

Create A Culture Clinic

By Holly Lisle

Introduction

Why Create Cultures?

Or “I Write Mainstream, So I’m Off the Hook ... Right?”

No writer is ever off the hook where culture is concerned, because every story ever written is, was, or eventually will be about cultures.

Really.

There was a science fiction story once in which a man was able to disguise the fact that he was alien by wearing a hat on his head to cover his antennae. All men wore hats almost all the time, so he didn’t stand out. The writer assumed that hats were essential to men, and that men would always wear them. And then the culture changed, hats went away, and the story now seems broken.

Novels set in the time of the writer frequently assume culture, and hope the reader will share (or at least comprehend) the culture the writer is assuming. These novels are written for the day and the moment; they’ll be unreadable in twenty years. If you want to write for the ages, your writing has to have complete, working subsets of all the cultures you wrote about IN the novel. Every single time. Cultures change. Dickens and Twain are still comprehensible today because they included right in their stories everything you needed to know about how their worlds worked. Their contemporaries are gone because they assumed that their readers would live in a world just like the one they lived in, and would simply understand all the things they left out.

Deeper novels draw out the cultures as richly as they draw out the characters. Novels set in the present show the present and those cultures working in it, and through the lives and actions of the characters demonstrate how their cultures work for and against them, and how the characters work for and against their cultures...

(continued in the class)

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