who cares to examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains much that a full-time politician would

consider irrelevant.” The Story is always there among the social politics.

In a way, however, the story part of his writing is his message. ANIMAL FARM (1945) is an allegory of the failure of the Soviet economic and political system. And a very effective allegory it was too. For the post-war generation who were perhaps a little too blinkered and idealist in the way they saw Soviet Russia, ANIMAL FARM was a real eye-opener.

And if ANIMAL FARM is about the failure of an economic political system, then Orwell’s 1984, (written in 1948 – just swap the last two numbers round to understand it is a book for its time) is ultimately a warning about a totalitarian system that triumphs, for in the end, Winston Smith learns to “love Big Brother.” Writing in 1946 Orwell says, “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it. It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects.” And 1984 proves that point.

But what stories, films, novels have changed the world or the society we live in? A case can certainly be made for I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG (1932), which led to American audiences questioning the legitimacy of the U.S. legal system to such a degree that the man upon whom the film’s protagonist was based – and who at the time was still imprisoned – was able to appeal his

sentence and was later released. And many other chain gang members followed suit.

Back in the nineteenth century in Victorian England some of the novels of Charles Dickens could be said to have helped bring about change, for example, the closure of appalling schools such as the one in *NICHOLAS NICKELEBY*. Dickens' novel *HARD TIMES*, unusual in not being set in London but in the north of England, focused on the inhuman mechanization of the industrial world and the lack of compassion resulting from it. It's difficult to make direct links with changes in the law, but Dickens at the very least altered hearts and minds by making people aware of the world beyond their own front door that they never would otherwise have seen.



In the late twentieth century, plays and movies such as *UP THE JUNCTION*, *A TASTE OF HONEY*, *THE L-SHAPED ROOM* and *VICTIM* arguably did more to alter attitudes to social issues than did newspapers or politicians, which in turn helped make the legalisation of previously contentious issues such as abortion and consenting

homosexual relations possible. Around the same time, CATHY COME HOME highlighted the housing shortage and homelessness.

In 80s America, PHILADELPHIA certainly helped change attitudes to HIV. BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE in 2002 was intended to bring about changes to United States gun law. It didn't succeed but it did inspire a movement. In Australia, the documentary film LOUSY LITTLE SIXPENCE (1983) was the first to deal with the issue of the 'Stolen Generation', where children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent were taken quite legally by the state and placed by federal and state agencies and church missions with white parents. Another documentary, KANYINI (2006), followed some twenty years later. Both are now shown in schools as part of Australian social history.



And there are other novels, movies and television series worth mentioning in the context of attitudes and social change. For example, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT, GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER, THE 14, RHINO, SCUM, YIELD TO THE NIGHT, I WANT WHAT I WANT, BOYS FROM THE BLACK STUFF,

plus the many socially aware storylines in EASTENDERS, CORONATION STREET and BROOKSIDE. It's impossible to pin-point exactly how and why social attitudes change, but certainly the stories we tell make a difference. And that's why those who oppose social change are so scared of them.

“ANIMAL FARM was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.”

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE



“Habitualization devours objects, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. If all the complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life; it exists to make us feel things, to make the stone stony. The end of art is to give a sensation of the object seen, not as recognized. The technique of art is to make things ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms obscure, so as to increase the difficulty and the duration of perception. The act of perception in art is an end in itself and must be prolonged. In art, it is our experience of the process of construction that counts, not the finished product.”

Victor Shklovsky

Making Strange

Ostranenie – ‘Making Strange’ or ‘Defamiliarization’ – was first coined in 1917 by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art

as Device” (or “Art as Technique”). The purpose of art, he argued, was to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The art of art, especially in poetic language, was then to make familiar objects ‘unfamiliar’ – “the author’s purpose is to create the vision which results from that de-automatised perception. A work is created ‘artistically’ so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception.” See anew, if you like. This, in a way, is an idea that goes back to Aristotle, who argued that in order for poetry to distinguish itself from prose, “poetic language must appear strange and wonderful.”



David Lodge puts all this in a slightly different way in his book *THE ART OF FICTION* when he asks, “What do we mean – and it is a common term of praise – when we say that a book is ‘original’. Not, usually, that the writer has invented something without precedent, but that she has made us ‘perceive’ what we already, in a conceptual sense, ‘know’, by deviating from the conventional, habitual ways of

representing reality. Defamiliarization, in short, is another word for ‘originality’.”

But can ‘making strange’ do more than just make strange?

Verfremdungseffekt – the distancing effect, sometimes translated as the ‘alienation effect’ or the ‘estrangement effect’ – is a performance concept coined and developed by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). Brecht first used the term in an essay on “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” published in 1936, in which he described it as “playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious.” That which is ‘familiar’ is presented in an ‘unfamiliar’ way with the specific purpose of making the audience think profoundly about the drama and its meaning rather than connect empathetically with the characters. As Brecht said, “It is not enough to demand insight and informative images of reality from the theatre. Our theatre must stimulate a desire for understanding, a delight in changing reality. Our audience must experience not only the ways to free Prometheus, but be schooled in the very desire to free him. Theatre must teach all the pleasures and joys of discovery, all the feelings of triumph associated with liberation.”



In their slightly different ways, *Ostranenie* and *Verfremdungseffekt* both suggest that the purpose of art should be to change your perception of the world. But does it work? Can your thinking be changed? The satirist John Wells used to say that the art of comedy rarely completely alters your opinion of things, “but it can,” he argued, “move the furniture around in your head.” In other words, make you re-think what you think. And haven’t we all come home to a home where the furniture has been slightly rearranged, making it a less familiar home than the one we left early in the morning? And equally, haven’t we also come home from a play or a movie to that home at least a little changed in how we think?

“There are plays – and books and songs and poems and dances – that are perhaps upsetting or intricate or unusual, that you leave unsure, but which you think about perhaps the next day, and perhaps for a week, and perhaps for the rest of your life.”

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE



‘Agitprop’, abbreviated from Russian agitatsiya propaganda (agitation propaganda), a political strategy in which the techniques of agitation and propaganda are used to influence and mobilize public opinion.

Encyclopaedia Britannica

Agitprop and Propaganda

The 7:84 Theatre Company, a left-wing agitprop drama group, took its name from a statistic on distribution of wealth in the United Kingdom published in *The Economist* in 1966, which stated that 7% of the population of the UK owned 84% of the country’s wealth. 7:84 was ardently and avowedly socialist and John McGrath, the founder of 7:84, took the position that an artist should be *engagée*, that is, engaged with political and social events. “We began serious discussions,” said McGrath, “about starting a theatre company to recreate a form of popular theatre and tour it to working class audiences and their allies during 1968. This was the year of the events in Paris, the big Grosvenor Square demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the gunning down of the students at Kent State University, the shooting of Bobby Kennedy, the Civil Rights marches

in Derry, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia and Che Guevara's guerrilla struggles in Bolivia."

The style adopted by 7:84 was of 'cartoon agitprop', with singing, dancing and speeches straight to the audience, plus a narrative style with a strong and very direct visual consciousness. And there's a comparison here with the Italian theatre director and playwright Dario Fo and the work he did with his wife Franca Rame such as *CAN'T PAY, WON'T PAY* and *ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST*, as well as the theatre style of John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy as presented in plays such as *THE NON-STOP CONNOLLY SHOW*.



The criticism of agitprop, of course, has always been that it is essentially preaching to the choir – and, with it being theatre, quite a small choir – so that the only people who would ever go and watch it would be those who already agreed with its politics. And it was partly for this reason that the socialist writer Trevor Griffiths (*THE PARTY*,

COMEDIANS) took his dramas to the mass audience of television. That said, an early production by 7:84 in 1973 called of THE CHEVIOT, THE STAG AND THE BLACK OIL (later a BBC Television *Play for Today*) became a major talking point and is now seen by many to have to have been instrumental in bringing about a dramatic increase in support for Scottish nationalism.

“People have tried for centuries to use drama to change people’s lives, to influence, to comment, to express themselves. It doesn’t work. It might be nice if it worked for those things, but it doesn’t. The only thing the dramatic form is good for is telling a story.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



“Dramatic playing is essential for children’s learning empathy and self-control. Children learn to empathise as they view the world from other people’s perspectives including those of peers, adults, and people in stories... To be able to stand up and explore fictional worlds... all students must agree to imagine actively that they have encountered, or that they are encountering, an imagined person. However, this does not mean that you or the students have to become actors.”

Becky Searls, from TEACHING & LEARNING WITH DRAMA: A COLLECTION OF QUOTES AND REFLECTIONS

Theatre-in-Education, Community Workshops and Role Play

Objective. There are many areas of theatre and drama that are worlds away from the Broadway musical or the West End play. Areas of drama such as T.I.E. (Theatre-in-Education) think of stories in a completely different way to the commercial dramatist. Story and drama are presented with the purpose of learning and development through a dramatic experience. One noticeable difference between the two forms is that T.I.E. may not have an ending to the story. The presentation may stop at a crucial moment in the story and the students watching will then be asked to comment on what they've seen and suggest ways forward. Community Theatre projects sometimes work in a similar way. For example, there may be a project on mental health and self-harm where there are scenes between the main character, a family member, then a social worker, then perhaps a stranger, then a health professional. At the end it's suggested the character went on to take their own life. That's where the play may end, but not so the project. In a way the drama is only a starting point, for then the audience of say health professionals are asked to consider what could have been done in the scenes presented to help the character in order to prevent the suicide.

“As teachers we may choose to regard young people as subjects with individual lives rather than as statistics or objects to be managed, to treat them with dignity rather than as problems, and to value them as equals rather than as inferiors. More challenging, we have the power to treat youngsters with respect even when

they may disrespect us or devalue their peers... New knowledge is understanding and knowledge of skills that is authored by participants – actually created and produced in the classroom by the students – or co-authored – as they work collaboratively with one another alongside the teacher.”

Becky Searls, from **TEACHING & LEARNING WITH DRAMA: A COLLECTION OF QUOTES AND REFLECTIONS**



Some more thoughts on changing the world and our perceptions of it...

“A word after a word after a word is power.”

Margaret Atwood

“One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world.”

Malala Yousafzai, I AM MALALA

“I wanted them to be diverse. The whole underlying principle of the X-Men was to try to be an anti-bigotry story to show there’s good in every person.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer.

“Art, the social purpose of which is to create, has been pressed into the service as a censor, whose purpose is to control. We are left with the spectrum of expression: the Radical, which seeks to destroy (blank canvases, graffiti art); the Liberal, which seeks to

reform (plays, books, films about homosexuality, feminism – works about conditions rather than about character); the Conservative, which seeks to lull, to distract, to sentimentalise (E.T., the Muppets); the Fascist, which seeks to control and manipulate (Walt Disney World, Up with People)."

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

"Angry contradiction of the patriarch is not creativity; it's delinquency calling for attention. Difference for the sake of difference is as empty an achievement as slavishly following the commercial imperative."

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

"Actors are agents of change. A film, a piece of theatre, a piece of music, or a book can make a difference. It can change the world."

Alan Rickman

"The mission of the theatre, after all, is to change, to raise the consciousness of people to their human possibilities."

Arthur Miller, playwright

"When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art'. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience. Anyone who cares to examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains much that a full-time politician would consider irrelevant."

George Orwell, WHY I WRITE

"I remember saying in 1958, 'I am imprisoned with a perception that will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time.' And I certainly failed, didn't I? At the

time, I thought I had books in me that no one else did, and so as soon as I was able to write them, society would be altered. Kind of grandiose.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“Ideally, anything one writes should have a social conscience: if you can write a story that thrills, and with a good message, that’s the perfect type of a story.”

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

“He who has so little knowledge of human nature as to seek happiness by changing anything but his own disposition will waste his life in fruitless efforts.”

Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

“I really don't have any solutions and I don't like movies that do.”
Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director

“Writers aren’t taken seriously anymore, and a large part of the blame must go to the writers of my generation, most certainly including myself. We haven’t written the books that should have been written. We’ve spent too much time exploring ourselves. We haven’t done the imaginative work that could help define America, and as a result, our average citizen does not grow in self-understanding. We just expand all over the place, and this spread is about as attractive as collapsed and flabby dough on a stainless steel table.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

“A culture cannot evolve without honest, powerful storytelling. When a society repeatedly experiences glossy, hollowed-out,

pseudo-stories, it degenerates. We need true satires and tragedies, dramas and comedies that shine a clean light into the dingy corners of the human psyche and society.”

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

“You are now to retire (as indeed should I) carefully to consider your verdict of not guilty.”

Peter Cook as Mr Justice Cantley, mocking Sir Joseph Cantley’s notoriously biased summing up speech in the 1979 Jeremy Thorpe trial.



“Satire, according to the dictionary, is a load of literature that uses comedy, wit or humour with the intention of changing society... Tony Jay doesn’t describe YES MINISTER and YES PRIME MINISTER as satire. He believes that because we offer observations on (rather than solutions to) society’s ills and injustices, we are not trying to change anything. My opinion is different: I don’t believe that satirical writing has to offer solutions – at least, not practical ones.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

Satire

The satirical television series SPITTING IMAGE ran for sixteen years and it was watched each week by as many as fourteen million people. During its time on air there were two General Elections – and the ruling Conservative government, heavily mocked by SPITTING IMAGE, won both. So did SPITTING IMAGE make a difference and change the world? Clearly not in electoral terms, but what can be

said about the series is that it certainly kicked pretty much all social deference well into touch. The 1950s respect for those in authority, whether it be the police, the politician or the clergy, still lingered in the 1970s, but that respect all but disappeared during the 1980s. And SPITTING IMAGE, through the power of ridicule and mockery, played it's part in bringing about that change, especially regarding the royal family.



At the same time that SPITTING IMAGE was being broadcast, Mikhail Gorbachev was General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Domestically he developed a policy of *glasnost* ('openness'), allowing for more freedom of speech and press, while his *perestroika* ('restructuring') sought to make decision making less centralised in order to improve economic efficiency. And it's possible to say here that stories of a particular kind helped in their way to bring about these changes. You see, Gorbachev was a great collector of political jokes. And in the jokes he found unwelcome truths about the flaws and inadequacies of the Soviet system. A few examples...

A young boy wrote in his weekly school essay: "My cat has just had seven kittens – and they are all communist." The next week, the boy wrote: "My cat's kittens are now all capitalist." After class, the teacher called him over and asked the boy to explain the sudden change. "Last week, you said they were all communists!" The boy agreed. "Yes, they were, but this week they all opened their eyes."

A man walked into a shop and asked the clerk, "I don't suppose you have any meat?" The man behind the counter said, "No, here we don't have any fish. The shop that doesn't have any meat is across the road."

An American dog, a Polish dog and a Soviet dog gather in a park. The American dog says "In my country if you bark long enough, you will be given some meat". The Polish dog replies "What is 'meat'?" The Soviet dog says "What is 'bark'?"

Dryden argued that the true end of satire is 'the amendment of vices', in essence what that means is that for a satire to be a satire it must have a moral purpose. In story terms, what this means is that for any narrative to be a satire the controlling idea behind it should be clear and understood. In other words, can you make a judgement from the satire as to the moral position of its creator? And in satire the answer is usually 'Yes' in that the satirists are in opposition to something or other. And this often leads to the perennial criticism aimed at the satirist which is that they are 'just a load of ag'nners.' Bluntly put, all satirists ever do is tell us what they don't like or don't approve of but never what they are for.

For all their perceived limitations, the satirists do have some fascinating tools in their graffiti paint box, including techniques such as inversion (Pierre Boulle's THE PLANET OF THE APES), Menippean dialogue (Antony Jay's and Jonathan Lynn's YES, PRIME MINISTER), black comedy (Evelyn Waugh's THE LOVED ONE), burlesque (Alexander Pope's THE RAPE OF THE LOCK), travesty (Edward Bond's EARLY MORNING) and the grotesque (SPITTING IMAGE). Plus, of course, allegory, for example's THE CRUCIBLE and George's Orwell's ANIMAL FARM.

Some thoughts on satire, both for and against...

"People say satire is dead. It's not dead; it's alive and living in the White House."

Robin Williams

"Praise undeserved, is satire in disguise."

Alexander Pope

"Satire is what closes on Saturday night."

George S. Kaufman

"The purpose of satire has been rightly stated as to strip off the veneer of comforting illusion and cosy half truth, and our job, as I see it, is to put it back again!"

Michael Flanders of the song writing duo Flanders and Swann

"I only aim at the powerful. When satire is aimed at the powerless, it is not only cruel - it's vulgar."

Molly Ivins

"The trouble with most comedians who try to do satire is that they are essentially brash, noisy and indelicate people who have to use a sledge hammer to smash a butterfly."

Imogene Coca

"I have never knowingly, I swear to God, written satire. The word connotes exaggeration of the foibles of mankind. To me, mankind just has foibles. You don't have to push it!"

Tom Wolfe

"Fools are my theme, let satire be my song."

Lord Byron

"It is hard for power to enjoy or incorporate humour and satire in its system of control."

Dario Fo

"The most brilliant satire of all time was A MODEST PROPOSAL by Jonathan Swift. You'll notice how everything got straightened out in Ireland within days of that coming out."

P. J. O'Rourke

"Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own."

Jonathan Swift

"Political satire became obsolete when they awarded Henry Kissinger the Nobel Peace Prize."

Tom Lehrer

"Satire can always be found everywhere. A people without love for satire is a dead people."

Dario Fo

"Satire is focused bitterness."

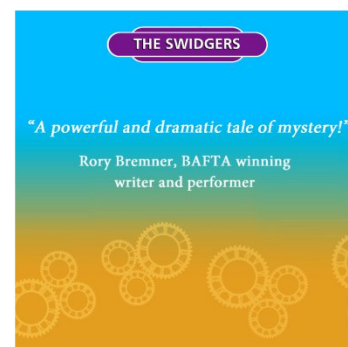
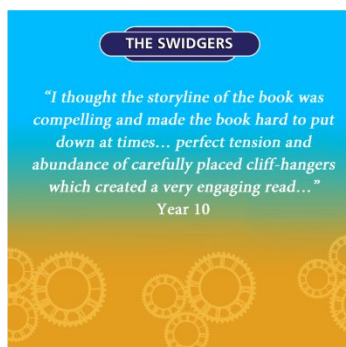
Leo Rosten

"I never really am concerned about the political landscape of the day when I'm writing because no matter what it is, it will change. By the time my stories come out, it will have changed. So I never think much about that."

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

"I've got some extremely subtle advertising slogans that should get the public behind us. Things like 'Vote for E.L. Wisty and lovely nude ladies will come and dance with you.' It's a complete lie, of course, but you can't afford to be too scrupulous if you're going to dominate the world."

Peter Cook as 'E.L. Wisty'



thinking story

The Purposes of Story: Meaninglessness, Ideology and Queerness

“Ancient tragedy is loss of life, modern tragedy is loss of purpose.”

Jan Kott

‘There is No Purpose’

When you are faced with that meaningless loss of life as a result of The Great War of 1914 to 1918, do the rules about beginnings, middles and ends matter anymore? This was the background that gave rise to surrealism and Dadaism. Both in their different ways were born out of being unable to see the world in the same way ever again. For when there is not meaning and no purpose, what use are stories that aim to give us meaning and purpose?

Dadaism, with practitioners such as Hugo Ball, was nihilistic. Dada is a nonsense word as Dadaism rejected not only the possibility that the world could make sense, but also threw into touch the notion that art itself could be a communicator and a healer. Surrealism gave up the conscious world and instead chose to inhabit

the world of dreams where there is no causality, no linear narrative and no beginnings, middles and ends.

Some thoughts on nihilism, godlessness and purposelessness...

“If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance.”

Albert Camus, THE REBEL

“I think we are just insects, we live a bit and then die and that’s the lot. There’s no mercy in things. There’s not even a Great Beyond. There’s nothing.”

John Fowles, THE COLLECTOR

“If you could be either God’s worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose?”

Chuck Palahniuk, FIGHT CLUB

“It is a self-deception of philosophers and moralists to imagine that they escape decadence by opposing it. That is beyond their will; and, however little they acknowledge it, one later discovers that they were among the most powerful promoters of decadence.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, THE WILL TO POWER

“Pooh called out: ‘Is anybody at home?’ There was a scuffling noise from inside the hole. ‘No!’ said a voice. Pooh thought to himself, ‘There must be somebody there, because somebody must have said ‘Nobody’. So he said: “Hallo, Rabbit, isn’t that you?””

A.A. Milne, WINNIE-THE-POOH



“I can say I love London. I can say I love England. I can’t say ‘I love my country’, because I don’t know what that means.”

Said by Guy Burgess in Alan Bennett’s one-act play and film about the spy, AN ENGLISHMAN ABROAD

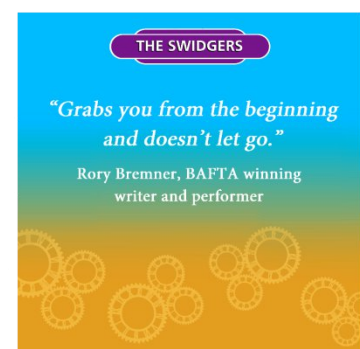
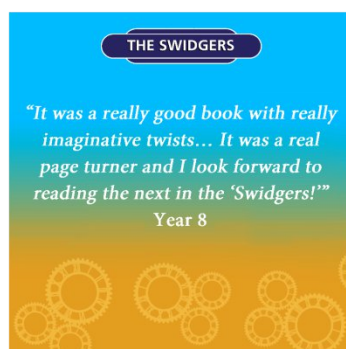
Social Structures, Ideology and Religions

The idea that it’s both narratives that create ideologies as well as ideologies that create narratives is a controversial one. The argument goes like this: All religions, ideologies and social structures are essentially created by Story. Take, for example, the national narrative of nationhood, national identity, kingdoms and kingship. One way of looking at Story in this context is that it is fundamental in establishing Russianness, Britishness or Americanness. For Britishness we have Shakespeare, Blake, Dickens, Orwell, Austen and any number of storytellers past and present who together help us identity who, to borrow a phrase from another nation’s history, we, the people, are. Human beings need as sense that we belong to a group beyond that which we know and these stories, along with symbols, rituals and ceremonies, each with their own story, allow us to identify what that is. Having said all that, there are those who reject the story of national identity as a complete fiction, and they

believe that it is ultimately created by those in the ruling class in order to oppress those below. Moreover, that story exists to hide and suppress a dirty history of bloodshed and subjugation. As for ceremony, symbol and all those people with titles and honours, well, they are little more than playing cards, who, as Alice discovered in her adventures, would simple disappear into nothingness if their made up world was ever seen for what truly it is.

Well, that's one way of looking at things.

Even more controversial is belief in a religion, which, at least in part, is usually based on a narrative of some sort. And, so the argument goes, since we know stories are made up by someone, then these too are essentially fabrications. It's easy then to see why this way of looking at the purpose of Story is so controversial, after all, as far as many of the world religions are concerned, these narrative are not 'made up', but in fact are based on Holy writ and the Word of God.



Aside from the religious belief and nationhood, there are complex issues around how narratives help ideologies. Take capitalism. *ROBINSON CRUSOE*, the novel by Daniel Defoe, first published on 25 April 1719, is sometimes put forward as one of the first texts to incorporate capitalism's values into its narrative in that Robinson Crusoe is presented as a self-reliant man who, having accepted his new reality, fashions it to his needs through his work ethic, common sense, resilience and technology. Plus, of course, in *ROBINSON CRUSOE*, there are clear examples of racism and imperialism. Well, that's certainly one way of seeing and reading, in the academic sense, Daniel Defoe's novel. But was that what Defoe intended or are those with a political agenda who came later creating a conscious purpose that was never really there?

In discussing *-ologies* and *-isims* like this we are, it should be said, touching on a post-Marxist view of history and culture. And Marxist methodology and pedagogy is not everyone's cup of tea and many philosophers and historians – mainly perceived to be on the right of politics – simply reject this way of seeing and analysing the world. Marxism after all isn't scientific fact, but rather a social science thesis. And some critics go further and say that Marxism is ultimately as much a made up narrative as those it seeks to undermine.

Not surprisingly then, any discussion in this area often results in heated and factional debate. However, what can be said without too

much controversy is that stories and narratives have played an essential part in religious beliefs, ideologies, nation building and how, from a political point of view, we see ourselves in the world. And so perhaps the degree to which you accept or reject the ‘truths’ of these narratives, or which narrative you pick out to be your own, is, ultimately, entirely up to you.

A few thoughts on politics, ideologies, national identity and the patriarchy...

“It is not easy to see how the more extreme forms of nationalism can long survive when men have seen the Earth in its true perspective as a single small globe against the stars.”

Arthur C. Clarke

“Any artist who aligns themselves with a politician is making a category error because what politicians do is not on a human scale, it is on a geopolitical scale.”

Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

“Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind.”

Albert Einstein

“To be patriotic – to be English – is partly to be sceptical of one’s country, and of patriotism itself. That is true of me, I think... Being sceptical about patriotism is a part of patriotism – a refined sense of patriotism, I think. Demonstrations of patriotism always make me uncomfortable, but I don’t think that makes me less of an Englishman.”

Alan Bennett

“The English intelligentsia are Europeanised. They take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow. In the general patriotism of the country they form a sort of island of dissident thought. England is perhaps the only great country whose intellectuals are ashamed of their own nationality. In left-wing circles it is always felt that there is something slightly disgraceful in being an Englishman and that it is a duty to snigger at every English institution, from horse racing to suet puddings. It is a strange fact, but it is unquestionably true that almost any English intellectual would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during ‘God save the King’ than of stealing from a poor box. All through the critical years many left-wingers were chipping away at English morale, trying to spread an outlook that was sometimes squashily pacifist, sometimes violently pro-Russian, but always anti-British.”

George Orwell, ENGLAND YOUR ENGLAND



“GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER... The novel maps the lives of twelve characters: eleven women and one character who is non-binary, and encompasses multiplicities around age, era, culture, class, sexuality, gender, race, occupations, ambitions, politics, migration, family set-ups, relationships, British geographies and original countries of origin – across more than one hundred and twenty years. The characters’ lives and stories are interlinked through a literary form I’ve coined ‘fusion fiction’ – which employs a poetic patterning on the page and non-orthodox punctuation, while fusing the women’s stories together. Each woman has a dedicated chapter, and they interrelate through x-degrees of separation. There are four main mother-daughter relationships, as well as other family set-ups, and relationships between lovers and colleagues. I

loved writing in this form because it allowed me to flow freely – from interiority to exteriority, from past to the present, from one character’s narrative to the next.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

Queerness

White. Male. Heterosexual. Cisgender. Able-bodied. In Western culture these have been the predominant story tellers. And the stories they told usually featured a central protagonist, usually male, where the narrative is kept within that psychological experience and where other characters, often women, are there primarily to function as foils for the protagonist. The narrative itself is often singular and linear, and so ignores the complex nature of life’s true challenges which are numerous and so often contradictory. The narrative action invariably has its male protagonist is in opposition to pretty much everything in its path, from people and ideas to nature and even the cosmos, and, as a result, little, if any, social or political context is ever offered.

Queer stories exist to counter that perspective. Not only do queer stories feature transgender, biracial and pansexual characters, the form of a queer story is rarely linear or goal driven. Nor is it likely there will be a single protagonist. Rather it chooses to show many characters interacting across many stories. And means and modes of presentation will not be singular. There will be poems, second

person narrators, unconventional grammar, and all brought together in a multi-media experience. All these or indeed none of these.

But such queer tales should not be seen as ‘anti-classical’, ‘other’ or ‘alternative’, but instead as distinct ways of seeing the world in their own right. And it’s in this sense that there can never be a singular queer purpose to a queer story, because that’s the point about queerness – it’s unique. As are we all.

Some more thoughts on queerness and queer writing...

“One of my mantras is, ‘Embrace what makes you unique, even if it makes others uncomfortable.’ I keep that with me in my back pocket. Shoot, I keep it in my front pocket! I keep it in my hair.”

Janelle Monae

“My experimental gene, the need to be different, has always been there, from the moment I decided to make a virtue of my outsider status as a teenager. It’s not something I impose on my writing for superficial or spurious reasons. My creative spirit is adventurous, an exploration of the unknown, a need to transform the ordinary into something new. I write because I have an urge to tell stories, even when I don’t know what those stories will become, or what they will reveal when completed.”

Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“I hope that people will say that ‘she told the truth, she told her truth, she wasn’t afraid to live her truth, and she wasn’t afraid to live her truth out loud.’ That’s what I want my legacy to look like.”

Lena Waithe

“God is a black Jewish lesbian.”

Derek Jarman, film maker and queer activist



“‘I don’t understand,’ said the scientist, ‘why you lemmings all rush down to the sea and drown yourselves.’ ‘How curious,’ said the lemming, ‘the one thing I don’t understand is why you human beings don’t.’”

James Thruer, THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY

The Danger of Stories

Walter Mitty. Don Quixote. Billy Liar. Each in their own way experienced the potential dangers of story. Or more specifically fictions. Walter Mitty was a fantasist, whereas Billy Liar uses fantasy to legitimise lying and Don Quixote’s head becomes so full of romantic tales of chivalry that he ends up being unable to tell the difference between what was a story and what wasn’t.

Well, that’s one danger of Story – living lives that simply aren’t true.

And fiction can occasionally be dangerous for the mental health of novelists and playwrights. You are creating a story all day, you then may spend your evening watching a movie and you follow that with a night dreaming stories. It’s really not healthy to live stories twenty-four hours a day. And that’s why many writers say they need

to take time away from fiction every so often. Those who make up worlds need sometimes to return to the real one.

But there's another side to the danger of stories and that is their political power. Plato, of course, would have banned all creative writers from his Republic. He would have done this partly for political reasons, for stories can not only be diverting but also subverting. Plato believed also that life itself was an illusion – we are merely shadows in the cave – and so, ultimately, fiction is an illusion on top of an illusion. Of course, if you were a dramatist or lyric poet in classical Athens you might have argued that a story has the power to illustrate the very truth that Plato sought, but it's doubtful Plato himself would have bought that.

A few not so positive thoughts on the nature of fiction and story...

“In stories, saying it brings it on. So if you get the heroine saying, ‘I don’t suppose I shall ever be happy’, then you can bank on it there’s happiness just around the corner. That’s the rule in novels. Whereas in life you can say you’re never going to be happy and you never are happy, and saying it doesn’t make a ha’porth of difference.”

Alan Bennett

“I hate all things fiction... there should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric – and pure invention is but the talent of a liar.”

Lord Byron

"I heard the stories of the storytellers, telling the stories people wanted to hear. Everyone finds the narrative that matches the narrative they already know and want. It wasn't that I didn't want to share the truth. It wasn't that I feared the response. It was that I no longer believed in a truth."

F. Lovett, THE MOONBORN: OR, MOBY-DICK ON THE MOON

By Steve Nallon



THE SWIDGERS