How Reading and Writing Fiction

Helps Us Understand Ourselves and Our Patients

by

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When we read quality fiction, we are compelled to relate to the characters as whole persons, as complicated and contradictory human beings, likable or not, familiar or foreign. For example, I recently read Naguib Mafouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, the story of an Egyptian family in the first half of the 20th century. If I had related to the trilogy as a case history, my focus would be on family dysfunction, on subjugation of women, on perverted sexuality. But the author engaged me in a more difficult and paradoxical task: to form an emotional attachment to his characters who lived in the context of Egyptian Islamic culture during occupation, war, and strivings for national liberation. The patriarch of the family is tyrannical, narcissistic, self-absorbed, cruel -- in short, a hopeless chauvinist pig. But he is also a man who strives to protect and provide for his family. At the end he is a shadow of his former powerful self, diminished by losses of his children, his business, his health, his influence, and his friends. As Egypt became a more modern state, the pillars upon which he had built his life crumbled and fell.

I reacted with revulsion and compassion toward this character. Moreover, I found in him aspects of my own personality: my narcissism, my wish to wield power, my conflict with religion. I especially resonated with the theme of aging and its attendant diminishments and losses.

Writing my novel, *Main Street Stories*, provided some of the same benefits and challenges.

One of my characters, Wayne Pickens, is an irritant. He is blind to his faults, inflated, nosy, self-righteous, preachy, a creep, a nut-case, a mama's boy. His psyche is dominated by the battle between religion and sexuality. His compulsive masturbation is immediately followed by his compulsive promise to Jesus that he will forever renounce that sinful habit. He frightens himself with Biblical threats about licentiousness and attempts to attain holiness and superiority in the most absurd ways.

You may be surprised to learn that I became so fond of Wayne I put him into several chapters where he wasn't necessary for plot development. I gave him long eyelashes, curly hair, a sexy girlfriend, a fresh start in life, and the possibility of release from some of the shackles his religion had placed upon him.

My affection for and interest in Wayne led me to explore and relate to my own blindness, inflation, nosiness, self-righteousness, tendency to preach; my own creepy, nutty, mother-bound self; my own struggle between my body and the Body of Christ. I found some compassion for those aspects of myself and the energy to relate to them in a different way, through Wayne.

Another favorite character in my novel is Pat Eliot. Pat is a lesbian whose attraction to young girls puts her on the verge of being unfaithful to her partner, Dorothy. Pat competes with her own nephew for the attention of one high-school girl. Pat is willful, noisy, intrusive, bossy, and bull-headed. She is a nuisance and borderline pedophile.

If she had been a patient of mine, I probably would have been unable to find value in her. Appalled, I would have phoned child protective services.

As a character of mine, I had to take all of her into account. I noticed the tenderness she displayed for her PTSD-afflicted brother and his suffering wife. I witnessed that she is not only selfish but also generous, not only disrespectful but also loving, not only foolish but also possessed of some wisdom.

Writing about Pat encouraged parts of myself to emerge from hiding. I had to admit that my controlling nature masquerades as helpfulness. I owned up to my bull-headedness and my voraciousness. In doing so, I found that these qualities of mine are paired with a tender heart and a wish to contribute.

It is my belief that we analysts can't help our patients if we believe we are superior to them. We need to relate to them as whole human beings, not as cases, and certainly not as flawed inferiors. To do this important work, it is required that we find compassion for our own failures and flaws, that we search for our complete selves and not be satisfied with our ego ideals. We need new avenues into shadow territory, ones that are not overloaded with shame and blame, guilt and

retribution, anger and remorse. Reading and writing fiction is a fine way to work toward individuation.

In his volume of essays, *The Merry Heart*, the great Canadian author Robertson Davies puts it this way:

It is through writing that you are most in touch with what is of greatest value in yourself. The special quality is the product of the writer's access to those deeper layers of mind that the depth psychologists call the Unconscious. The ability to invite it, to solicit its assistance, to hear what it has to say and impart it in the language that is peculiarly his own, is decidedly his gift and what defines him as an artist. He is not fishing up things from the Unconscious to astonish readers but to tell them things that they recognize as soon as they hear them, but which they have not been able to seize and hold and put into language for themselves. It is a direct revelation of reality which leaves us enlarged and in possession of some new ground in the exploration of ourselves.

I'll conclude with James Joyce in *Ulysses*:

Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.