

What role can fiction serve when the nature of 'fact' is continually called into question?

When I was young, my father told me bedtime stories. He talked of his childhood, of running through streets barefoot, caring not a bit for dirt and sharp stones. Of scrapping with other boys in the schoolyard, of skateboard ramps and rope swings; broken bones and bloody noses. Mistakes made over and over, schoolwork not done, and teachers not heeded. I listened with great attention, thrilled with the insouciance, the devil-may-care attitude that sprang from his memories, refreshing and entirely new to me, the girl who wore her hair in two braids with ribbons tying off the ends, the girl who cried if scolded in class. These recollections of my father's, they gave me a peek into a world I wouldn't have been able to imagine otherwise, and each time he sat down next to my bed to begin, I waited with bated breath, fidgety with anticipation. I cherished each of these stories, told them to my friends, held them in my head to take out and retell to myself when I was sad.

My favourite stories, though, were of the time when my father was a pirate. Sailing the Seven Seas on a ship called the *Heartsease*, battling waves the size of our house, capable of washing unlucky sailors overboard and into the hungry water. Desert islands laden with palm trees, coconuts, crystal-blue lagoons. Sword-fighting with sabres hilted in silver flashed in and out – *lunge and parry* – perhaps even accompanied by a demonstration by my father, who was as enthralled by his story as I was. Treasure chests brimmed with jewels so extreme in their colour that you could *feel* the shades. Wickedly glinting doubloons clinked against pearls taken from the seabed, rings from the fingers of drowned men, rusted and ancient, scored with the marks of war. Once, my father had to wrestle a shark, he told me, voice hushed, eyes wide. In the struggle, he had ripped a tooth right from the shark's jaw, with his bare hands. He'd show me the tooth on his necklace, yellowed and threatening, and I'd touch my index finger to the sharp enamel tip, shivering with delight and horror.

Of course, none of it was true.

My father, whilst quite exceptional in his own way, was not a pirate in his youth – and even if he had been, I doubt it would have been quite so glamorous. It wasn't until I was about twelve, however, that I realised that the stories of my childhood were lies. I remember feeling a wave of shock that hit me like a blow, as if I had forever lost something special, leaving only a hollow pit within me, because those stories had been *wonderful*. They had allowed me to imagine a great past for my father, and, by association, a great future for myself. Coming into reality, stripped bare of all its undiscovered mystery isles and ferocious sea monsters, was a terrible blow. The betrayal I felt was strong as poison, as much as a twelve-year-old could feel.

As I have grown older, though, I have come, almost full circle, back to the young girl I was, who went to sleep and dreamed of sailing, of the magic and perils and drama of living a fairy-tale on the high seas. Because although it wasn't the truth, it was nothing so harsh as lying. And although I spent some time remembering those stories with bitterness, those days have come and gone, because now I see those stories for what they truly were: gifts. My father gave me my dreams of sea and sky, of jungle and desert, of bravery and ingenuity. He gave me the imagination to see that no life is boring if you have a mind to glean a new perspective, and that has been more valuable to me than all those chests of jewels and coins would have been. While fictions do make their living upon lies, there is always a spark of truth within them, the pearl at the centre of the oyster, stored safely for those prepared to look.

Facts are becoming far harder to nail down, these days. Which is unusual, for fact has been a word with an unambiguous definition within the English language. A fact is a 'something that is known to have happened or to exist, especially something for which proof exists, or about which there is information'¹. Here, we come to the problem; a 'fact' is becoming increasingly based on only the first half of this definition.

¹ Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fact>

Something that is 'known' is not necessarily a fact – and, even if you accept that facts are knowledge, what is 'knowledge'? How does one 'know' something? Plato defines knowledge as a justified true belief, and that seems to make fairly intuitive sense. Of course, this definition *has* been questioned, most famously by Edmund Gettier, with his paper *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* Plato's definition, though, still serves as a general catch-all for most people.

However, a modern addition to the traditional JTB account of knowledge seems to be validation via popular opinion. Knowledge – and that which stands for it – is becoming easier to share than ever, and untruths run rampant between platforms and forums. Often, one can find oneself in an echo chamber of sorts, hearing nothing but your own beliefs shouted back at you by others. Some lies online have become so convincing, they are easy to fall into the trap of belief, and, what's more, people *will* believe these fictions.

With misinformation spreading like a too-familiar virus, these falsities can become ingrained in common belief. Fact has always historically been inextricably linked with truth – but even that has been called into question. What is truth to one person seems to be a lie to another, and as someone who has known people with severe eating disorders, I can say that what may even be called the 'objective truth' might not be something that someone else will even listen too, even when said truth should be staring them in the face.

So, what role can fiction serve today?

Fiction for me personally has always been my greatest form of escape. There are some books which have the same effect as chicken soup on a cold day, hot chocolate by the fireside; it is comfort, a safe place. I have read fiction books to escape reality, to create reality, to remind me what I have lost and of what I have to gain. For possible futures and possible pasts, alternative presents, good and bad. The best fictional books can suck you so far into their narratives that you no longer see the words and syntax, and you become a bystander to action, watching with wide eyes as cities crumble, as

time reinvents itself, as angels slay demons with swords of ancient steel. This is timeless, and films and TV shows are but poor substitutes.

There are scientific proofs to display fiction's worth, too. The difficulty of improving your EQ has become something people are more aware of in today's society, and research suggests that fiction actually may be far more valuable than non-fiction. Recent studies in neuroscience say that reading fiction improves 'empathy, theory of mind, and critical thinking'.² Even for a short period of time after reading one singular novel, brain connectivity increases, especially in the somatosensory cortex – the part of the brain that responds to physical sensations.³ In fact, researchers have been talking about 'the Matthew Effect' – named after the biblical verse Matthew 13:12 – for around sixty years. A study has shown that students who read books regularly have a marked rate in vocabulary growth than those who don't.⁴

However, while this is all clinically interesting, there is something far less scientific about the benefits of reading fiction. And it is that in an ironic way, fiction is becoming more important than it ever has been; when fact is so changeable, fiction is comforting because you know that it is made up. When you sink into your chair and open the pages of a fictional story, you know that whatever happens, you can stop. Drop the book, pages splayed, and come back again later. You can say, without one speckle of a doubt, that what happens within that book can stay within that book, that it is fictional. With fact, it is obviously a lot harder to compartmentalise. Facts, especially current ones, are not ignorable, and they do not disappear at the close of a book. They stick around, affect your daily life, your family and friends, the world.

² Christine Seifert, the *Harvard Business Review*

³ PubMed Central: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3868356/>

⁴ PubMed Central: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4610292/>

And that is why fiction is so valuable. It can provide a reminder of what we can become if we're lucky, what we can descend to if we're not careful. How that planet was, how it could change to be. It can improve our minds and behaviours, make us savvier, more imaginative. It's a healthy escape, a comfort, and an enjoyable pastime. You may pick your genre, whether you wish to be scared or sad or happy or comforted or provoked. That is fiction at its most important; it is something under your control. You may begin or finish when you like; you may buy the book or take it back to the library. And for the little child of tomorrow waiting, like I did, to hear what happened next, fiction is irreplaceable.