

Finding Your Themes

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Writing fiction is about telling stories . . . but what is telling stories about?

When you tell someone a story, why are you doing this? What compels you to create lies that have about them the ring of truth; what drives you to invent people and places and events and create a context that pulls them all together and makes them seem real?

When you're creating fiction, at heart you are searching for ways to create order in the universe.

You are digging into your core beliefs on how the world works, and running imaginary people through a trial universe built on these beliefs to see how both the people and the beliefs stand up under pressure. People who write fiction tend not to accept the world at face value – in general, they are the people who always got in trouble when they were little for asking “Why?” one time too many about something that, to everyone else, seemed pretty obvious.

When you started writing fiction, you probably did so at about the same time that you discovered that not only did your parents not have all the answers to the universe, but neither did anybody else. You discovered that, if you wanted an answer to that still-nagging “Why?” you were going to have to find the answer yourself.

Writing fiction is the act of questioning the silent, unanswering infinite and demanding that the infinite cough up a reply . . . and hurry up about it, too.

It is the ultimate defiance of that stock parental response, "Because I said so." Writing fiction is standing on the edge of the abyss of ignorance, looking across at the cliffs on the other side, and saying, "With nothing but words, I am going to build myself a bridge that takes me from here to there . . . and when I'm done, other people will be able to cross over that same bridge." It's an act of ultimate hubris, but of ultimate courage, too, because the abyss can eat you, and will if you slip.

So which bridges are worth building?

You can't cover the whole abyss. You can run a thousand lines from one side to the other if you live long enough, and you won't even cast a shadow on the voracious ignorance that lies beneath. All you can do is span the darkness with your slender threads, and build them strong enough that people can traverse them, and make them interesting enough that people will take the risk.

Which bridges are worth risking life and limb and hope and soul to create? Only those that take you to someplace you have not yet been.

And how do you decide which bridges those might be? You ask yourself the following question: To what questions in life have I not yet found a satisfactory answer?

These are some of my answers to that question:

Why do good things happen to bad people? Have you figured that one out yet? I haven't. Why do bad things happen to good people? I've struggled with that one through a couple of books, and I have a couple of angles on it now, but certainly not the definitive one.

Why do we get old and die? Would living in these bodies forever be better? I've run with that one a couple of times now, too.

Why do we fall in love? Why do we fall out of love? Why do we hunger for the place that is just beyond the next horizon?

What is evil, and why do some people choose evil? What is good, and why do some people choose good? How are the first group of people different from the second group? How are they the same?

Is there a God, and if there is, does he or she know I'm here? And if he or she does . . . what is going on with my life?

Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there anything that lies beyond the realm of this moment, this breath, this place and time? Do we have souls, and if so, what does that mean? Do we have a purpose for being here? What do we mean to each other? What constitutes living a meaningful life? What is love, and why does it matter?

These have all been my themes. Perhaps they are the same questions you have wondered about. Perhaps your curiosity and doubt run in completely different directions. In either case, your themes will define the power of your work, and its meaning not only to you but to everyone who reads it.

If you choose to work with safe themes – with questions to which you already know the answer – you’ll write safe books.

You can have a very successful career writing safe books; after all, you won’t drive too hard into the core of anyone’s comfort zone, you won’t force your readers to question the meaning of their own lives, you won’t upset yourself or anyone else by reaching conclusions you don’t like or find frightening.

But you won’t grow as a writer, either, and you’ll risk becoming bored with your characters and your stories and your work.

You can have a successful career writing about the questions you haven’t answered, too. Mark Twain, my favorite writer, is also my favorite example of a man whose themes challenged the pat answers and asked the scary questions. He was a marvelous entertainer and a brilliant raconteur . . . but he also dared to look even God in the eye and say, “This doesn’t make sense to me. Explain yourself.”

In books and short stories and articles and essays and letters, again and again he held a mirror up to the world of his day and said, “Your actions belie your words, people. Your beliefs don’t fit the facts. And your hypocrisy shames you . . . you deserve better of yourselves than to act the way you do.” He wrote with everything he had. He dared the tough themes. And now, long after his death, when his colleagues who chose to write safely are nothing but footnotes in unread texts, Mark Twain continues to talk to us. His bridges across the abyss are still strong, still in use, still vital to those who want and need to get to the places he explored.

Every writer has something to say, but those writers whose works endure have dared to say something about the things that frighten them, confuse them, challenge them, and occasionally delight them.

They have not gone across the bridges built by others. They have dared to build their own.

You can find your own themes, and add power and depth to your work by daring to explore them through fiction. You can leave a worthwhile series of bridges into unknown territory, a solid series of roads away from ignorance and into knowledge that your readers can continue to use long after you are dust. In a world that cannot offer you physical immortality, you can leave something of your spirit, your courage, your hope and your integrity behind.

Find your themes – your REAL themes – and write them. I dare you.

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