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Framing the World

As a child, I attempted many times to write a novel. I always imagined my stories happening in my perfect imagined world of magic. As I went about my days in school, I weaved the stories in my head. If a story gets bigger and bigger after a few days and cannot get out of my head, I felt the need to dump my ideas of a story all on a notebook. But half way through I always stopped, having realized that what I wrote could never turn into a novel. Each of the characters in the world that I created has their own identity, their own reactions to events, their own stories, I wanted to tell them all, but could not fit everything in the linear lines of writings. I was lost in my narration.

Author Jeanette Winterson used the expression of “framing the world” when she discusses her writing career in her article “Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?” I found this to be my missing step in my attempts to write novels. Winterson explains that “Truth for anyone is a very complex thing. For a writer, what you leave out says as much as those things you include.” She reveals in her article that she was raised in an adopted family with her mother as a “flamboyant depressive” because of her natural born illnesses, including the inability to have children. Her childhood imaginations were held back because books are banned in the house. To face up to the harsh reality that the family pretended to be “normal”, Winterson started writing. Her first successful book *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* was an autobiographical novel. In the novel, she tells her story of unhappy family, but replaces parts of her story with her imaginations.

She explains that she wanted to write it as a novel so that can tolerate the story, because her truth is unbearable. When it comes down to it, any truth is not really knowable.

As an adopted child, Winterson had always felt something missing from her identity. Not knowing her past gave her pain. When she refused to look at the world in a cynical way that her adopted parents did, she realized that “the missing part, the missing past, can be an opening, not a void. It can be an entry as well as an exit.” Her acknowledgement of the imperfect truth, that something is missing, was what prompted her to imagine, despite her mother’s strong disapproval of her writing novels. By not attempting to telling the whole truths, Winterson escaped a cynical narrative and expressed what she wishes her life to be like.

Winterson says in the essay that “part fact part fiction is what life is”. That is because truth for anyone is hardly attainable. Everything we hear come from narrators who have to modify the truth as a compensation of the ability to express them. Winterson’s choice of becoming a writer is, according to her, “not an act of will or even a conscious choice”. She was living too much in what her parents believe to be the painful truth, and she needed the part of life that is not true to get her through the day. That is a thing about narration. Everything we hear come from narrators who have to modify the truth as a compensation for the ability to express them. That is the process of framing the world.

Imagination partly comes from the subconscious, which drives us to do different things as we grow up. To the childhood me who cannot make sense of how imagination connects with reality, the process of framing the world is what got into the way of me writing a novel. In the way that I saw it, the world is just magically there, not knowing that it was a part of my life. To frame the world into stories means sometimes to give up control, that I can only tell one part of the story. The inability to tell the story in its completeness as I intended is fearful but inevitable.

It is, to me, a brutal thing to do: to create a world, wrap it into a box, and send it off as an adopted newborn child. How can one do that, when the world that a writer creates is deeply personal?

J.K. Rowling, after writing 8 Harry Potter books in 17 years, felt anxious and depressed when completing the last Harry Potter book. She told NBC that “I was incredibly low. I was mourning the loss of this world that I had written about for so long and loved so much. I was also mourning the retreat it had been from ordinary life, which it has been.” Writing Harry Potter was Rowling’s way of escaping her misfortunes: divorce, the death of her mother, and unhappy family. Harry Potter is something very personal to her, his tragic backstory and the monster that he faced are all shadows of Rowling’s life. Therefore finishing her last book of the sequel means that she would no longer have control over the magical world. That is the way with narration. But narration has a bigger purpose. To the readers, this would not be the end of Harry Potter. In each of her books, Rowling frames the world into a story where some of the characters go on a journey. At first, we do not know about why Harry was adopted, or anything about his original family. He is known as an adopted boy with a scar on his forehead, and as it turns out, wizard talent. While the next few books explaining Harry’s past is being published, readers fantasized and wrote their own versions of Harry Potter. They want to live Harry’s life, dressing up as the characters in Halloweens and fan conventions. They would argue with each other on the knowledge of the wizard world, which they can impressively remember for the fan trivia games and other social occasions. What is sliding off Rowling’s fingers is becoming something of the culture of the readers’ generations.

The influence of Rowling’s writing is extensive. Anna Paszkiewicz used the term “the Harry Potter Generation” to describe the current youth and young adults in England nowadays

that are infatuated about Rowling's magical world. Paszkiewicz references to a YouGov survey which says that "in Britain, 81 percent of 18-to-24- year-olds are fans of the Harry Potter books, films or both". Along with the captivating stories and characters, Leszkiewicz also mentions a Spectator article which says that the fans seem to be taking on the escapism mindset that Rowling had when writing her novels: "to be a fan of Harry Potter is to 'ignore the complexity of reality'... the series is the reason why 'young people are often so childish in their politics, why they want to divide the world between tolerant progressives and wicked reactionaries'." Even though most of the readers do not suffer as much as Rowling did, they are able to use her book to take off their imaginations, so that they arrive in the same imaginary world with consensus. They can feel what other fans can feel and unpack Rowling's backstory just like Harry going back to the magic world after growing up with muggles. Perhaps they can relate to her and be aware of what she left unsaid in the book, in which case Rowling can almost express her full world without words.

Or perhaps the books act as a spring of the readers own imaginations, so that they can find their own lives and know more about the way that they imagine things. After all, the readers and writers have different outlooks on the world, even though they share feelings through the book franchise. The books that Rowling uses to escape from people in her life bond people together. The differentiation of thoughts come from the things that were left out when Rowling try to frame her world. Winterson emphasizes in her article the importance of leaving out some of the things, that choosing which parts to be silent about in the story is just as important as the parts that are written out. She explains that "When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one. And perhaps we hope that the silences will be heard by someone else, and the story can continue, can be retold."

When an imagined world is framed into a story and released to the mass audience, it is no longer something of the authors. It became the readers'.

Whether it is the reader or the writer, one thing does not change about the journey of literature: it is about facing fears. When Rowling wrote her first novel, it was to get her distracted from her thoughts about suicide. Through Harry, Rowling imagines the world of Harry when he stays strong in the adversities despite family abuse, mockery, and being on the weaker side of the battle when fighting for justice. There is something larger and meaningful about Harry's life. Winterson wrote her first novel to counter her fear of her pessimistic and passive adopted mother, and to face her mother's fear of life. In her novel, she is able to look at her life and what she wishes her life to be like. After the book came out, she confronts her mother in real life.

I did not have fear, or I did not think that I had fear when I tried to write novels when I was little. As I grow up, I gradually become more aware of my fears, so perhaps it is a subconscious thing that people can discover about themselves, that guides them how to frame the world, to tell only parts of the story. Author Jhumpa Lahiri had the same trouble as I did when she was little. She could not connect her imaginations with herself and be assertive enough to frame her world. She writes in her article "Growing up as a Writer" that when she was little, she read American novels and wrote stories about American worlds, hoping that she could connect with others in that way. But she struggled to connect with her parents because they did not read her Bengali books. "What I really sought was a better-marked trail of my parents' intellectual lives: bound and printed evidence of what they'd read, what had inspired and shaped their minds.", she writes, "A connection, via books, between them and me." Like Winterson, there is a part of identity missing from Lahiri's life. Not from her family, but from her cultural past. As

Lahiri grew older, she realized that “though the compulsion to invent stories remained, self-doubt began to undermine it”. She could not find a way to be assertive until she went back home and reconnected with the culture of her parents. Eventually, she discovered that she fears letting go of either of her two cultural identities, that she became more uncertain as she goes to university to America because she was drifting away from her Bengali culture. As a writer, she writes about what it feels like to struggling to belong somewhere because she was caught in the middle.

Literature is a way to reconnect with our subconscious selves with imaginations and fears in the subconscious. It helps us examine our relation to our pasts, and our thoughts of our alternative pasts. The narration process makes the writers’ expression of these things imperfect, but its product helps the readers know the fiction in life they want to believe in, and through the deep thoughts they can connect with others.

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