TEXT Vol 9 No 1 (April 2005)

Reviews contents

***TEXT* Review**

Good Form

review by Ronn Morris

An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art
Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes (eds)
University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002
ISBN 0-472-06725-7
442pp. Pb RRP US$24.95

An Exaltation of Forms necessarily contains the work of established poets - Lewis Turco, Maxine Chernoff, Maxine Kumin, John Hollander, Paul Hoover and Charles Bernstein are some of the contributors. While this work features many elder statesmen and women of American verse, it is also an earnest endeavour to cover the dynamic variety of American poetry as cultural production in the present tense. The collection, particularly, in its last two sections, engages a reader in key deliberations upon the province of verse. Finch and Varnes's brief is broad and inclusively demotic. One of the virtues of this collection is that it provides a smorgasbord for the practitioner arising as it does from a teaching practice in which the writing of poetry is valorised in writing courses.

An Exaltation of Forms is a collection of 51 essays divided into four sections on (I) Meters, (II) Stanzas, (III) what Finch and Varnes term the Received Forms and (IV) on their notions of Principles for Formal Experimentation. These essays are written by poets, often, but not always, by poets who teach (or have taught) within American university writing programs and include examples of the matter under discussion. The individual essayists themselves reflect the diversity of modern American poetry and LANGUAGE poets, New Formalists, and Traditionalists are among them

The editors begin their work with a detailed introduction to the collection's contents and also include a few pages of 'the basic terms of prosody used in this book'. They cover terms that provide the beginnings of a viable working vocabulary for describing meter. The first dozen contributions consider meter in detail, augmenting this brief introduction. I'd argue that because of the weight given in the first two sections to meter and stanza there is a bias in this collection towards the more traditional forms - the other chapter headings include: Iambic, Anapestics, Trochaic and Dactylic meter and there are excursions to Hendecasyllabics, and Quantitative meters and the gloriously named 'Maverick Meters'. That misnomer, Free Verse, has its own chapter of essay and examples, as do English language verse's bread and butter - the accentual and syllabic measures.

The first two sections are quite literally definitive work. Their strength is in their provision of a working lexicon through which to read and write. These

nuts and bolts (more precisely, these types of definitions and examples) are with the obvious exception of Pat Mora's essay in the stanzas section, '*The Décima*: A Poetic Journey from Spain to New Mexico', readily sourced elsewhere. I refer the interested reader beyond an *Exaltation of Forms* to James MacAuley's classic (and sadly out of print) *Versification*, Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, Lewis Turco's challenging *The New Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*, John Hollander's playful *Rhyme's Reason* and Alfred Corn's eminently readable *The Poem's Heartbeat.* (It is noteworthy that Hollander and Turco both contribute to Finch and Varnes's collection and Corn is mentioned in the acknowledgments.)

One of the most useful brief accounts of rhythm, meter and form is to be found in your local library, if it's not already on your bookshelf. It's John Leonard's final chapter in his *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English*. Also T*he New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* is an exhaustive resource. Mary Kinzie's *A Poet's Guide to Poetry* proves invaluable in other ways - of all these books, the Kinzie is one I return to most often as it's heartening as well as authoritative.

Of course, the problem with reading guides on meter to understand verse is similar to that of reading a dictionary to grasp the meaning of words in an unfamiliar tongue. Marele Day demonstrates the problem in her *How to Write Crime* when she cites that wonderful Monty Python sketch on how to play a flute with words to the effect: it's a simple process really, you blow in one end and move your fingers over the holes and make music that melts the stars. *If only!* The cure to sounding out the mystery of cadence is found partly in the sounding of examples, which, fortunately *An Exaltation of Forms* has in abundance.

Australia's unofficial Poet Laureate, Les Murray, defines crafting verse as 'learning to play the instrument' that is the individual poet's voice and so reminds a reader that the poet is *always* a student of poetry and, more precisely, of their own poetry. Perhaps even more than meter itself, the *idea* of meter is the most basic unit in verse - even if poets choose to disregard the sense in sound, sound makes its own sense. Learning to play the instrument that is a poet's voice is learning about the tolerances and partialities of a poet's ear. Form, and the trying out of various different forms, is a viable way of unfolding the poet's capabilities as practitioner. The only way to learn to write is by writing.

The American Poet Laureate, Robert Pinsky maintains that *an art is best understood through careful attention to great examples* and he suggests that the best way of learning to write poetry is to read, re-write and recite examples of verse that you love. While I suspect this provides the student of poetry with a good foundation for understanding the craft, I prefer Mary Kinzie's approach to writing poetry as stated in *A Poet's Guide to Poetry*. She writes, '*The most effective way to think oneself through a poetic form is to try and write in it'*.

Pinsky's advice encourages appreciation but also emulation. Murray's perspective on the craft of poetry as a way of learning to play the instrument of our individual capabilities is my preferred model. For the teacher of poetry writing, questions of *what poetry* is move necessarily beyond interrogations of taste and become elemental. Whereas, most literature conforms to Roland Barthes's definition of *that which is taught*, poetry writing, when taught, is taught through a process of exchange - namely, through the poetry workshop in which all participants facilitate learning. In short, reading literature is at University a received form of learning, where canon-formation (even post post-modernism) plays a key element in literature and cultural studies courses. By

contrast, the poetry workshop allows a more fluid exchange of reading/writing perspectives - that includes reference to the historical record but necessarily privileges students' writing.

The strength of Finch and Varnes's work comes to the fore in the collection's third and fourth sections. The discussion of Stanza forms in Section II takes a reader beyond the individual measures to a discussion of what the stanza does and how the stanza works to house discrete parts of poems. The Stanza forms include Heroic Couplet, Sapphics, and Terza Rima among others. The third section, on Received Forms underlines the cultural diversity of American verse with its essays on Hip-Hop, The Blues, and Rap. These essays are *not* grouped together, and indeed, there's little rhyme or reason to the placement of these small chapters with the essay on the Ghazal followed by one on Haiku, the essay on Haiku followed by Hip-Hop and the essay on Hip-Hop followed by one on Japanese-Style Linked poems. I'd prefer like to be followed by like, so, for example, Haiku followed by the Japanese-Style Linked poems. Folk Ballad, received French and Italian forms including the sonnet, the villanelle and Rondeaux and Roundels are found in this section.

The last section, Principles for Formal Experimentation, is the most ludic. This is the place where the notion of the poem as a form of significant expression battles it out with Archibald McLeish's *Ars Poetica: a poem does not have to mean but be* and all in favour of the arbitrary win. The chief fault with all these essays, but particularly the essays in this section - lies in their very brevity. I want more, particularly from Charles Bernstein in his 'Nude Formalism: A Sampler', and from Aldon Lynn Nielson with his 'Oulipian Poetry'. These particular essays are reminiscent of those by Borges in which entire other principalities and potentialities of verse are evoked only to be lost before they are fully fathomed. *O brave new world that has such poetries in it!*

And so to conclude: *An Exaltation of Forms* is a fine resource for the practitioner. It could be meatier but meatier essays would have, in all probability, meant fewer essays. The examples used by poets when discussing the more conventional forms are often the examples used in discussions of form found elsewhere. For instance, I was disappointed that Turco's discussion of the Sestina used the same examples he had put forward in his *New Book of Forms.* I was both a tad saddened and pleased to see the usual suspects: Theodore Roethke's 'The Waking', Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle…', and Elizabeth Bishop's examples of Villanelles mentioned by Maxine Kumin in her chapter on that form as exemplars of the form. I have yet to read a villanelle to beat Bishop's 'One Art', and I would like to.

Attempting a range of forms adds to an appreciation of poetry and will broaden and vary a poet's technique. Leaning to play the instrument that is your poetic voice is learning to sound its notes and learning also to see where your ear takes you. Playing with form is playing a part in the grandest on-going experiment wrought by poets; it places you within that privileged continuum of those who brave the demands of form. To succeed, of course, is another exhilarating thing altogether. What can I say, start with Haiku and Limericks, and proceed with verve? This American book, rightly titled *An Exaltation of Form*, will give you as good a start as any, and better than most.

A select list of works cited:

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TEXT
Vol 9 No 1 April 2005
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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***TEXT* Review**

Experimentation and theory pay off for writers

review by Komninos Zervos

The writing experiment: Strategies for innovative creative writing
Hazel Smith
Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005
ISBN 1-741140-15-3
304pp, Pb AU$39.95

I have read the book, it's great for providing ideas for experimentation and placing the writing thus produced in a theoretical context without prescribing what is good, or bad, writing. It is intended for students of university creative writing programs but from my experiences teaching creative writing in schools, as well as at university, I believe it is not beyond year 10, 11 or 12 high school students. It is certainly a much-needed resource for their teachers, who often find it difficult to introduce their students to the concepts of contemporary literary and cultural theory with practical examples of the art that their students can relate to.

I am doing belly-dance classes at the moment and I didn't start to have fun with it until I knew the standard shimmies, body movements, steps and turns. Then I could extend, re-combine, re-invent and experiment for myself. We all need some knowledge of the bricks before we start building.

Hazel Smith claims that creative writing interconnects intellectual and creative exploration and her book aims to demystify the creative writing process. It is not a 'painting by numbers' approach to creative writing, but it is a step-by-step writing manual. It is not based on pre-conceived forms. Hazel refers to word systems rather than structure or genre, with open-ended strategies with diverse outcomes. Writing can be worked out and skills can be learnt, experimentation is fundamental to creativity, and she encourages writers to make their own experiments. It helps if you can visualize yourself as a writer first. Without being evangelistic about what is good writing Hazel stresses that experimental texts are polysemic, having many meanings and interpretations, and there is a considerable difference between real life and text life. Everything written is a fiction, and texts are composed of other texts.

It is emphasized that writers do not have 'one unique voice' but many voices, and writing is often a means of becoming a more informed reader. In doing so she does not deny an inspirational kind of writing but shows us that a disciplined writing is no less valuable. In 1985 I stopped doing every other job in my life. Making poetry my art and my means of financial survival I was probably the first Australian full-time professional performance poet with a wife, family and mortgage (since Henry Lawson).

If I sat around waiting for the inspirational poem, I wasn't very productive. If I set myself tasks, if I made myself productive, then I was a whole lot more creative, even if some of the things I wrote never made it past the work-in-progress stage.

Another great benefit of this book is that it acknowledges that writing has many forms and utilizes various inscription technologies: print, performance and the multimedia interconnected Internet. She identifies that spoken word poetry has its own qualities: dynamics, pitch, accentuation, rhythmic delivery, and tempo. Internet texts are characterized by a different use of space, of topography utilizing images, language, sound, a plurality not possible on the page, with multi-linear or non-sequential pathways through the text, including animations, split screens, hyper-linking, interactivity and encouraging scanning of surfaces with the mouse, and reading in directions other than left to right. It is a simultaneous absorption of multiple and fragmented texts.

There is an Internet website to accompany the book, http://www.allenandunwin.com/writingexp/

Hazel's chapters on narrative and narratology and narrative strategies stress that our past is constantly being transformed by the present and the relationship between past and present is fluid. Her chapters on postmodern writing emphasize that it established frictions in breaking traditional narrative structures, projecting character then challenging it. Hazel states that there is always a tension between what we are feeling and the language we use to express it. In postmodern writing subjectivity is de-centred, fragmented and multiple. The I that writes is not the I that is written. There is not one centred self and that all texts are political. The contemporary image focuses on the taboo subjects like areas of disgust, secrecy or fear or the modern social condition, and on urban/technical issues. This kind of writing employs devices like metonymy, games/formulas, homonym and working within constraints, mostly self-imposed formulas.

One thing that worries me about this does not have to do with Hazel's reading of postmodern writing, which I think is very accurate, but rather the value of postmodernism as a vibrant theory if it can be so easily defined.

Finally here are a couple of poems that I constructed using some of Hazel's exercises:

Word Pool Exercise (Choose 15-20 strong words)

Southport

Workers Buses

Breezes Welfare Recipients

Coffee

Road works Pastries

Sipping Urban Banks

Morning

School
kids

pension day on scarborough

welfare recipients
sipping the morning
bank breezes
like coffee buses
gather
like pigeons to a bakery
as urban as workers
bitumen crumbles like pastry
road works
coffee banks
school-kids rushing for buses
future welfare recipients?

sound run

breasts broken spoken speech screech
scrawny morning awning
spawning
horn-blower rower crower omen chromed home ho ho ho
whoa why try demystify kisses
bliss bleeding sincere chin
chunder scum scallops trollops
troughs and bollocks

Komninos Zervos, Poet, Convenor, CyberStudies major, School of Arts, Griffith University

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TEXT
Vol 9 No 1 April 2005
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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***TEXT* Review**

Easter time thoughts on space and place

review by Tess Brady

Who wants to create Australia? Essays on poetry and ideas in contemporary Australia
Martin Harrison
Halstead Press, Sydney, 2004
ISBN 1-920831-20-7
110pp, Pb AU$29.95

Easter is as good a time as any to reflect on Australia *as we have created it* - the demonstrators are predictably doing their bit for the national identity in the desert, and John Howard contemplates releasing long-term refugee detainees. It's all very seasonal, very biblical. Then the TV news brings in the comic. Demonstrators are arrested for flying kites, but that too echoes and a Google search reveals kite flying to be a politically volatile activity. It seems the Taliban, amongst others, also banned the act of flying kites.

These are not hang gliders we are talking about here but toys, the kind of kites we might take to a park with the dog and kids and run along trying to get airborne. We might have made it from paper and string and lightwood or assembled it from plastics and hard-to-understand instructions. We might have put colours on the tail or painted butterfly eyes on the kite itself.

So it has come now to this - in this place kite flying has become overtly political. This place. This desert place, this city place, this government place, this jail place, this park place, this desk place. In this sense of place, in this Easter Australia, I read Martin Harrison's book of essays *Who wants to create Australia?*

The collection draws together many of his essays from 1997 to the present day. Several have been previously published, in earlier forms, including in *TEXT*, so, as co-editor of that journal I was familiar with Harrison's work. The drawing together in one volume however gives each essay a new presence and following his thoughts in this chronological way is like revisiting a photo album of conversations. It is a great pity that the collection is marred by poor editorial and too many typos, something Halstead Press needs to take responsibility for.

Harrison is concerned with perception and seeing, with the naming of a kind of private and national self within a political, theoretical, physical and imagined place. And all of this is worked as the background to the business of writing, specifically as a poet, but it can be read in a broader arena. He says '...poetry and the idea of teaching poetry are inescapably positioned, between the practice of a craft and inherited knowledge, between creative imagining and philosophical thinking' (p24).

There is much here for the teacher of writing and the collection might make for lively discussions in senior classes whose members are interested in exploring their own poetics. In 'Land and theory' he explores an adverbial reading as a shadow narrative. 'The gap between experience and narrative, the space of the absent adverb, remains apparent. The problem of mode and mood does not go away. In the end it is what tells us that this time, this place, are real' (p36).

In 'What can poets teach?' he reflects on the new technologies and how they modify the way in which a poet might engage with the poem. I would have liked a little more here, perhaps a further essay not so much on the marvels of hypertext but rather an exploration of the more intimate relationship between the writer/poet and the computer. Harrison is a deft hand at the intimate in such debates.

Martin Harrison writes with clarity and vividness using his own narratives along with examples from other poetic voices to tease out his ideas. The text is always readable. For example, after handling some of the complexities of metaphor he writes:

> The study of poetics is, in this sense, a study of what might be termed "realisation". It is about bringing to consciousness one's own and one's work's relationship with its setting, with its time whether in the large sense of period or the more immediate sense of biographical experience'. (p98)

My personal favourite in this collection is the final essay 'Country and how to get there' I too had moved from the city in order to investigate some private understanding of place and country. I too live in an environment where layers of black and white settlement have come and gone, where to turn the soil is to unearth traces of the past. And this is true of ideas, of values as well as of physical location. Harrison works this territory making sense of it - he writes:

> The fact of so much already non-existent, so much already vanished, could suggest that country inevitably demands that we understand the relationship between openness, wilderness, habitation and travel as a series of transformative experiences of place, both across time and through multiple senses of environment and place. Even the most deeply and intuitively acquired senses of time, land form and weather cannot help but be historical. Here history might mean recognising detailed micro-structures of recurrence… (p106)

And so I am indebted to Harrison as I personally explore place and more immediately as I struggled with this Easter time, trying to make sense of deserts, protests, releasing of prisoners, memory of the old stories and the politically volatile nature of flying kites.

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TEXT
Vol 9 No 1 April 2005
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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***TEXT* Review**

Cyclopean view of story telling

review by Theresa E. Lauf

The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories
Christopher Booker
Continuum, London, 2004
ISBN 0-8264-5209-4
728pp. Pb AU$69.95

Someone shared this anecdote with me recently. I cannot stipulate as to its accuracy, but that is not the point. Apparently, a large hamburger producer was not prepared to track the meat put into its food because of the scale of the task. In every meat patty, goes beef from around one thousand cows, all combined in an enormous meat grinder. Oddly, this anecdote resonates with my reading of Booker's *The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories.*

Booker has thrown more than a thousand interesting thoughts into his life-time work, ground them all up and come out with an homogenous mass of his own. At least initially, it tastes good and it satisfies basic hunger, until one starts to suspect the quality control and feels queasy. Unfortunately (and no doubt unlike the meat products which I still half-heartedly consume) there are more than a few mad cows in this patty Booker has thrown in hooves and all, and frankly, it's surprising that his editors didn't pick them out.

This was a very difficult book to review. The four parts could well have been four separate books. It is both brilliant in parts and incredibly one-eyed and wrong in others. The number of typographical errors also surprised me. The sheer size of the book (728 pages) and the amount of (sometimes contradictory) information imparted is overwhelming. In case you're in a hurry, the answer to the central question is literally given in the last sentence of the book. The question, put simply: is why do we tell stories? Remember that.

Booker's intended audience is not easy to identify. The tone is often condescending and the material repetitive. In its current form, only academics, keen scholars and true literature lovers are likely to persevere with it.

This isn't your usual how-to-write book, although by grinding the goodness out of hundreds of stories (mostly classics, predating the Romantic Period) and contrasting that with the sludge that he purports emerged in the last two hundred years, Booker tells us that there is only one right way to tell a story. Is this a worry? You bet. But more on that later.

By stealth, Booker has produced a work that encapsulates his expansions and amendments to the work of famous psychoanalysts, Freud and Jung, into understanding the workings of the human unconscious, no less. The unsuspecting reader is tricked into reading a lot of personal opinions of one man, stacked on top of each other, to seem big enough to equate to a thesis. Some of the opinions are well grounded (but one must question the completeness and integrity of the methodology behind the work). Many are not. The things that are left out tell us as much about the author as the things he deigned to include.

The formal layout and heavy reliance upon 'precedent' (in the form of centuries of stories) gives this book at least the veneer of logic and authority.

Part one: The seven gateways to the underworld

To answer his question, Booker first analyses the plots of many of the stories familiar to Western readers since the beginning of time, and categorises them into his seven plot types, including: Overcoming the monster; Rags to riches; The quest; Voyage and return; Comedy; Tragedy; and Rebirth. The idea of there being only a handful of master plots is not new, but no-one has gone to such lengths to prove it. For that, we can congratulate Booker. Part one of the book is eminently useful for teachers, scholars and literature lovers. Nothing like it has been achieved before. It is superb.

However, it needs to be noted that the stories are not necessarily representative of the entire world. Indeed, they seem limited to those Booker thinks his readers might be most familiar with: those in the Western, Christian or Jewish traditions mostly. Stories of Australian Aboriginals, Asians, gays, feminists, to name a few, are completely left out, and according to Booker, because of America's beginnings, almost nothing good has come out of America - ever. American stories are mostly used to illustrate unsuccessful outcomes. The limitations of the resource material aren't clearly stated. This issue is only alluded to in the Author's Notes (p. 703).

In his Epilogue to Part one, Booker introduces the reader to the chief archetypal numbers around which stories are structured: one, two, three and four. Any others are dealt with only in a footnote (p. 235), including, ironically, the number seven, as in *The seven plots*…the seven deadly sins…need I say more?

Part two: The complete happy ending

In Part two, Booker submits that there is a familiar cast of characters who keep reappearing in the plots he has just categorized in Part one, and that they are significant in revealing some deep mystery about storytelling and life. The chief archetypes are: Mother, Father, 'animus' and 'anima', and Child. At this point, the reader begins to wonder what Booker's point is. Is he looking for the meaning of life through stories? Is he telling us how to suck eggs?

Booker explains the significance of dark/light figures and corresponding masculine/feminine traits and the need for all to be balanced to achieve a fully resolved story. This all seems tame enough, until he starts applying it to the modern world, particularly in the context of the feminization of men

and the masculinisation of women in his very last chapter. But in this part, Booker continues to apply his theory only to traditional stories to illustrate his points, lulling his readers into a false sense of security.

Part three: Missing the mark

Part three catalogues the downfall of modern storytelling, in parallel with the happenings in the world and the shifts in consciousness since the Romantic period and French Revolution. This whole part reads like a long complaint of almost two hundred pages, pulling apart stories of each kind of plot, highlighting the darkness and unresolved natures of the stories.

In Chapter 25, Booker goes further and compares the downward spiral of the quality of Thomas Hardy's work with his own life's tragedies. Chapter 27 obsesses about the active ego and the unacceptable coming to the fore of sex and violence which merely titillates rather than telling genuine stories. In Chapter 29, he suddenly introduces a new plot to the mix, which he says has only emerged recently: The mystery. The mystery does not represent a fully developed and resolved story and is strictly lowbrow in Booker's literary estimation.

Booker has a disconcerting habit of amending accepted theories in footnotes (for example, his comments on Jung's 'psychological types' theory [p. 559] and how Freud got his 'Oedipus Complex' theory wrong [p. 521]). I wonder how the learned establishment would view such flippancy.

Part four: Why we tell stories

In Part four, Booker steps 'outside this self-contained world of storytelling, and to see how the ways in which we tell stories relate to what we call "real life"' (p. 540).

Booker examines the difference between humans and other animals and highlights that his study differs to all others in that he takes into account 'the consequences arising from the split between the ego and instinct' (p. 553). He asserts that his work picks up what Freud and Jung missed: essentially, they studied dreams to better understand the unconscious, without recognizing 'just how much more systematic a picture of its workings can be derived from analyzing the process whereby we imagine stories' (p. 553).

It is disconcerting to me that Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs was not featured in a study about plots. Maslow is not even mentioned, but masturbation is. Feminism isn't included in the index, but feminization of men is. Booker's work is odd in the things it chooses to completely ignore or highlight and, in that sense, I do not feel confident that it has been balanced and properly presented as a scholarly work. Furthermore, Booker has no qualifications in psychoanalysis as far as I know.

As I mentioned before, feminism is not listed in the index or contents. However, I pushed myself to the end of the book because I couldn't believe that he would have excluded it. I was right.

If you want to read Booker's thoughts on feminism, look up 'feminization of men' (pp. 661, 687-89) and 'The heroine as hero' (p. 486) for starters. I'm not being funny. His feelings on this supposed social disintegration are palpable. I thought I was conservative and traditional in outlook and

lifestyle until I read pages 486, 661 and 687 to 691 for example - I thought my eyes were bleeding.

Booker can't hide his contempt for the 'new "mannishness"' (p. 661) and 'emancipated attitudes' (p. 661) ('"mass-individualism"' [p. 661], '"political correctness"' [pp. 689-90], 'new secular Puritanism' [p. 689]) and those who have become 'possessed by a fanatical and humourless intolerance' (p. 689). He doesn't understand the different types of feminism, nor does he acknowledge any positives from its intervention. I don't think I'd like to live in Booker's ideal world, even if all the stories have happy endings.

While it isn't addressed all in one place, Booker appears to suggest that all the evils in the world, including the demise of good storytelling, are because of women's egocentricity (beginning with Eve and Pandora). These days, women in the modern world and modern stories are not complying with their preordained archetypal roles and are upsetting everything, from a psychoanalytical standpoint of course. Reverse 'gender stereotyping' of women in modern stories particularly offends him (pp. 486, 690).

Only women who fulfill their archetypal roles (of two centuries ago) and 'complete' the hero are acceptable to Booker. A woman needs to be '"tamed" back into contact with her femininity' (p. 688).

See page 689 for Booker's views on 'political correctness', the 'mother's boys' (Tony Blair and President Clinton), extremism and anti-discrimination issues. This reads like a John Laws script.

Epilogue: The light and the shadows on the wall

Here Booker preempts any criticisms of his work by relying on Plato's Parable of the Cave, basically, that with our limited state of consciousness, of course we can't see what he's talking about! There are so many other incredible throwaway lines in this chapter about the scientific significance of his work, and religious references about the state of the world, that it's too much to summarise. Once he started talking about 'cosmic mind' (p. 701) I lost it. Happy reading…

Without clearly stating it, Booker has presented us with his life's work (summaries of many stories) within the framework of psychoanalytical theory. It was incumbent upon him to stipulate this at the beginning rather than setting up clichéd cliffhangers on every page, right up to the last page where we finally get the answer, but still within an unclear context.

Psychoanalytical theory presupposes that human beings are pushed and pulled by unconscious instinctual impulses. That should have been in paragraph one, page one. Then he should have prepared his reader for the journey they were embarking upon.

What I realise now is that Booker subscribes to psychoanalytical theory (which he expands upon, on the basis of his reading of stories), and feels that proper stories (which he defines, and which definition seems to hold up until 200 years ago) hold the blueprint to our own 'happily ever after'. The problem with Booker's 'theory' is that he only refers to things which support it and disregards the 200 years of experience which don't. Booker believes in evolution (he describes the first single-celled organism as our ultimate Rags to Riches hero [p. 545]), but somehow, he can't accept that

we've changed since we started walking on two legs and that maybe our lives, expectations and consequently stories have also.

Ironically, Booker so clearly explains the role of the 'deadly opposites' (p. 233) in storytelling and how the hero must walk the fine line between them or face a sudden and horrible death, yet, he cannot see that he has in numerous, fundamental respects, overstepped the line himself. And as he says, it's all about fighting one's own egocentric nature. At least on that point, we agree.

As a writer, the most unsettling thing about this work is that it states in absolute terms that if we don't follow the archetypes, both in plot and character, we don't have a satisfying story, because we are all unconsciously programmed to look for these archetypes. It would be an interesting question for someone to take up with Booker: Where do the archetypes end and the clichés begin? Also, is art in all its forms, including storytelling, not art if it engages in and reflects the culture of its time? And could it be that there is more than one reason why we engage in storytelling?

This book is a worthwhile addition to the general discourse on storytelling, however, it needs to be considered with caveats.

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TEXT
Vol 9 No 1 April 2005
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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