

On the Personal Worth of Fiction

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Understandably, we are drawn to pay attention to what's going on when things aren't good in our lives, when we are discontent or ineffective or spinning our wheels, because we want to get out of the fix we are in. Equally important, however, is noticing what's going on when life is going well, or better than it was before, when we are more content, more powerful and productive than before, more the person we want to be and ought to be, and happier. Because that is a sign that we're on the right track and ought to do more of what we are thinking and doing, and we need to be clear about what that is so we can keep doing it.

In this regard, after a long lifetime of almost exclusively reading non-fiction, in the last six months or so I've noted that my life goes better if I regularly read fiction. Reading really good fiction (not just any fiction, top-of-the-line fiction) is a good time for me: it is an aesthetic pleasure and it is intellectually stimulating, it settles me, grounds me, affirms me, validates me, informs me, strengthens me, gives me direction, and somehow it makes me feel safer, more secure, less threatened, less vulnerable, and less alone; it has therapeutic value for me. Simply, fiction makes me more satisfied with my life than I would be if it weren't part of my routine. I wish I had come to this realization a lot earlier in my life.

In particular, short stories work for me--though novels and novellas do too, it's not a simple either-or. For that matter, it isn't either-or between fiction and non-fiction, with fiction being the better of the two. Because something is good doesn't mean whatever contrasts with it is bad or unnecessary. Indeed, non-fiction serves a purpose, and I want to keep in part of my life. Yesterday, for example, I read a fine non-fiction book (historian Joseph Ellis' book, *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789*, Knopf, 2015) and it was a most

rewarding time. The way I look at it, fiction and non-fiction complement one another; each provides something the other doesn't, and, the point here, I've been missing out on what non-fiction has to offer me.

Over the last few months, it has become a ritual for me to read a short story or two propped up in a well-made bed just before I go to sleep at night, with only the bedside light on, no other lights on in the apartment. It's a really good part of my day; I look forward to it. During this time, the rest of the world goes away in welcome fashion; the affairs of the public realm, terror attacks and the like, as well as my private concerns and issues, fade from my consciousness. It's like a burden has been lifted, that I'm granted a reprieve, a respite. It's just me (I live alone) and whatever I'm reading about, I'm immersed in it and I'm at peace, or as close to at peace as I get, anyway. And then I sleep well, which is very much appreciated, because restless sleep and outright insomnia have increasingly been problems for me in recent years.

I'm finding that it has to be really good fiction, and it has to be "my" fiction situations and stories I find meaningful, that touch me or enlighten me in some significant way. I'm not up on the best novelists and short story writers, especially contemporary ones, so it's been a challenge for me finding good things to read. Over the years, I've sampled the greats—Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and the like—and, truth be told, I've never gotten what all the hoopla is about and given up and gone back to non-fiction, biographies and philosophical writings and sports books mostly. I've read enough poetry in hit and miss fashion to get the sense that poetry would work for me in much the same way fiction does, but here too, I don't have the background and frame of reference that could guide me in identifying my poets from among the truly finest ones.

I'm a long-time subscriber to *New Yorker* magazine, which weekly includes a short story, and the word is *New Yorker* fiction is top of the line. From time to time, I've started one of them, but invariably the story remained "over there," words on a page and

my mind would wander and I'd set it aside without finishing it. I've come to learn that there is a *New Yorker* type of story and, as good as it might be by general standards, it simply isn't to my particular taste.

In years past, I got into Raymond Carver's and John Cheever's short writings some and liked what I was reading. Cheever, by the way, was a *New Yorker* regular, so my lack of fit with *New Yorker* writing isn't an all-inclusive generalization. My superficial engagement with Carver and Cheever—you have to say YES to art, give of yourself to it completely, dialogue with it; I'm getting better with that--and lack of fit with the subject matter (ennui in suburban Connecticut) left things at a level where I appreciated their remarkable talent but never really connected to their work. Those disclaimers aside, Carver and Cheever gave me the inkling that if I could find top-rank fiction writers and could open myself up to all that they have to offer me, fiction could be a rewarding part of my life in the same way film, fiction in another form, has been for many years.

About six months ago, I read a positive review of a new collection of stories by Shirley Jackson (1916-1965). I had at one time or another read Jackson's arresting and disturbing story, "The Lottery," which was originally published in the *New Yorker* in the late 1940s (I'm noticing the *New Yorker* keeps coming up). That was enough to get me to check out a couple of Jackson's short story collections from the library (*Just An Ordinary Day*, selected by Laurence Hyman [her husband], Bantam, 2005; and *Shirley Jackson: Novels and Stories*, selected by Joyce Carol Oates, Library of America, 2010). Jackson is known for her Stephen King-like writings about the macabre (King another writer whom I respect but can't get into), but I found that her writings on everyday life were the ones that most engaged me, and thus began my short-story-at-bedtime ritual.

As it turned out—I wasn't consciously looking for them—Jackson's writings gave me criteria, standards, to use for selecting what to read. There was her exceedingly high intelligence and

perceptivity. She was a superb prose stylist and storyteller. She wrote about things that, even if foreign to my personal experience, I could relate to, and she gave seemingly mundane events marked importance and meaning. Reading her, I came away with greater insight into life generally and a better understanding of my own life in particular, what has gone on and what is going on for me. Her stories were “grabbers”—once I started one, I was hooked, I needed to see how it turned out, even if I was tired and looking to go to sleep. And most fundamentally, in my judgment this was top-rank art, worthy of my time; I was getting the satisfaction that comes for an encounter with superior quality of any kind, art included.

While I was reading the Shirley Jackson stories, I read a biography of her (Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*, Putnam, 1988). I’ve found that learning about the life of an artist—writer, painter, film director, poet—helps me to better appreciate his or her work. I notice that, at this writing, a new biography of Jackson is forthcoming (Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, Liveright, 2016)—I’ll read that.

All things pass, and my Shirley-Jackson-before-sleep ritual played out after a few weeks. So what’s next, who’s next? I asked myself. I tried a couple of Jackson’s novels, but no go, too Stephen-King-ish for me. I knew George Saunders is highly respected and checked out his short fiction. Not for me—too intellectualized, too self-conscious, too “writery,” too safe somehow. Jonathan Franzen, no. Joyce Carol Oates, no. John Updike—more suburban angst, no.

I looked into Ernest Hemingway’s supposedly great short stories (*The Complete Short Stories Of Ernest Hemingway*, Scribner, 1998). I had a copy of the book in my bookcase. At this point in my life, I found Hemingway’s writing sophomoric and shallow. His self-conscious, self-referential penchant for “and sentences”—short independent clauses strung together with ands, short on commas—especially get to me, to the point that I wind up counting the ands in his sentences. Here’s one: “In the day time

the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference.” Here’s another: “The leaves lay sodden in the rain and the wind drove the rain against the big green autobus at the terminal and the Cafe des Amateurs was crowded and the windows misted over from the heat and smoke inside.”

A couple of years ago, I bought a book by Jim Harrison (*The River Swimmer*, Grove Press, 2013), which I hadn’t read; it sat on a shelf in my bookcase. I set the Hemingway book down and decided to give the Harrison’s book a go. Harrison—at this writing he has just died—with his boozy, outdoors, man’s man persona and tough-but-sensitive, no-frills oeuvre, was often likened to Hemingway. He always disputed any Hemingway comparisons and influences, but reading him I noted similarities, including what seemed to me to be his satisfaction with staying on the surface of things, complete with skim-along, pseudo-artsy “and sentences”--“When I reached the main road I would stop at a gas station and make a reservation at a hotel in Ishpeming and when I got there I knew I would shower and go down to the bar and drink myself into a comatose state I knew I deserved.”

I put the Hemingway and Harrison books back in my bookcase and looked through the shelves for something else to read and finally gave up and cooked dinner and thought about where I could take my fiction reading and decided to go to the public library the next day and see what I could find. If you’ll notice, this last sentence of mine was a pretty good “and sentence” itself. On the library visit, while perusing the new books shelf, I noticed a thick volume entitled *100 Years of Best American Short Stories* (selected by Lorrie Moore and Heidi Pitlor, Houghton Mifflin, 2015). I thought to myself, there must be something in a century of the best short stories that will do it for me as much as Shirley Jackson did and John Cheever and Raymond Carver sort of did. So I took the book out. Unfortunately, my hopes weren’t fulfilled; I’d start story after story, but nothing worked. These are

the best American short stories over the last one hundred years? I thought they'd be better than this. I've got a problem.

There was one story in "100 Years of Best American Short Stories" collection, however, from 1982 by Charles Baxter—never heard of him--called "Harmony of the World" that hit big for me. Superb, mature prose; complex, layered, insightful, challenging, things went somewhere that mattered, I connected to it, got lost in it, I couldn't put it down. Hmm.

It turns out that "Harmony of the World" is the title of a failed symphony by the composer Paul Hindemith. It wasn't that Hindemith was untalented; in fact, he had very talented. His problem was that, as talented as he was, he wasn't talented enough to pull off a truly fine piece of music. Which was the theme of the story: being just about good enough but not quite. That ultimately disheartening personal characteristic also applied to the story's protagonist, one Peter Jenkins. Jenkins was a child prodigy as a pianist, and was even getting fawning attention and applause as an adolescent. But as he got into early adulthood, he hit a ceiling that was just short of being high enough. Jenkins' problem with his music was compounded by the fact that generally, as a person, it was the same thing—high minors, but not major league.

When Jenkins was college age and still pursuing his dream of being a concert pianist, his music teacher, a no-nonsense older man, one day suddenly declared to him, "You should buy a house, young man. With a beautiful view. Move to it. Don't stay here. You are close to success, but it is the difference between leaping the chasm and falling into it, one inch short. You are one inch short." And then there was the woman, a fellow musician and potential love interest, who shared with him, "You're so close to being good, but you *aren't* good."

The dilemma of being at the top of the second rank, the result of which, Baxter writes, quoting Dante, is *duol senza martiri*, grief without torment. Baxter ends "Harmony of the World" with a reference to sighs "rather like the sounds one hears drifting from front porches in small towns on soft summer nights." A story

about a life of sighs. A reference to Dante. Fresh, not the same old same old. I could relate. I'm going to look into this Baxter.

I checked Amazon to see what Baxter has written. Amazon is the first place I go to when looking for books. I review the list or books written by an author, read the summaries, and look through customer reviews. If I see something that looks as if it might be good, I check to see whether my local public or university library has it. If a library has it and it's available, I get a copy, and if it's checked out, I request a recall. If a library doesn't have it, I may ask the library to obtain it via an interlibrary loan. If getting a copy of a book that is not readily available seems as if it will be too time-consuming, I check Amazon to see if a Kindle is available at a reasonable price, and I also look to see if there are used copies for sale and the prices of those. Only as a last resort do I pay full price, either at Amazon or my local Barnes & Noble store.

Along with looking into Baxter's books on Amazon, I Googled him. It turns out he is from my home state of Minnesota and he's in his late sixties, in my age cohort. He's taught writing at the University of Michigan and, now, the University of Minnesota, my alma mater, and I taught there. All of that sounded promising in terms of my connecting with his writing. Even though I wasn't familiar with him, Baxter is a prolific author and a respected and honored one, a number of nominations and awards. Baxter's somebody. By my count, he is the author of six novels and five short story collections. Plus, he has written three books on the craft of writing.

From what I could pick up from Amazon, it appeared that my best bet to start off with him was a collection of his stories called *Gryphon*, published in 2008. I checked out that book from the public library, as well as his novel that was short-listed for the National Book Award, *The Feast of Love* (Vintage, 2009). I also took out his most recent short story collection, *There's Something I Want to Tell You* (Vintage, 2015). I found the Gryphon stories to be stunningly good, and they became my bedtime short stories.

These late-in-the-evening quiet times immersed in Baxter's prose were rich, settling, personally affirming experiences for me.

Earlier, I referred to how Baxter ended his story "Harmony of the World." To give a sense of him, I'll quote from the endings of three stories in the Gryphon collection:

"The Would-be Father":

It's a fire," she repeated. And then she turned around in the boat, bent down, and cupped her hands in the water. Raising her arms, she doused her head. The water streamed into her grey hair and washed the handkerchief off, so that it dropped onto the gunwalls of the rowboat. Again she reached down into the lake and again she scooped a small quantity of water over her head. As the children and Burrage watched, handful by handful the old woman soaked her hair, her skin, and her clothes, as if she were making a formal gesture toward the accidents of life, which in their monotonous regularity had brought her to her present condition.

"Horace and Margaret's Fifty-second"

She tried to remember what she had planned to eat for either lunch or dinner and found her way back to the living room, where she sat down in front of the television set. She saw, reflected in the dark screen, herself, in black-and-white, miniaturized. She smiled and laughed at the tricks television could play, whether on or off. And then, behind her, but also in the background of the set, she saw a tree, waiting for her. Horace had left his trees behind when she and he had moved out of the house. She stood up and went to the window again, and with the clatter of furniture being hauled away in the alley serving as a background, she began to stare at the branches and dried leaves of the one tree the management had planted, and then she began to talk. She told the tree about Horace. Then she laughed and said that she and he would probably sit together again, checking on the sun and the other tricks of light shining from odd directions on the open gulf lying radiant and

bare between them.

“Shelter”:

“Well, what do you want?” She asked.

He put his hands over hers. “Shelter me,” he said.

“Oh, Cooper,” she said. “Which way this time? Which way?”

To answer her, he rolled over and, and quietly as he could, so as not to wake their son in the next room, he took her into his arms and held her there.

Baxter’s “There’s Something I Want You to Do” stories, which were set in Minneapolis, a city I know well, and interconnected, were equally fine, as was his novel, *The Feast of Love*. I’ve concluded that writing doesn’t get any better than this. Baxter is no newcomer, he’s been at it for over three decades, and yet I had never heard of him. I thought to myself, if I’ve been unaware of this excellence, what other excellence is out there that I don’t know about?

I’ve reached the end of my Baxter encounter. What’s next on the fiction agenda? I’m not sure. Perhaps all the classic books I’ve never read while there is still time in my life, which is nearing an end, *The Brothers Karamazov* and the rest. At this writing, the novelist and memoirist Pat Conroy very recently died (*The Great Santini*, *The Prince of Tides*) and that brought him to mind. I checked out of book of his at the library today called *My Writing Life* (Doubleday, 2010) in which he chronicles his lifetime of reading “from Milton to Tolkien, Philip Roth to Thucydides.” Perhaps I’ll find something in there that seems promising for me. I am a fan of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima (see the July, 2007 thought on this site, “On Yukio Mishima”) and found a collection of his short stories (*Death in Midsummer and Other Stories*, McClelland and Stewart, 1966) to take out along with the Conroy book.

It 10:30 at night, and I want to curl up with a Mishima story,

so I'll end with this: Thank you, Charles Baxter, for these last few weeks. And to you reading this, if there's any really good fiction or poetry you can recommend, you're invited to use the "contact me" reply on this site to let me know about it. I could use your help. And good luck with your own fiction reading.