

That Our Reach Exceed Our Grasp

written by Holly
December 23, 2009
By Holly Lisle

The first thing any good book has to do is tell a story that's worth reading. Writers' manuals give that advice pretty regularly—"Tell a story worth reading."

Hard to argue with the advice. After all, it's true.

And when you're writing, it also helps if you're telling this story about a character you care about; simply stated, if you don't care what happens to the character, why should anyone else?

You ought to have a plot that holds together as well, though some books that have no more plot than my cat sell remarkably well anyway, so I'd be lying to you if I told you this was essential. It helps if you can keep the story moving along at a decent pace, and *really* helps if you have the concepts of scope and sweep firmly in hand and are working on a book that has both.

If you have all of that going for you, you'll probably be writing bestsellers before too long, and that's a good thing.

It isn't everything, but it is a good thing.

Why isn't it everything?

Because there are some books that are about more than story, character, plot. There are some books that not only give you a good read for the money, but that reach inside of you and grab your heart and your soul ... and twist. Theodore Sturgeon wrote several, though the one that comes immediately to my mind is

Godbody .

It was about ... ah. It was about both the pain and the transcendence of being human. It was about love that encompassed all of life, that changed everything it touched, that transformed.

It was a magical book, and it was magical because Ted Sturgeon was not afraid to rip his heart out of his body and type it onto the page where you and I and everyone could read it. He imbued **Godbody** with not just a story, but with a spirit, and if you can read the book and not be touched—ennobled—transformed by it, I wonder at your species.

People write for different reasons—they have different goals in mind. And I can't say that the writer who has made 'make a million dollars per book' his primary goal has anything to be ashamed of, or that the one who wants to touch the lives of each of his readers and leave them with something more when they finish the book than they had when they started should be nominated for sainthood.

Personally, I wouldn't mind doing both, and I'm neither saint nor villain. I do know that the thing that keeps me happy as I write is not the hope of a big payoff but the hope that somehow I will someday manage to reach inside the hearts of my readers, as Ted Sturgeon reached inside of my heart, and twist. And that those readers will say, as I said, 'Oh. I understand more now. I'm more complete now. And I want to make more of my life—for myself and for the people I love.'

It's a struggle for me to explain why this matters so much to me. I can't tell you with conviction that there is life after death; I can't swear that anything we do here will face an accounting later, and frankly I doubt any such accounting.

I don't proclaim that searching for the meaning in my life will improve my karma, clear up my skin, or improve my sex life, either.

But I do think that as humans, we owe the best of who we are—more ... the best of who we can be—to ourselves, to our fellow human beings, and to the future.

Not because if we slack off an angry deity is going to blast us with thunderbolts or roast us in eternal torment.

Not because its better to play the odds and be good just in case.

I read a prayer once, and I believe it was attributed to Thomas Aquinas, and I'm probably misquoting it terribly, but the gist of it was, 'If I worship you because I hope to gain heaven, withhold heaven from me; and if I worship you because I fear hell, then throw me into hell; but if I worship you because I love you, don't deny me your presence, or turn your face from me.' I always thought that prayer showed guts, and what I'm saying here is, in a way, the same thing.

This isn't about worship, or about prayer.

But it is about doing what we do with our lives not because we expect to get something good in reward, or because we're afraid we might get something awful as punishment, but because our love and our creativity and our **selves** are all we have to offer to each other or to the future that are worth a damn.

Our best is the only gift we have to give that is worthy of us, or of those who will receive it.

Life is short.

Love is rare, and hard to find.

Your soul—my soul—poured freely into our work, no matter what work we do, ennobles the work. Ennobles us. Leaves a trace of something good behind, something that wasn't there before. Something that can, perhaps, continue after we're dust.

Ted Sturgeon was already dead when I read **Godbody**. I wept when

I finished the book, not because he was dead, but because he had once been alive, and while he was alive his love had driven him to leave a legacy that made my life better.

He had within him some magnificent species of passion that allowed him to paint his soul across the pages of a book, and leave it there where it could reach out to me, and where it could show me at a point in my life where I had given up on people, on love, and on idealism, that I had quit too soon—but that I could stand up again. That I could go on.

Perhaps I'll never reach the place in my writing where I can touch the soul of a stranger from across the abyss of death.

Maybe I don't have in me what it takes to change my corner of the world, or to change a life. But I want to live my life knowing that I gave everything I had—and if my reach forever exceeds my grasp, I will not die knowing I could have been more. To me, that is the challenge of writing.

More, it is the challenge of life.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved