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A Steady Journey - Critical and Self-Analysis

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Critical Essay

What's in a story? This is a question that seems to follow all writers as they take up their pens and begin to write tales of their own. Some may discover their answer by intuition, most by practice, and all through time. I do not have a complete answer myself—all I can offer are tidbits I have learned here and there as I make my way along the road of creative writing.

Much—if not most—of what I have learned about writing has come through constant reading. There are certain generalities I have gleaned from many authors that have particularly impacted my writing: for instance, the idea that every word carries with it an importance, no matter how minute it might seem at the moment. Many wrongly assume that the pettiness of a single word is less crucial than the overall reception to a piece, but these trivialities can and do convey a connotation subtle or overt enough to influence our perception of the work. A great amount of patience is required in order to pick the right words—something that has been painfully evident as I rework and rewrite my story.

It is partly because of this ideology (if it can be defined as such) that I have chosen to opt-out of publishing my short story, working instead to refine and lengthen it until it has told all it needs to tell in the way it might best be told.

I have often looked toward other's published words—other's works, novels, essays, poems—for inspiration, for guidance of my own arduous journey as a writer. Their writings have affected my own and continue to shape my thinking and style. To that end, I come to the heart of the essay: to discuss the novels and authors that have influenced me thus far, and what I have come to learn from their words.

To begin with, out of all that I have read through the years, there is always one book that immediately comes to mind—I feel as if I wouldn't do it justice if I had made the decision to start with another. It's funny to think I came across this novel by sheer luck, perhaps, by being at the right place at the right time. The setting is one that itself seems like it might have hopped right out of a cliché novel you might have read ten or twenty times before. It was at the corner of a small, crowded second-hand bookshop run by a sweet old woman at the edge of a market, and I was 9 or 10 at the most. Every time I stopped by to visit, there were dozens of new and old used books to be seen, constantly being rotated in and out of the shop. This particular novel was curiously short, a fat 400-page used book in a thin plastic crate that was just about swallowed up in a sea of larger ones. I remember glancing over it, putting it back—but it stayed in the back of my mind. It seemed too interesting to leave in the shop, I thought, and I'd better take it or else risk regretting that I never took the chance.

That book was a 1997 copy of *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende, and it was undoubtedly one of the most influential works on my writing. I was blown away by the cryptic world Ende had created, bedazzled by its charm and gripped by the endless adventures to be had. It was more than just a story; the ever-changing world of *Fantasia* seemed to be alive, something that morphed and changed on its own free will, with equally important input both by its author and its reader.

The theme of creation resonated deeply within me. Just as Bastion began (hesitantly at first) to alter the world within the book, I found myself being encouraged to do the same. The open-ended qualities Ende employed painted the world with a peculiar shade that seemed unfinished—and yet perfectly finished all the same. There were dozens and dozens of pointedly unique characters and creatures in the novel who found an exit away from the road of the main

plotline, and whose individual character arcs were left purposefully unfinished. Ende would hint at the continuation of the story—whether by vaguely noting future events or more explicitly telling of feats accomplished but never exactly how or when—but he would never clearly tell the exact ending to their individual tales. Rather, the reader would instead repeatedly be met with a single line that teased of the unwritten future: “that’s another story and shall be told another time.”

As a child I was sorely disappointed when I found out that there were no further books offering a continuation of these stories, but I eventually came to realize that Ende was inviting us—the readers—to take it upon ourselves to play a game of fill-in-the-blanks, taking these characters into our own hands and utilizing the mantle of creation to carve our own unique paths. The possibilities were endless, as bottomless as imagination and creation itself—in that respect, *The Neverending Story* was indeed a story that would never end. There was always something more to tell, someone new to discover, and it is fitting that the last words of the novel are in this very same vein.

I marveled at Ende’s creative work as a child, and though I had written small bits and pieces beforehand it wasn’t until I read Ende’s book that I was encouraged to seriously attempt creative writing, to begin a long journey that has led me to where I stand now. In many of my creative ventures, I have attempted to emulate Ende’s expansive world to a degree by creating works whose setting is rich with details; this is often a specific focus in much of my editing.

Ende’s detailed style of writing is perhaps comparable to another particular author I have read—Brian Jacques. The world of Jacques’ *Redwall* series is ever-expansive, sporting a well-defined history and a multitude of creatures and locations, many of which crisscross each other through the course of the novels. But whereas Ende utilized an unrestricted sort of fantasy genre

that was very clearly unrealistic, Jacques grounds his fantasy with a plethora of realistic details, creating a story that—talking animals aside—almost seems as if excerpts were taken from detailed records of a land’s mythical history. These books follow the adventures of a group of personified animals who are given a surprising amount of depth in regards to their specific cultures, as well as their accents and dialects. From a warrior-clad, sharp-tongued clan of sparrows with simplified dialects to down-to-earth groups of engineering moles with heavy country accents, to dozens of additional unique creatures and cultures. These details constantly seek ways to paint a more thorough picture and are present down to the last bits—even the animals’ food is given meticulous attention and creativity, with dishes portraying minute components that reflect both the constitution of the creatures themselves and their respective cultures.

The sheer quantity of characters and their conflicting alliances is another point of interest. Though the central plot of the novels is often presented as being black-and-white, there are multiple characters with dispositions that put them in positions that do not solidly adhere to either sides of the conflict. Several individuals remain independent, working towards their own benefit and crossing the line into either faction at various points. Coupled with Jacques’ emphasis of location and culture, this adds nuanced viewpoints into the classic battle between good-vs-evil.

Thus far, the aforementioned novels have dealt with creative writing—with art—chiefly as a medium of entertainment. There is certainly plenty of merit in writing works for such a purpose, for the sake of beauty—but as I have matured through the years I have realized that a deeper purpose for art is equally—if not more—important. The idea of art for society’s sake

became a thought that I first began to perceive when I took a high school literature course in which two particularly influential novels stood out.

The first of these was Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. This was a fascinating novel that grappled with the dangers of certain philosophical views, offering commentary through the actions and mind of protagonist (and simultaneously antagonist) Raskolnikov. Could crime—even murder, perhaps—ever be truly justifiable for the “betterment” of society? The utilitarianism and nihilism implied by this question is wrestled by Raskolnikov, with anti-nihilism ultimately becoming the outcome that Dostoyevsky notes as being clearly superior to its counterpart.

The psychological battle that rages inside Raskolnikov's mind as he contemplates these philosophies—as well as his own view of duty to society—was more than intriguing. It was one that physically affected me as well: I became anxious, tense, and nauseous at the heavy weight of the novel's extensive introspection. A vague sense of panic seemed to permeate the atmosphere. The more I read, the harder it got to continue. Raskolnikov's relief at the end was echoed by my own.

The idea that a believable story could be built on social ideas and achieve a unique creative analysis through creative writing was one that enthralled me. Dostoyevsky's writings explored consequences and grounded lofty idealizations through the use of a complex story. At its heart it is a book of thought used to provoke rumination in its readers—this I would consider to be one of the great ends to fulfilling creative writing.

The second novel I read that year was, I believe, a far more influential one: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was written just prior to the Civil War, its dramatic

influence extending far and wide and undoubtedly swaying many unsure Americans' sentiments towards one of compassion and of anger at the injustice of slavery. It was a long read with surprisingly frequent monologues and brief interludes in which Stowe frankly discussed the morality of slavery, humanizing the plight of the slaves in a way that was highly accessible and relatable to an audience that struggled to perceive it as such. She achieved this by brilliantly discussing slavery with the very same lens of Christianity that had previously been used to help justify enslavement, arguing for the cause of abolition in a way that very strongly resonated with the population.

Stowe's style of writing is dripping with constant references to Christianity, the use of which serves to give her characters an inner strength that they draw upon in their respective predicaments. Moments of weakness, of uncertainty, of gratitude, of sadness—even in the face of death, and so on, are often met with calls and praises to both God and Jesus. Additionally, there are moments of brief theological debates concerning slavery and cruelty that add a philosophical depth to the issue at hand. The novel's pervasive Christian commentary and its critical reception are no mere coincidences.

I admired the author's boldness and bluntness, her style of interjecting and melding her own thoughts into the action. It is a shame that popular culture of today has the consistent tendency to stereotype *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as only a racist piece of literature, fully ignoring and keeping silent about all other merits of the novel.

Works imbued with social purposes are often aimed towards mature audiences, and with good reason—the content present often either isn't appropriate for young children or is too complex to be fully understood by the demographic. However, that isn't to say that there is an absolute absence in children's literature with such intent. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* was one such

children's novel which artfully blended serious topics and commentary on society with a child's naive viewpoint. The result is phenomenal: almost as if an (albeit toned-down) version of *1984* or *Brave New World* were to be seen through the eyes of a child. Mature themes predate a gradual destruction of innocence as the protagonist slowly begins to realize that his utopia exhibits more and more features of a dystopia.

This perspective is key to a unique take on the genre, emphasized by the elements of fantasy that dot the course of the novel. The use of abstract memories as a concrete form that mentally and emotionally connects humans across time serves as a catalyst for debate within the protagonist's young mind as he struggles to understand the severity of the situation at hand. Ironically enough, it is the use of this unrealistic fantasy that results in the realistic view the main character comes to have.

That the genre can be used as a vehicle for such introspection is noteworthy, perhaps emphasized by Lowry's more straight-forward style of writing that isn't too extravagant. It does not dwell on its actions for long periods of time, instead maintaining a steady beat that pushes onward despite the reluctance of multiple characters. The realizations are simple yet complex as naivety is frankly and harshly brushed away, provoking discussion of children's own possible naivety towards these subjects. It opens the door for the young reader to ask questions of "hows" and "whys" in regards to the society portrayed in the novel—questions of analysis that are important for the application of critical thinking of both literature and the world beyond literature.

In writing many of my creative pieces, the authors thus discussed were clear influences on my work; but in writing *A Steady Journey* I found myself drawn in particular to my memories of Laura Ingalls Wilder's set of *Little House on the Prairie* books. Though I unfortunately did

not have the pleasure of growing up with this fantastic set of children's books, I did come across them as a young teenager. The wild setting of adventure and living on the frontier was a direct influence on the setting I eventually choose to illustrate my own tale with.

The episodic—and yet connected—nature of the books were a snippet into the real life of Wilder's childhood, and I attempted to draw from that atmosphere. It had a simple, raw sort of feel to it, perhaps similar to that of a grandmother passing on tales from when she was a young girl. Laura's voice was clear and pervasive, quintessentially American with a certain charm that is difficult to find in many other children's books. I especially loved the dynamic within the close-knit family—which felt like a real, genuine family. It was a breath of fresh air from many popular novels in which parents are absent or given an otherwise insignificant role in the story.

The clear moral lessons taught to Laura and her siblings by her parents surprised me—though I was ironically more surprised at feeling surprise. I don't mean to suggest that other children's books don't have clear morals—but all too often they choose to focus solely on the actions of the children and on what the children learn by themselves with little to no input by their parents. This is especially a problem in young adult literature, accentuated by the well-known stereotype of a main protagonist's dead or missing parents. The advice and reprimands given to Laura by her mother and father had a familial depth of love conveyed that absolutely put many other young adult and children's novels to shame. When writing children's literature, this is an important note to take.

Though the list of authors that have influenced me is far from complete, these are the key ones to date, the ones that have withstood a certain test of time and remained glittering in the farthest reaches of my memories. Their works have followed me for many years, and their words continue to form trails of echoes as I take up my own pen. Undoubtedly there are a multitude of

authors I have yet to know that I will encounter—whether by coincidence, or by design—that will subsequently tap into my way of thinking and of writing. I am eager to discover what lies in the future.

A Steady Journey Analysis

A Steady Journey came about first as a result of wanting to provide a perspective not often seen in fantasy literature. Fantasy protagonists are commonly in possession of supernatural or fantastical powers, unique abilities that serve to distinguish their character's strengths and assist them in their respective plotlines. Although some literature may choose to place an emphasis on the difficulties that come with having these abilities, perhaps expressing how they may hinder and perhaps even harm their users, it is nonetheless rare for them to feature prominent characters that have disabilities or injuries that constantly affect their everyday lives. It is furthermore less common for such a character to have no fantastical qualities while being placed in a setting that exhibits such features. This is the niche that *A Steady Journey* seeks to enter.

The main character—Thomas—is stricken with a disease when he is very young, the consequence of which is the permanent weakening of his arms and legs. He walks with a makeshift crutch—or a simple “walking stick,” as he calls it—and struggles with such qualities as strength and endurance, occasionally having to resort to more creative means in order to accomplish a particular goal. Thomas explores and interacts with the world around him through a lens that force him to take into consideration his own shortcomings—though he sometimes attributes them to coincidental causes rather than acknowledge his own physical limitation, a result of his young age, perhaps.

The landscape surrounding Thomas is imbued with traits that distinguish it from a relatively “normal” setting. Rivers that change their course like clockwork, mountains that house

ethereal creatures, grasses that hum tunes with the wind. Animals that can't quite be identified, appearing and disappearing as quickly as they come. And yet they seem realistic, to a certain degree. None of it is terribly outlandish—at least, that's what I would hope to think. It forms a contrast with the band of characters that do not have such qualities, which in turn forms a stronger contrast with Thomas's own down-to-earth disability, a comparison that highlights his daily struggles as he encounters one event after another with more difficulty than his fellow friends, acquaintances, and family members.

How to best show Thomas's experience with this setting was one that I pondered for too long a time. I eventually concluded that perhaps one of the best ways to highlight different locations and features is through a plotline that involves a central journey. Rather than having a stationary setting with one main landscape, a journey allows for a wider range of backdrops to be covered, a larger amount of features to be added, a broader set of possibilities to be explored by both author and character. Though there are aspects of the journey that may seem a bit mundane at times—for a good portion of the story, the actions of the characters can be described as walking from point A to point B—these bits add to the realistic aspects of the story.

When discussing the realistic qualities of the setting, it should be noted that much of the story's setting is based on real locations. Though my original intent was to create a fictional map alongside fantasy creatures, as I began to write there was a natural tendency to gear the story towards a more realistic angle. Since I had decided on a journey format for the story, I flitted around the idea of basing the story on the Oregon Trail, one of the grandest of journeys in American history. I researched for a small niche of the trail to focus on, and eventually settled on Bridger Trail, a lesser-known offshoot from the Oregon Trail that traveled north through Wyoming into western Montana. This trail passed through a wide variety of land features in a

relatively short amount of time when compared to other trails—grasslands would give way to a sparser, rockier landscape through the Bighorn Basin, before joining with its sister Bozeman Trail for the final stretch of the path along the mountains. Most travelers heading to Montana would follow the popular Montana Trail or the more direct (and dangerous) Bozeman Trail. Bridger Trail was a relatively newer trail that was blazed in 1864 as a safer alternative to the Bozeman Trail; however, the geography made it a difficult journey for cattle, making it an unpopular route to take despite its advantages. The trail's isolation worked in favor of the storyline: a more crowded trail would have limited certain interactions between the characters and their environment. Some creative liberties were taken. For instance, it is unlikely that a small wagon train would have braved the trail by themselves.

A Steady Journey picks up near the start of the trail and leaves off where Bridger Trail combines with the easterly Bozeman Trail for the final leg of the journey into western Montana. The location and timing of each feature roughly corresponds to that of the real journey undertaken by pioneers over a hundred years ago. The historical aspects of the story add another layer of realism to the story, simultaneously contrasted and emphasized by the fantasy elements attached to the landscape. In one example, the location of the mountains that sported a view of mystical creatures in the distance is in roughly the same location where a wealth of fossils had been discovered, some of which were excavated relatively recently. Connections between fantasy and reality such as these were especially fun to research and write—it was as if I were rediscovering old parts of American history that remained seemingly buried and overshadowed by larger, more well-known events and places. By attaching a historical background to the story, I hope to encourage others to delve into the history themselves, imparting a curiosity and interest into a small piece of history they otherwise might never have known.

Also of note is the formatting of the story itself: a brief journal entry followed by a longer piece of narration. There is a division between a past experience and a present one, one that suggests a continuation of a journey both at its start and at its end. It was meant to add a degree of fictional authenticity to the story—one where the main character affirms that which happened in the journal entry, elaborating on events that continued after the stop of the pen. His view is frank, reminiscent of dialogue at times and noting both what he sees and what he is told, with commentary interjected here and there. There are times when the narrator's unreliability peeks through, times when it is admitted that the exact order or action of events is uncertain. Rather than have a third-person perspective, this structure allows for a more personal take on the character.

Though what every individual takes away from a story changes from person to person, certain themes remain constant and prominent. A core message of the story is one of continuation, of finding ways to persistently proceed with daily life, even when it may be a bit more difficult at times to do so. It is a theme that is tied to the overall journey in the story, but especially to the main character's disability. You can't dwell on your limitations; you need to think creatively around them, making progress little by little. Though it may be a more well-known lesson, it is one that is often forgotten in the midst of frustrations, and one that perhaps may not be as evident for a younger audience at times.

It was a lesson I acutely began to learn when I broke a finger, and a good portion of my arm became immobilized under a large cast that extended from beyond the tips of my fingers down to an inch or two before my elbow. It was for added stability, I was told, but it created a great deal of instability in my life as I struggled to navigate without the use of a hand. It was a frustrating ordeal, some things seemingly impossible to do—but by and by I created new

routines and learned to find ways to do many things either one-handed or with the partial use of an arm. This experience also served as a basis of inspiration for the initial drafts of story-planning, and it is one I frequently drew upon.

Nonetheless, it is an experience that I am uncertain I have captured entirely in *A Steady Journey* with the finesse necessary to accurately portray it. I have withheld the story from publication to further review, edit, and expand it. I have questioned from what angles I can best approach the significance of disability in a fantasy world, and I have yet to answer every inquiry I have thought. In the end, it is representation in a genre that is sparse with such topics; that in and of itself makes it a worthwhile project to tackle. It is representation that requires much of its writer, to not seem too flippant or dismissive of its intricacies, while also not allowing for the disability to overtake other qualities the character possesses. Have I accomplished this? There are a dozen opinionated responses I can think of in reply, and a dozen more for every additional minute that passes. But if my story becomes published, you will know my answer.