Combating Cynicism

I was watching the most recent Karate Kid film, the one with Jackie Chan and Jaden Smith - I got to the scene with the chopsticks where Chan is eating and Smith comes to ask about the hot water. Smith watches Chan as he tracks a fly with his chopsticks, the tension builds for a moment, then when the viewer is sure he’s about to grab it, Chan hits the fly with a fly-swatter. It’s sudden, unexpected, and throws both the viewer and Smith. In a film ten or twenty years ago Chan would have grabbed the fly, it would have been a moment that was set up to amaze the viewer and add to the mystique of the story.

Today for every person that would have been wowed by such a scene, there might be two others who scoff “yeah right!” Whether it’s a development of more mature viewers/readers or a growing sense of cynicism in our modern psyche when it comes to fiction, we seem to be losing our sense of wonder - or if not our sense, then our easy acceptance of these things. Today we would not be happy with a story merely about amazing characters and events. We require our protagonists to be human and fallible, to surprise us, and we might take stories of their spectacular deeds with a pinch of salt.

The détente or truce that is the suspension of disbelief ever rests on shaky ground, one poor sentence or line of stilted dialogue can destroy its fragile balance. The chopstick scene works to subvert our expectations, and that is just one of the tricks that writers use to keep their stories fresh. To evolve with changing cultural views, writers may alter the entire nature of the story or merely tweak the style of writing in order to keep people interested and wow them all over again.
The use of humour is a great way to twist an idea and keep it interesting - continuing with the martial arts theme, let’s look at the *Kung Foo Panda* films as an example. They contain many traditional elements, like the growth of the hero, the gain of great power, overcoming adversity, all elements we have seen before. What keeps those ideas fresh is the irreverent humour and self mockery of the films and the character of Po. From his comical attempts at training to his final victory and acquisition of inner peace, Po follows the typical story arc but does it with a whole new look.

Working on the characters is another way writers try to keep the reader engaged. The average person has probably seen hundreds of stories with a good looking, courageous, and noble hero who performs extraordinary feats – the writer responds with a cowardly screw-up as the main character, and then works to make us love them. Or instead they might give us a more believable reason for a hero’s courage, showing him taking a swig from a hip flask before a battle, and taking the shine off their noble hero. Characters can be used to explore new ideas, represent issues and provide an endless well of variation for the writer to utilise.
There are also greater changes in fiction as writers seek to respond to their audience. On a larger scale we could look at the whole concept of Grimdark as a response to our cynicism about the traditional hero archetype. As a result of people deriding the traditional hero and rural worlds of classic fantasy we now have stories where the world is crumbling and there are no heroes but only varying levels of villainy. Grimdark is a rather extreme response, but given its popularity one can’t say it hasn’t been successful.

Now I believe that good writing will win out no matter what the situation, and I think that responding to the readers is part of the natural evolution of fiction. It will always be a running battle between those who create fiction and those who enjoy it to keep up the standard of entertainment. But rather than some bitter struggle, it’s more of a friendly back and forth with the imagination as a weapon. While we are able keep the reader entertained and the events plausible, people will believe in the story. As writers, it might not be a battle we can ever win; we just need to take care we don’t lose.

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