Tony Cerullo

Teaching Writing

Literacy Narrative

**Reading Bad Words and Sex**

 I can remember the first proper novel that captured my imagination as a reader. It was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Prior to that I was an avid reader, but the little novellas and such geared toward my age group didn’t really excite me too much. But Harry Potter, with its hardcover and heft, felt like a real book. My folks and even my Catholic school teachers had no issues whatsoever with the magical adventures of Harry, Ron and Hermione, so I encountered no controversy in reading what I wanted. Reading was fun and totally socially acceptable.

That changed when I first heard the adventures of Roland of Gilead in Stephen King’s *Dark Tower* as I rode with my dad on a long drive. You see, he (and this is a habit he passed on) likes to listen to books on tape or NPR to pass the time as he drives, oftentimes selecting old favorites to listen to. He had been a big fan of King’s writing and especially the *Dark Tower* series, so had picked up a few to listen to. I was absolutely captivated. It was an exciting, gritty, adventure. It had magic, fighting, grand locales, and swearing. To my little fifth grade mind, it was the perfect sort of book for me.

 And so I began to read *The Gunslinger*, book one of Roland’s adventures. My parents, as I found out later, had a discussion regarding my book choice. It had bad words and sex and violence, and was possibly “inappropriate.” My mother was apprehensive, but neither of my parents wanted to tell me that I couldn’t read something. Now, suddenly, instead of a reader, I was a subversive. I loved it. Actually, bad words aside, I didn’t comprehend most of the juicy stuff until I reread the series in high school, my reading just being for the thrill of the journey.

 What I discovered by reading edgy material was that I could safely rebel and explore the uncharted waters through literature. Whereas my folks could turn the channel or make me close my eyes watching a movie together, they couldn’t see the raunchy and mysterious vulgarity on the printed page unless they had read it themselves, and even then, since it was an intellectual activity to read; they would not discourage me. Reading became my way to begin to create my own values.

 The next big literary impact also came in fifth grade in the form of my first real experience with the space opera genre, which would remain forever a favorite. Back in the day, when cartoons were worth watching, Cartoon Network aired an after-school programming block called “Toonami.” Toonami, for those not in the know, was *awesome*. It was an ever changing block of anime and action cartoons that forever cemented the Japanophile within me. One cartoon in particular made an impact with me, and remains to this day my favorite anime of all time. A space opera called “Outlaw Star” was my first experience with genuine, emotional investment with a cast of characters and their goals and aspirations. This is an important moment for a consumer of literature and any writer. It was the first story that made me cry. The ending music still puts tears in my eyes. Perhaps you are apprehensive, dear reader, to hear me refer to a cartoon as literature, but frankly the dramatic and all other “non traditional” literary forms have the potential for profound value. There is a lot of crap on the TV, I don’t deny that, but there is also quality. Outlaw Star was certainly the latter.

This show, along with *Harry Potter* and *Dark Tower*, was another painful reminder of how dull reality was. I wanted to be in space, hanging out with catgirl aliens and assassins and shooting magic guns at Kei Pirates. This year was the one where I decided I needed some way to escape from the doldrums of the everyday. This was the year I wrote my first novel.

 Oh sure, it wasn’t very long; perhaps 20 pages of a wide ruled notebook, but I’ll never forget my first crack at storytelling. It was called “Samojen” and it was, what else, but a science fiction adventure. The tale centered on a group of school children, avid Virtual Reality gamers and self styled explorers aboard a space station. Their existences are shaken up when a crystalline asteroid impacts the hull, unleashing a gelatinous psyonic alien creature called Samojen. One of the character’s parents is impaled by a shard of crystal, (the creature can synthesize crystal as a defense and transportation method) making it personal. Naturally, they fight off the alien and save the day. This idea has never left me. Actually, I’ve thought of ways to use the Samojen creature in a legitimate science fiction and would like to tell the story right one of these days.

 So what is at the core of my literacy narrative? Boredom and the urge to rebel. I wanted something more exciting than the 20th century could offer me. I wanted a sword in my hand and a treasure to hunt. I wanted to see the stars. I wanted to be friends with Jim Hawking and Gene Starwind and meet a sexy alien chick on my way to saving the universe. I’d realize later that Jim, Gene, and just about every other literary figure that I felt a connection with was in their own way an outcast, a flawed figure that didn’t fit into their respective societies. This was the character that I loved, because I could relate. This was the character that gave me hope because despite their problems and quirks, they belonged somewhere, even if it was just with their pack of fellow outcasts. I had 3 friends in elementary school. We called ourselves the “Harry Potter Club,” and they were my band of outlaws. To use a term from *The Dark Tower*: (which has shaped my personal philosophy and view of the multiverse, though that is another essay entirely) we were *Ka-Tet*. My literary identity was to throw my lot with the anti heroes, and this became my personality beyond the page as time went on. To borrow a term from another favorite of mine, *The Dungeons and Dragons Player’s Handbook*, my alignment, and that of all of my literary (anti)heroes is Chaotic Neutral.

 So what does this mean for me as a teacher, attempting to encourage reading and build writing skills amongst new generations? It means I’m going to encourage as much subversion as I can. Why read what’s safe when they can read what’s edgy? This doesn’t mean that I’m going ignore the classics, of course, but to try to get students reading what they themselves want to read. After all, what good are we doing by forcing readers to associate reading with boring dead people and tired morals? I’d also like to work fantasy and other genre fiction into the cannon for young readers especially. There is nothing that frustrates me more, as a genre writer and reader, to have to justify my so called “low fiction” and to explain to deaf ears why a kid reading a comic book can be just as valuable as a kid reading Mark Twain. If a student wants to do a book report on a graphic novel, more power to him. It can easily be held up to the same standards as a traditional report, and the student will get so much more from it if he has passion for the assignment.

 Since I intend to do some of my future graduate work in the field of interactive fiction, I feel that I ought to give an example of that concept in action. Take for instance F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic, *The Great Gatsby*. One of the reasons that it is still worth examining today is for its treatment of gender roles in the historic setting of the novel and in modern society as a whole. A valid theme for a paper might be examine the roles of women in relation to the men like Tom Buchanan, who had his wife and his mistress. This is a great start, but it can be taken one step beyond by demonstrating modern fiction that is not only a different genre, but a more contemporary setting to show the universality of the themes of this apparent dusty old classic. Konami’s *Silent Hill 2* is a horror story, but, interestingly enough one that revolves around male domination over gender roles. It has characters that stand as parallels in respect to their parts in a gendered society. Naturally, not everyone will connect to the game example, which is why the lesson would also include a recent novel and a movie that deal with gender and society. There are countless examples to choose from, and by examining a literary theme from several multimedia approaches, this creates an engagement with the topic on some level for all students, even those with diverse tastes.

 My future classroom will be a literary revolution, where the classics are valued, but the new has a place as well. If we’re reading Dracula in class for instance, I’m more than willing to examine a popular modern bit of vampire lore, to compare and contrast, to analyze characters, to study the plots of things that the students know. How does Bella compare to Lucy Harker, for instance? A diehard Twilight fan will have an answer for me, and even as I present counterpoints they learn how to better phrase their literary analysis while in the process of trying to prove their point. If I can tap into that vein of passion, I can get powerful writing without having to drag out the prescriptive prompts.

Even as I expound the virtues of nontraditional literature though, I find myself dreaming once again. I might as well be talking about how spaceships will be an important part of the curriculum. How on earth am I, as a no-name teacher, meant to talk a school board into letting me use *The Watchmen* to discuss the Vietnam literature? Would I lose my job for teaching Tim O’Brien? How can I grin and bear it when I’m told that I can’t teach Orwell’s *1984* because it encourages rebellion against authority? Is my future being fired for telling my supervisor to go perform an anatomical impossibility when he gives me the censored *Huckleberry Finn* to use in my classroom?

 For a field that encourages, at least in theory, progressive thought, I worry how much I’ll be able to make a change in the stilted English curriculum. These dusty old classics that teach students to hate reading instead of embracing it need to be shuffled around, but who is going to let me do it? The Literary cannon needs to be taken to with dynamite and sledgehammers, but all that is allowed for the excavation effort is magnifying glasses and brushes. Still, such a struggle ought to excite me. The battlefield of curricular debate is just as rife with slings and arrows as any fantastical conflict that I’ve dreamed up.