

## The lack of respect... - by MosesJones

<http://interviews.slashdot.org/interviews/04/10/20/1518217.shtml>

*Science Fiction is normally relegated to the specialist publications rather than having reviews in the main stream press. Seen as “fringe” and a bit sad its seldom reviewed with anything more than condescension by the “quality” press.*

*Does it bother you that people like Jeffery Archer or Jackie Collins seem to get more respect for their writing than you ?*

Neal: OUCH!

*(removes mirrorshades, wipes tears, blows nose, composes self)*

Let me just come at this one from sort of a big picture point of view.

*(the sound of a million Slashdot readers hitting the “back” button...)*

First of all, I don't think that the condescending “quality” press look too kindly on Jackie Collins and Jeffrey Archer. So I disagree with the premise of the last sentence of this question and I'm not going to address it. Instead I'm going to answer what I think MosesJones is really getting at, which is why SF and other genre and popular writers don't seem to get a lot of respect from the literary world.

To set it up, a brief anecdote: a while back, I went to a writers' conference. I was making chitchat with another writer, a critically acclaimed literary novelist who taught at a university. She had never heard of me. After we'd exchanged a bit of small talk, she asked me “And where do you teach?” just as naturally as one Slashdotter would ask another “And which distro do you use?”

I was taken aback. “I don't teach anywhere,” I said.

Her turn to be taken aback. “Then what do you do?”

”I'm...a writer,” I said. Which admittedly was a stupid thing to say, since she already knew that.

”Yes, but what do you do?”

I couldn't think of how to answer the question---I'd already answered it!

”You can't make a living out of being a writer, so how do you make money?” she tried.

”From...being a writer,” I stammered.

At this point she finally got it, and her whole affect changed. She wasn't snobbish about it. But it was obvious that, in her mind, the sort of writer who actually made a living from it was an entirely different creature from the sort she generally associated with.

And once I got over the excruciating awkwardness of this conversation, I began to think she was right in thinking so. One way to classify artists is by to whom they are accountable.

The great artists of the Italian Renaissance were accountable to wealthy entities who became their patrons or gave them commissions. In many cases there was no other way to

arrange it. There is only one Sistine Chapel. Not just anyone could walk in and start daubing paint on the ceiling. Someone had to be the gatekeeper---to hire an artist and give him a set of more or less restrictive limits within which he was allowed to be creative. So the artist was, in the end, accountable to the Church. The Church's goal was to build a magnificent structure that would stand there forever and provide inspiration to the Christians who walked into it, and they had to make sure that Michelangelo would carry out his work accordingly.

Similar arrangements were made by writers. After Dante was banished from Florence he found a patron in the Prince of Verona, for example. And if you look at many old books of the Baroque period you find the opening pages filled with florid expressions of gratitude from the authors to their patrons. It's the same as in a modern book when it says "this work was supported by a grant from the XYZ Foundation."

Nowadays we have different ways of supporting artists. Some painters, for example, make a living selling their work to wealthy collectors. In other cases, musicians or artists will find appointments at universities or other cultural institutions. But in both such cases there is a kind of accountability at work.

A wealthy art collector who pays a lot of money for a painting does not like to see his money evaporate. He wants to feel some confidence that if he or an heir decides to sell the painting later, they'll be able to get an amount of money that is at least in the same ballpark. But that price is going to be set by the market---it depends on the perceived value of the painting in the art world. And that in turn is a function of how the artist is esteemed by critics and by other collectors. So art criticism does two things at once: it's culture, but it's also economics.

There is also a kind of accountability in the case of, say, a composer who has a faculty job at a university. The trustees of the university have got a fiduciary responsibility not to throw away money. It's not the same as hiring a laborer in factory, whose output can be easily reduced to dollars and cents. Rather, the trustees have to justify the composer's salary by pointing to intangibles. And one of those intangibles is the degree of respect accorded that composer by critics, musicians, and other experts in the field: how often his works are performed by symphony orchestras, for example.

Accountability in the writing profession has been bifurcated for many centuries. I already mentioned that Dante and other writers were supported by patrons at least as far back as the Renaissance. But I doubt that Beowulf was written on commission. Probably there was a collection of legends and tales that had been passed along in an oral tradition---which is just a fancy way of saying that lots of people liked those stories and wanted to hear them told. And at some point perhaps there was an especially well-liked storyteller who pulled a few such tales together and fashioned them into the what we now know as Beowulf. Maybe there was a king or other wealthy patron who then caused the tale to be written down by a scribe. But I doubt it was created at the behest of a king. It was created at the behest of lots and lots of intoxicated Frisians sitting around the fire wanting to hear a yarn. And there was no grand purpose behind its creation, as there was with the painting of the Sistine Chapel.

The novel is a very new form of art. It was unthinkable until the invention of printing and impractical until a significant fraction of the population became literate. But when the

conditions were right, it suddenly became huge. The great serialized novelists of the 19th Century were like rock stars or movie stars. The printing press and the apparatus of publishing had given these creators a means to bypass traditional arbiters and gatekeepers of culture and connect directly to a mass audience. And the economics worked out such that they didn't need to land a commission or find a patron in order to put bread on the table. The creators of those novels were therefore able to have a connection with a mass audience and a livelihood fundamentally different from other types of artists.

Nowadays, rock stars and movie stars are making all the money. But the publishing industry still works for some lucky novelists who find a way to establish a connection with a readership sufficiently large to put bread on their tables. It's conventional to refer to these as "commercial" novelists, but I hate that term, so I'm going to call them Beowulf writers.

But this is not true for a great many other writers who are every bit as talented and worthy of finding readers. And so, in addition, we have got an alternate system that makes it possible for those writers to pursue their careers and make their voices heard. Just as Renaissance princes supported writers like Dante because they felt it was the right thing to do, there are many affluent persons in modern society who, by making donations to cultural institutions like universities, support all sorts of artists, including writers. Usually they are called "literary" as opposed to "commercial" but I hate that term too, so I'm going to call them Dante writers. And this is what I mean when I speak of a bifurcated system.

Like all tricks for dividing people into two groups, this is simplistic, and needs to be taken with a grain of salt. But there is a cultural difference between these two types of writers, rooted in to whom they are accountable, and it explains what MosesJones is complaining about. Beowulf writers and Dante writers appear to have the same job, but in fact there is a quite radical difference between them---hence the odd conversation that I had with my fellow author at the writer's conference. Because she'd never heard of me, she made the quite reasonable assumption that I was a Dante writer---one so new or obscure that she'd never seen me mentioned in a journal of literary criticism, and never bumped into me at a conference. Therefore, I couldn't be making any money at it. Therefore, I was most likely teaching somewhere. All perfectly logical. In order to set her straight, I had to let her know that the reason she'd never heard of me was because I was famous.

All of this places someone like me in critical limbo. As everyone knows, there are literary critics, and journals that publish their work, and I imagine they have the same dual role as art critics. That is, they are engaging in intellectual discourse for its own sake. But they are also performing an economic function by making judgments. These judgments, taken collectively, eventually determine who's deemed worthy of receiving fellowships, teaching appointments, etc.

The relationship between that critical apparatus and Beowulf writers is famously awkward and leads to all sorts of peculiar misunderstandings. Occasionally I'll take a hit from a critic for being somehow arrogant or egomaniacal, which is difficult to understand from my point of view sitting here and just trying to write about whatever I find interesting. To begin with, it's not clear why they think I'm any more arrogant than

anyone else who writes a book and actually expects that someone's going to read it. Secondly, I don't understand why they think that this is relevant enough to rate mention in a review. After all, if I'm going to eat at a restaurant, I don't care about the chef's personality flaws---I just want to eat good food. I was slagged for entitling my latest book "The System of the World" by one critic who found that title arrogant. That criticism is simply wrong; the critic has completely misunderstood why I chose that title. Why on earth would anyone think it was arrogant? Well, on the Dante side of the bifurcation it's implicit that authority comes from the top down, and you need to get in the habit of deferring to people who are older and grander than you. In that world, apparently one must never select a grand-sounding title for one's book until one has reached Nobel Prize status. But on my side, if I'm trying to write a book about a bunch of historical figures who were consciously trying to understand and invent the System of the World, then this is an obvious choice for the title of the book. The same argument, I believe, explains why the accusation of having a big ego is considered relevant for inclusion in a book review. Considering the economic function of these reviews (explained above) it is worth pointing out which writers are and are not suited for participating in the somewhat hierarchical and political community of Dante writers. Egomaniacs would only create trouble.

Mind you, much of the authority and seniority in that world is benevolent, or at least well-intentioned. If you are trying to become a writer by taking expensive classes in that subject, you want your teacher to know more about it than you and to behave like a teacher. And so you might hear advice along the lines of "I don't think you're ready to tackle Y yet, you need to spend a few more years honing your skills with X" and the like. All perfectly reasonable. But people on the Beowulf side may never have taken a writing class in their life. They just tend to lunge at whatever looks interesting to them, write whatever they please, and let the chips fall where they may. So we may seem not merely arrogant, but completely unhinged. It reminds me somewhat of the split between Christians and Faeries depicted in Susannah Clarke's wonderful book "Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell." The faeries do whatever they want and strike the Christians (humans) as ludicrously irresponsible and "barely sane." They don't seem to deserve or appreciate their freedom.

Later at the writer's conference, I introduced myself to someone who was responsible for organizing it, and she looked at me keenly and said, "Ah, yes, you're the one who's going to bring in our males 18-32." And sure enough, when we got to the venue, there were the males 18-32, looking quite out of place compared to the baseline lit-festival crowd. They stood at long lines at the microphones and asked me one question after another while ignoring the Dante writers sitting at the table with me. Some of the males 18-32 were so out of place that they seemed to have warped in from the Land of Faerie, and had the organizers wondering whether they should summon the police. But in the end they were more or less reasonable people who just wanted to talk about books and were as mystified by the literary people as the literary people were by them.

In the same vein, I just got back from the National Book Festival on the Capitol Mall in D.C., where I crossed paths for a few minutes with Neil Gaiman. This was another event in which Beowulf writers and Dante writers were all mixed together. The organizers had queues set up in front of signing tables. Neil had mentioned on his blog that he was going

to be there, and so hundreds, maybe thousands of his readers had showed up there as early as 5:30 a.m. to get stuff signed. The organizers simply had not anticipated this and so---very much to their credit---they had to make all sorts of last-minute rearrangements to accommodate the crowd. Neil spent many hours signing. As he says on his blog

<http://www.neilgaiman.com/journal/journal.asp>

the Washington Post later said he did this because he was a “savvy businessman.” Of course Neil was actually doing it to be polite; but even simple politeness to one’s fans can seem grasping and cynical when viewed from the other side.

Because of such reactions, I know that certain people are going to read this screed as further evidence that I have a big head. But let me make at least a token effort to deflect this by stipulating that the system I am describing here IS NOT FAIR and that IT MAKES NO SENSE and that I don’t deserve to have the freedom that is accorded a Beowulf writer when many talented and excellent writers---some of them good friends of mine---end up selling small numbers of books and having to cultivate grants, fellowships, faculty appointments, etc.

Anyway, most Beowulf writing is ignored by the critical apparatus or lightly made fun of when it’s noticed at all. Literary critics know perfectly well that nothing they say is likely to have much effect on sales. Let’s face it, when Neil Gaiman publishes *Anansi Boys*, all of his readers are going to know about it through his site and most of them are going to buy it and none of them is likely to see a review in the *New York Review of Books*, or care what that review says.

So what of MosesJones’s original question, which was entitled “The lack of respect?” My answer is that I don’t pay that much notice to these things because I am aware at some level that I am on one side of the bifurcation and most literary critics are on the other, and we simply are not that relevant to each other’s lives and careers.

What is most interesting to me is when people make efforts to “route around” the apparatus of literary criticism and publish their thoughts about books in place where you wouldn’t normally look for book reviews. For example, a year ago there was a piece by Edward Rothstein in the *New York Times* about *Quicksilver* that appears to have been a sort of wildcat review. He just got interested in the book and decided to write about it, independent of the *New York Times*’s normal book-reviewing apparatus. It is not the first time such a thing has happened with one of my books.

It has happened many times in history that new systems will come along and, instead of obliterating the old, will surround and encapsulate them and work in symbiosis with them but otherwise pretty much leave them alone (think mitochondria) and sometimes I get the feeling that something similar is happening with these two literary worlds. The fact that we are having a discussion like this one on a forum such as *Slashdot* is Exhibit A.