

## THE NEVERMENDING STORY

It's three a.m. The food you ordered at midnight has been cold since two. Outside, someone's vacuuming the hall. Everyone's trying to fix the story, perhaps recalling the definition of a novel: "A piece of prose of a certain length with something wrong with it."

Across town, I'm rewriting an animated pilot. Plucky animals, talking vehicles, forgetful fathers, and always *the lesson* – the lesson about sharing, about faith, about not giving up. As I gild this platitudinous lily I note the incongruities that must be skated around. Carnivorous animals apparently never eat. Mothers strap their six-year-olds in car seats out of concern for their safety but let them go on long wandering adventures alone in the woods. And no character has heard of anything that's unfamiliar to the average animation executive, who is 25, childless, and thinks no one has heard of the Irish Potato Famine. ("Can we replace that with an American famine?" Like what? The great Hamburger Shortage?)

It must be said: the bulk of daytime animation writing is nonsense, and the work of those who deny this is the worst of the nonsense. It's pointless to pretend even that it's helpful nonsense; that its skateboarding stegosauruses and plump cowardly bullies illustrate anything about the way we live. I am writing a babysitting device.

Meanwhile, you are trying to think of a way to have a character who's never been on a date or talked to a girl stun an auditorium full of kids with his dancing skills. Sorry; skillz. And the same people who want you to do that because it will be funny (actually, because it was in a movie they saw) urge you to keep it "truthful."

Hard work and craft get us through 99 percent of our days, but every writer prays for an epiphany. Over the past year – my tenth writing animation, overlapping 30 years of live action – I've begun to have a heretical one. It's that when we alter reality in order to entertain, Story cannot be fixed, not properly, anyway. It's not only broken, it's *inherently* broken. The best we can ever do is to find the least conspicuous fudge to glue it back together.

### **Of Talking Mice And Men**

I recently co-wrote a CG movie. The script was polished around a table with writers and an executive, and at several points we hit brick walls. Either **a)** powers the protagonists had been given made it impossible for them to have the problems the story was ostensibly about, **b)** powers they'd been denied, or powers given their enemies, made solving the problems manifestly impossible, or, **c)** the lead characters' inaction in key moments – *necessary* inaction, if we were to have a nobility-provoking crisis – made them immoral, or, at the very least, criminally unobservant.

I felt as though we were shuffling the tiles in that famous Sliding 15 puzzle, and that no one but me realized if the parity of the starting position was off, there was no solution. When I ventured we might be trying to put a 9'x 9' carpet in an 8'x10' room, the exec insisted that couldn't possibly be the case – if we kept moving the carpet around, using our writerly skills, probing for the truth of our mutual humanity, eventually it'd fit. He'd seen it done before.

He was saying: this 81-square foot carpet will fit precisely in this 80-square-foot room if we pound on it ingeniously enough.

I was saying: put a couch over the lump and let's move on.

This was taken for unhelpful cynicism. But we'd been handed a universe with different physical laws; we couldn't expect them to dovetail with Newtonian physics. If you've got water running uphill, it's got to run uphill everywhere. You can't have it raining at a crucial moment just because that's what you need to cinch your Humanitas. Furthermore, I ventured, patching the holes with more fantasy was creating new and unhelpful complexities.

"Oh come on. Real life's more complex than any story."

Sure. But real life's unburdened with the requirement that it be instructive. It's also internally consistent. Grab any snapshot of life – a war, a romance – and sleuth into its antecedent states, the way historians do, and you'll find coherence. You have to, because something real led to where you're standing. Physicist Irving Langmuir, who coined the term "pathological science" (N-Rays, homeopathy), pointed out that correct impressions differ from mistaken ones chiefly in that they get clearer the closer you look. Reality, as we search, grows more lucid. Story, subjected to the same probing (especially while eating cold Chinese food), like cold fusion, grows less so. Atomize any fiction and you hit Truman Burbank's studio wall. You stand face-to-face with cheap paradox; the paradox that you put there in order to entertain.

It got vacuum-cleaner-lady late. And I began to wonder about the probity of entrusting the elaboration of novel world-systems to a group of people who spend eight hours a day trying to think of funny but broadcastable ways to say fuck.

### **Nonexistentialism**

At three a.m. we optimistically think the gimmick just hasn't occurred to us yet. If we go back and add a rare disease, drop a scorpion in a boot, then the great floating ship of Story will come about and miss the iceberg. But I increasingly think our labor is hard and our hours long, particularly in sci-fi and animation, because of limitations built into fantasy itself by the liberties it takes with reality. I don't think in these cases Story is the ship. I think it's ship-plus-iceberg, always in the third act being *pretended* back to a surface it's unable to navigate with skill alone.

One of my heroes is the Austrian (later, naturalized American) Kurt Gödel, who in 1931 shook up the math community with a proof that no finite axiomatic system like arithmetic can prove all the truths it contains. He upset formalists like Bertrand Russell, who'd spent years trying to prove the opposite. Gödel showed there were upper stories on the edifice of reality unreachable by any scaffolding. I'd love to see what he could have proved about talking vegetarian lions.

A nonexistence proof is an un-American idea. In Hollywood it's thought insufficient to demonstrate that a character's ideals are admirable – his or her decency must triumph over more heavily armed opposition. A show is felt incomplete if strength isn't ultimately drawn from error, love from antipathy, insight from pediatric gastritis.

The rest of the world seems to accept that this isn't so, as does literary fiction. Why, then, is it all but a truism of screenwriting?

### **A Tangent**

And why, particularly in children's entertainment, are we not allowed to use what we do know – words and facts – in pursuit of these verities? In 1980, writing a kids radio show

for Canada's CBC, I used to tell one language-simplifier that he was impoverishing the vocabulary of future executives: "Twenty years from now, the kids you're depriving of 'tangent' will be sitting in your office telling me to cut it because it isn't a real word."

He laughed. A friend of mine, last year, got the note: "Please change *though* to *but*, to avoid confusing our audience."

We've all got to encounter phrases and concepts for the first time. Why not on a kids show? Anyone who's written cartoons will tell you that argument doesn't wash:

*"All I'm saying is that light goes 186,000 miles a second..."*

*"Kids won't know that."*

*"But we're telling them that!"*

On a 2005 series I was unable to have The Smart Girl mention the xylem and phloem in a plant stem while tutoring a friend in Botany, because the executives thought there might be some kids in the audience who hadn't heard of it. And you've gotta love stuff like "Please replace the Mona Lisa with a more familiar image." Or, "A snake is not an animal. Please revise."

They're adamant that the logic of our scripts be impeccable in its pursuit of greater truths. They'll keep us there forever until it's clear why Grandpa Rabbit, normally so thoughtful, would leave the garden gate open at the end of Act One. But they won't let us mention Bunny Alzheimer's.

My generalized pique at all this has vitrified into the current conjecture: let my people go home. We cannot prove anything about "human nature in this world" with a toolkit that alters both human nature and the world.

### **Breakfast At Epiphanies**

The great comic miniaturist Stephen Leacock wrote, "Humour and disillusionment are twin sisters." What started irking me in the late nineties, eating at me though I couldn't pinpoint it until I landed on a troublesome show that threw it into relief, is how often we put humor to work to help sell the self-delusions that it properly exists to deflate. Humor is for when stuff doesn't work out. What's it doing in a business that insists everything's hunky-dory?

Jokes frame incongruities, anomalies, weakness. Like the wonderful *Onion* headline, Loved Ones Recall Local Man's Cowardly Battle With Cancer. The writer asked to pen something "funny and uplifting" has been given two contradictory tasks. Our only hope is to find the least-conspicuous falsehood that glues water to glass, brick to wind – that bonds two incommensurable substances, amusement and rah-rah, to the employer's satisfaction.

The showrunner of that troublesome 90s sitcom wanted to demonstrate how the virtue of his main characters enabled their happy endings. But his fantasy set-up gave them powerful enemies who had every week to be routed. This required showing how such things as Faith and Having A Plucky Sister trounce concerted malignity. The staff, bright people, ended up eating breakfast together a lot, while trying to use humor just enough to josh about the little things in life that made no sense, but never enough to observe that the playing board upon which our pawns suffered made none. These poor corporeal unrealities, in their brief flicker of life (26 and out) were miserable-for-20-

minutes-then-happy-for-two, over and over. And at the end we always had to beat them with the Lesson Stick. I felt as though we were torturing them. And for what?

Humor is mental cartilage: it absorbs the shock between What-Is and What-Should-Be. It ought not to be tasked with making the gap between them appear nonexistent. When we use it to sell, we're doing what advertising does, putting a gorgeous waterfall behind the happy beer drinker. We're conflating two unrelated things.

Because stories require that we selectively *ignore* absurdities. They've got artificial gravity in the Nostromo, but for some reason they don't turn it off in the cargo bay to make lifting things easier? Never mind – the cargo hauler fight's a great sequence. MAD Magazine has made hay off this stuff for years; the remora on the belly of iffy drama.

It's frankly pointless for execs to ask us, "What would he really do here?" They're puppets – they do what we tell them to do, for our reasons, not theirs. Did your kids watch *Barnyard*? In Act Three, Otis the cow gets an offer from the evil coyotes – they're going to kill all his friends, but if he looks the other way they'll spare a few. Otis decides his shoulders aren't broad enough for the mantle of leadership and sadly packs to leave... but without telling any of his pals they're *about to be slaughtered*. Well... see ya!

Why? Because the story would have been thrown off track in a crucial soft moment if Otis had provoked a panic. The upcoming sequence – where Otis eats his spinach and whomps them coyotes – was the proper place for the ruckus, not in his going-away bit. The need for a story "shape" trumped the requirement that he act with appropriate decency. (Presuming cows share our sense of decency, something I'd say we have reason to doubt.) This wasn't Otis's decision; he's a moral cow. It was writer Steve Oedekerk's decision, and a good one. But it's as incongruous as anything joked about in the film. And it couldn't have been "fixed." They're talking cows. In children's writing we're always trying to cram the carpet of the story's desiderata (and the Broadcast Standards department's, and the toy companies') into the room of logic in order to craft a pleasing shape.

## Conclusion

Here, accordingly, is my Fudge Principle:

- a) *If you create a world with different physical laws, you're unjustified in drawing moral conclusions from the outcome of any action you stage there.*
- b) *Since Story demands these conclusions, to the extent that it alters reality it will be irremediably flawed.*

"Different physical laws" includes talking Camaros, but also any universe with gods, fairies, unicorns, miracles. In mathematical terms, I think the product of realism and emotional satisfaction is a constant. With, say, Big Guest Stars as a scaling variable.

## Objections

I see some objections backed up at the audience microphones:

1) *Nobody believes this stuff. They're stories. Get over it.*

This one's the biggie: "Whistle Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah and cash the paycheck." But it doesn't wash if **a**) you yearn to write intelligently and **b**) you've been taking notes

for 30 years. The note-givers, and the more sincere showrunners, believe they're Doing Good, and they'll keep us in that rewrite room for however long it takes to craft a narrative demonstrating the moral truth they're plugging. (Those who point out, "The characters are good exemplars," I agree with. Character lessons, the first derivative of the story calculus, are swell.)

2) *The world is harsh. Story exists to comfort.*

So does morphine, but no one pretends those under its influence see the world more clearly. We don't tell the opiated they're now better equipped to drive.

3) *What's the alternative? Have evil triumph? Wow, that'll draw them in.*

There's no alternative believers will find satisfying. That's why I dragged Gödel's Incompleteness Proof into this: some human aspirations, even noble ones, are unsatisfiable.

4) *Isn't it better to have morality in stories, which educate, than to be burning witches in real life? In stories our moral urges are harmless, plus people learn.*

I'm not sure how much stories educate. More than this: I believe the part of them that is the (McKee-Seger-Campbell) Story is precisely the part that doesn't. Certainly no animated script I've written has ever taught anything, and it ain't been for lack of trying. Facts can be dropped thick on the ground in any tale, and be as useful as (certainly they'll reach a larger audience than) those in a book. But how many facts have you put in a sitcom lately? When we sneak them in, they take them out. We all sign the clause foregoing our *droit morale*. We can't insist our scripts reflect things we know to be true, let alone our worldview.

5) *You can't apply numbers and straight lines to Cinderella, or Hamlet. Stories may look superficially like theorems – premise, analysis, conclusion – but they're not. Story taps into myth, not math.*

Absolutely. That's why it's flawed. Look, it's a fine thing to entertain. I just think we've got to stop seeing self-delusion as a necessary part of the enterprise.

6) *Fiction implies, Here's a remarkable case. That's why it's a story – because it's unlikely. If it was likely it'd be journalism. Fiction celebrates the exceptional, the once-in-a-lifetime.*

"Celebrates"? Puffery and nonsense. Journalism examines the unlikely too, and (mostly) keeps its wits about it. I love making up stories. But we're writing jokes for scrappy old ladies, not building an orbital gravitometer. A friend of mine was pissily told by a righteous story editor that a moment in his script didn't work because "alligators don't eat jelly." My friend pointed out that in the title sequence of this very show an alligator was shown doing precisely that. The guy snarled, "*Lady* alligators don't eat jelly!" This sort of ad hoc Little Hitlerism just has to be kneecapped.

7) *Can't we write about Anne Frank, Gandhi, Lance Armstrong? Even if we alter small details – "He immediately called his mom," instead of "He sucked down a beer..." –*

*aren't those possible worlds? Aren't there an infinite number of "derived" true stories that don't violate your precious laws of reality?*

Small details are the worm in the wood. When you change anything, you've stepped off Bradbury's path. The butterfly you take out of the food chain starves the primordial bat or fish which would otherwise have evolved into your moral. You want to refer in your closing statement to exhibits that were never entered into evidence.

*8) Jesus Christ, bats and butterflies? What do you want?*

Just lay off the staffs. Don't pretend you're whipping us to fix something until it's "honest." When we come up with a solution that pleases, there'll be a new flaw. The medium undoes the message. All we're ever really looking for is the least conspicuous comforting lie, so we can go home and live our real lives, the ones where stuff, God knows, doesn't always work out.