

The Subtleties of Translating Personal Experience into Fiction

By
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Roman a clef is a time-honored tool of the fiction writer used to provide authenticity to a work of fiction. By definition, it is the creation of a fictional work utilizing real people and events; that is, the narrative uses, as its subject matter, people that actually exist (or have existed) and events that have actually transpired (as opposed to events completely made up by the writer). Perhaps the most famous example of the roman a clef novel (at least, in America) is Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. The book is, essentially, a fictionalized account of Hemingway and his compatriots living the expatriate lifestyle in Europe. Perhaps the most notorious example is found in Truman Capote's book *Answered Prayers* (wherein he recounts the gossip and stories told to him by and about the social elite of New York and the world). Unfortunately, once the book was recognized as a thinly disguised volume of privileged class gossip, Capote's sources for that gossip quickly vanished in light of the embarrassment that the first serialized installment of the book provided.

Capote's misguided use of genuine experience notwithstanding, the use of actual people and actual events as subject matter for a fictional work is a precarious method of creation for the writer. The allure of this technique is found in the emotional immediacy that the writer feels within his subject matter; certainly something which actually happened has to translate spectacularly to the reader. But this is not always the case. The requirements for reportage are far different from the requirements of effective fiction. The reader accepts the nonfiction work on its merits, and understands that such things as coincidences, nonsequiturs and illogical circumstances occur all the time in real life.

However, the requirements of effective fiction demand that such common nonlinear circumstances be kept to an absolute minimum. Because the reader expects a certain level of artistry in an imaginary work (even one based on actual people and events) the writer must adhere to internal rules of logic that may or may not allow him or her to relate the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Fictional truth is its own version of reality: a version that requires that the relationships between the characters and events in the story follow a logical and reasonable pattern of cause and effect. And so the writer must, in the purest sense of the term, take meaningful poetic license with his material.

Now, the well-meaning writer may take exception to the thought of bending the truth away from the factual circumstances of his or her personal experience; after all, what's the point of writing about personal experience if you have to reshape the truth of it? I humbly submit that that is what personal memoir and biography are for. The intent of each is different, and the reader's expectation of each form is also different. Attempts to make good fiction of fact without adhering to internal rules of fictional logic tend to fail simply because the truth of the event or character does not make for a compelling narrative. There is a proportional effect in fiction between the logic of narrative and the facts used to support that narrative. In the case of a purely fictional work, we call the facts of this kind of work *background information*, which are facts selected to support the fictional reality of the story. Generally, the writer already has the progression of the narrative in mind, as well as the characters, but must research certain factual information that will give a sense of logic and realism to the work.

But the writer of the roman a clef has just the opposite problem: he must somehow find a way to make the narrative fit the logic of real people and real events. Unless the writer's subject matter already makes perfect fictional sense, some bending of the truth is necessary in order to make both ends of the fictional technique meet in the middle.

Ernest Hemingway's experiences in Europe were not alone compelling enough to fuel the engine of a seminal novel; the consuming problem of Jake Barnes revolved around his inability to consummate his relationship with Lady Brett. Barnes, the recipient of battlefield wounds during World War I, is physically impotent because of them, and so must endure a social death instead of a military death. This theme of impotence, whether physical, as embodied in Jake Barnes, or spiritual, as pervades the circumstances of the entire book, is what Hemingway most wanted to convey in his story of the 'lost generation'.

Although Hemingway actually suffered injuries during World War I, he was not left physically impotent because of them. But because he needed a meaningful dramatic circumstance to fuel his story he created Barnes' condition, and in so doing also created a dramatic vehicle through which he could move his personal experiences through a legitimate fictional terrain. Despite using his perceptions of real people and real events, Hemingway included only those people and events that could support his fictional premise. In the end, the writer's ability to sacrifice meaningful personal experiences for the sake of the fictional truth of his story will determine the success of the narrative.

Another good example of bending personal experience to fictional narrative is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad actually did travel down the Congo of Africa in the latter part of the nineteenth century and experienced some harrowing circumstances. But the story of Kurtz's devolution into the darkness aspects of human psychology is pure speculation. Despite the value of the informational quality of Conrad's personal experience, this information alone did not make for an interesting story. Instead, Conrad used his personal experiences to support the fiction of a European colonialist agent turning savage and instructing the peoples of the native cultures to perform monstrous rituals in the depths of the jungle wilderness. Again, Conrad never encountered an actual 'Kurtz', but he used his personal experience to support the conditions of the narrative that would allow Kurtz to come alive in story.

Too many times writers try to convert their personal experiences into fiction because they believe that the emotional truth of those experiences cannot be but believed. Nothing could be further from the truth. The reader cannot distinguish between illogical fiction created from the imagination and illogical fiction created from personal experience. And the writer doesn't usually have the luxury of announcing the difference to the reader before reading the story. Imagine how the reader might respond if a writer prefaced his story with the following: "Please give the logic of this story a pass because most of this actually happened and that is what I really want you to react to."

When writing the roman a clef (or fiction based on actual people and circumstances) the writer has three choices: the first is to write about these experiences as they actually happened. The writer must then take his chances on the fictional logic of the story. The second is to take an actual event and make it the basis for the story. Thereafter everything that supports the story will be purely or mostly fictional. The third is to create a central fictional event and support it in the narrative with real events and people.

The first approach is almost never an option, since the work would be thinly disguised nonfiction (and, unless written by a knowledgeable hand, would be fairly transparent to the reader). This approach almost never produces great fiction, but does produce an enormous amount of unpublished and unread fiction. The exception to this rule is the 'literary story' found in too many pretentious literary magazines that mistake poignant vignette for effective fiction. These types of stories leave the reader wondering what in the hell the point of the 'story' was and why he or she just wasted ten or fifteen minutes searching for it. While there is nothing wrong with experimental fiction, this is too often the pursuit of elitist apologists for bad fiction and for writers who didn't want to do the extra work to make their 'personal reminiscences' comply with traditional narrative expectations.

The second approach is valuable if the writer wants to explore the impact of a single meaningful personal experience such as divorce, a death in the family, the effects of an illness or some other incident that is as emotionally affecting. Then the writer can take the truth of the central event and support that experience with fictional circumstances tailored to fulfill the logical progression of the story. An example of this would be the writer's personal experience of divorce. Whereas the subject matter is compelling and closely felt, perhaps the specific details of that writer's life are inappropriate for a work of fiction, and so the writer creates a character that conveys the emotional truth of his or her own experience in imaginary circumstances. Factual details from the writer's experience support the character's experience, and so convey the truth of a real experience in fictional terms.

The third approach is the probably the one most common to fiction writers. I've already given the examples of Hemingway and Conrad. An example of this approach would be of a writer, having lived in the mountains of Wyoming most of his or her life, using his or her personal experiences to support the creation of a character in conflict with that environment. The character and his circumstances may be created from whole cloth, but these can subsequently be supported by the personal experiences of the writer. Through this approach the writer is

able to pick and choose those personal experiences that best support the fictional logic of his story.

The writer should also keep in mind that the background material of the story must logically move the narrative; even as Joseph Conrad sought to describe the fascinating aspects of Kurtz's mental state, the circumstances of his narrator, Marlowe, having been sent to the Congo to recover Kurtz from his outpost, continually drive him inexorably toward the place where he will find this man. Two-thirds of the story goes to support the contrast that Conrad wanted to display between the 'civilized' European environments and the 'savage' African environments, environments that are only a reflection of the cultivated and primitive psychological states of different societies. What Conrad *did not* include was a great deal of extraneous personal experience that didn't support his central fictional thesis.

With all this to consider, why would the writer of fiction want to incorporate personal experience into his or her fiction in the first place?

The answer, of course, is that despite the fact that fiction is created from the human imagination, the raw material for the imagination is human experience and knowledge. When we experience significant events as human beings we are stockpiling the raw material for our imaginations to incorporate into fiction. Of course, we don't incorporate everything that we personally experience; but since human experience is a part of every human life, we understand that our personal experiences, especially if they are significant, can be understood, and empathized with, by other people. And human experience is the very essence of fiction (no matter how surreal the narrative). And so it is a natural artistic condition to want to utilize personal experience in art; the only problem with this tendency is that the writer's art should dictate its use if it is to maintain its own integrity.

Because the art of fiction demands that the writer make every effort to maintain the artistic integrity of his or her work, the roman a clef remains one of the most demanding fictional forms for the writer, and one that will not abide artistic inattention. But it also remains one of the most intriguing forms for the writer because of the opportunity it provides for the exploration of acutely experienced human truths.