

The Two Halves of Writing

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My dad was a physicist. Well, early on, his job title was 'Engineer'. I was bitterly disappointed to discover he did NOT drive trains.

A legacy from that is my need to analyze. And writing, an art, begs analysis.

There are many out there doing that – but we seem as a society to be stuck on one theme. Money. Thus all the analyzing is how to make writing pay.

I'm much more interested in improving the craft. And they are not the same. The former focuses on this desperate, I must SELL something to exist mindset; the latter is taking each step with a growing sense of confidence.

It's okay to wish to make millions off of your novel, or to dream of selling a screenplay for seven figures. But use other yardsticks to measure your progress, your work, and yourself.

You'll wind up a better writer that way.

Writing is really two pieces. One is the story you are attempting to tell. One is the words you use to express it. The best words in the world will fascinate a good writer – but if the story is contrived, or makes no sense, or is just plain boring, how well you tell it is moot. And having a great story that stays in your head and that never appears on the page with a clarity no one can miss is sad.

Which is your weakness?

With some early screenwriters, there's a tendency to get their inspiration from existing movies. "I've written Die Hard at the Antarctic!" they'll cry excitedly. And while we do indeed want to sum our stories in one sentence, the elevator pitch, that does not mean rehashed Hollywood.

Ask yourself, is this really a story normal people want to see? Not the producer who made Die Hard, but your parents? Your brother? Your friends?

Is this a story worth telling?

The second piece is what story is actually on the page?

Do people get it? Do they laugh when you want them to, cry when you hoped they would? Do they see the beautiful growth in your characters?

Or do they wonder why the heck the butler did it?

The art of expressing ideas, of turning the flashes in our brains into meaningful, even lyrical, phrases on paper is key to writing. All writing. A news story may not wax poetical, but if it doesn't impact us, if we don't feel emotion when reading it, it's failed. Scripts are pared down to bare bone, yet they must push emotional buttons or they achieve nothing.

Ask yourself which one of these is your weaker piece. And what can you do about it?

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