

How Fiction Killed Self-Improvement

by Ryan Harbert

In the past, fiction was something of a commodity. A peasant in 16th century Europe, for instance, would be lucky to catch a performance from Shakespeare or Marlowe here and there. Literacy rates were low; books were expensive (and didn't exist for the vast swath of human history); and mythology was treated as fact. The average person most commonly encountered fiction through oral storytelling. Either a bard would pass through town and share stories he picked up on his travels, or peasants would exchange local folklore that became the fairytales we know today. People, by and large, spent the bulk of their time under the drudgeries of labor, so fiction reflected their hardships. Hansel and Gretel kicks off with a famine so horrible, parents are forced to abandon their children. Little Red Riding Hood learns that journeying alone can be dangerous, especially when certain men are wolves with only one thing on their minds. Cinderella is rescued from the grip of poverty by marrying into the only thing peasants could aspire to: the nobility. Fairytales reflected the common man's world, a world of suffering and uncertainty. Because of that, the stories focused on overcoming obstacles and surviving peril. They were something I'll affectionately call "empowerment escapism." Through wits, piety, generosity, and hard work, even the lowliest dregs of society could live happily ever after.

The fiction of today is radically different. Firstly, its prevalence boggles the mind. Netflix alone boasts over 17,000 titles. There are limitless television shows, movies, podcasts,

YouTube videos, novels, comic books, video games, traditional board games, songs, and websites to keep the average person engaged at all times. While medieval peasants spent the bulk of their days living in reality, the inverse is true in the 21st century. Almost everything we do for enjoyment is rooted in fiction. In fact the chief philosophical question of the modern age has become, does reality even matter anymore? Our brains are bombarded with so much stimulation that anxiety disorders are more common than left-handedness and almost everyone feels some degree of alienation from his/her identity, society, and life.

Because of this, modern fiction rarely seeks to reflect reality. There's very little reality to reflect. Most people go to work, browse their phones, come home, watch TV, browse some more, and go to bed. Hardships are generally passive, in the form of things like stress and worry, and not active, like the starvation, highway robberies, and squalid living conditions that beleaguered medieval peasants. Few people build their own houses, stitch their own clothes, grow their own food, or forge their own tools; so life happens *to* them with minimal involvement on their part. Minimal involvement means minimal agency. Minimal agency leads to increased anxiety, which causes people to retreat from the world even further, and the problem snowballs.

A brief examination of the American novel illustrates this movement away from reality. Before World War II, writers like Fitzgerald and Hemingway strove to mirror life as accurately as possible. Their novels rarely had plots; characters lived unremarkable lives; and their genius came from drawing significance from the ordinary. After the War, technology exploded. In the span of thirty years, society went from gathering around the radio every night to playing the Atari 2600. Life grew increasingly tethered to entertainment and the American novel consequently saw a boom in science fiction. Bradbury replaced Hemingway; Mars eclipsed clean, well-lighted cafes; and people's minds drifted into fantasy as their bodies became less important. After all, a body is essential in tilling a field, but not so much in watching episodes of I Love Lucy.

Fiction no longer provides the tools to face reality. It *consumes* reality. It fights for every second of our time and every dime in our wallets. If we aren't watching, listening, swiping, or browsing, the entertainment industry isn't profiting. And because of that, fiction no longer bothers itself with moral obligation. In order to reflect humanity one must do that humanity justice. But vying for attention requires nothing but mental trickery. Empowerment escapism has transformed into empowerment pornography, a masturbatory exercise in showing people what they believe themselves to be instead of mirroring real life.

Social media initially fueled this trend. Facebook and Twitter allowed John Q. Public to broadcast his thoughts to the world, free from the meddling of an editor or the restrictions of intelligence or qualification. This allowed him to feel important, impactful, maybe even famous. Overnight the world of action shapeshifted into the world of opinion. People no longer did things; they talked about things, and the engagement it spurred produced a high that traditional entertainment struggled to duplicate. Fiction found itself competing with social media for the

attention of its audience. If people saw themselves as special, well-informed movers and shakers—if they truly believed they were making a difference and sharing pearls of wisdom with the world—the entertainment industry was more than willing to lure them in by assuring them that, yes, they were absolutely correct.

Grab any form of modern media off the shelf and the protagonist is likely a child of destiny. Hansel and Gretel were average peasants who survived by outsmarting both their parents and the witch who tried to eat them. Neo from the Matrix, however, was born amazing. His journey is about unlocking the power that dwelt within him all along. Think of all the movies, games, and books where the main character suffers from amnesia, has to rediscover his/her identity, or learns to accept his/her destiny as the savior of mankind. Superman, Star Wars, Captain Marvel, Harry Potter, the Power Rangers, the remake of Mulan—modern characters rarely start from the bottom and reach the top by overcoming moral obstacles and bettering themselves. They simply discover they already had the skills they needed for success. They fight clearly-defined villains who are always external threats—typically either evil corporations, religions, or corrupt governments (all the things a modern person might blame for his/her unhappiness); and instead of teaching audiences that they aren't destined for greatness, and maybe a better world starts with a better self, entertainment assures them that they're perfectly in the right and everyone else is the bad guy. A current advertisement for chewing gum sums it up best: "Confidence is realizing you don't need to become your best self, because you already are your best self."

So what happens? Dissonance. A teenage girl can share posts about social activism all day while treating everyone around her like garbage, and not find a single thing about that situation incongruous. A devout evangelical can spew hate speech online, smile into the eyes of his fellow churchgoers on Sunday, and fully believe he's standing on the side of moral decency. A young man struggling with depression can look to his favorite media for answers only to be told that his problems will resolve themselves if he realizes how perfect he already is. When fiction *should* have held a mirror up to society, it instead chose to flatter. Now the chief element of modern life is nothing but a Photoshopped image where everyone is special, everyone fights for the right cause, and self-actualization is preferable to self-improvement.

This, of course, produces far-reaching consequences. If people are taught to view themselves as children of destiny, they'll feel overlooked when the world ignores them, and upheavals like the MAGA movement are the result. Christianity's popularity has hit an all-time low partly because, when the Bible says only Jesus Christ is worthy to stand before God, and audiences have been told they're essentially Jesus for the past twenty years, they'll feel the Bible is being "unfair" when it condemns their behavior. Perhaps most significantly, the population is losing its ability to change its mind. The recent chemical spill in East Palestine, Ohio exemplifies this. Residents voted for right-wing politicians who promised "smaller government" and sweeping deregulations. When those deregulations led to a train jumping the track and soaking the land in highly-volatile chemicals, the majority of East Palestine's residents performed a

mental magic trick (a real-life example of doublethink) and blamed left-wing politicians for the deregulations passed by the right. There's no way residents could have made a mistake in voting for Republican lawmakers. That would imply they have room to grow as individuals. But fiction teaches us we don't need to grow, just self-actualize. How can we improve perfection? So we don't improve. And when we're confronted with the undeniable realities of our imperfections (like obesity, mental illness, and damaging life choices), we console rather than challenge. We cope instead of ascend. After all, our fictional heroes never have to mature. Why should we?

There's no escaping the prevalence of fiction. Ease of access and profitability anchored entertainment firmly at the center of modern life. As our day-to-day activities drift further away from the physical world, our minds will continue to wander into the forests of fantasy. But that fantasy should dignify the human existence, not mine it for gold. It should heighten the senses instead of numbing them. Most importantly, it should challenge the face we see in the mirror, not smooth over its blemishes. Until people can see their true selves in the heroes of fiction, dissonance will worsen, anxiety will increase, and art will fail to offer valuable insight. Society will be left with the nagging sensation that something isn't adding up, that life should be more than entertainment. But by then our heroes will be just as anxious and dissonant as the rest of us.