

“Why do you find these okay stories good?”

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Abstract. As an answer to the title question, some stories you can operate on and then get something good. I explain why I find a story about a tiger attack good, because of this reason, “courageously” presenting what I take to be something good. In the appendix, I present an attempt to clarify a distinction.

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I doubt the men you admire

You would hire

“Why do you find these okay stories good?” I fear someone will ask. Some stories in a broadly realistic tradition that I value are maybe just okay, if you focus on surface qualities; but they have this quality of you can quite easily operate on them and get something good, or at least I think so.

Recall William Blake’s legendary poem Tyger. The poem’s opening verse (or stanza!) is:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,

In the forests of the night;

What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

I learnt this verse in wintry England, if I remember correctly. Now consider R.K. Narayan’s story “The Tiger’s Claw,” which I probably would not like if I heard it. It is set at night in a station in South India near forests with lots of tigers, I believe with the intention of bringing to mind the

classic English poem. The story ends with some troubling information about forest tribes. Anyway, I think there is something funny about the poem being evaluated in this context. Probably some details are helpful for appreciating this. An easy operation! Imagine a British colonialist educator proudly presenting the poem, changing the pronunciation of “symmetry” even,¹ in a setting where tigers are normal and probably you don’t count as a grown man or woman in that tribe if you can’t handle a tiger. You would surely feel more nervous presenting in this context but the colonialist is a good soldier and he is certainly not backing down.

“But Mum framed a tiger’s symmetry the other day,” one of the tribe children says. (Eventually a cult develops around Mum with the colonialist as a leader?)

Appendix. “In the first paragraph, you distinguish between surface qualities and other qualities, but can you clarify that distinction?” The following is an attempt! (A lot of really clever people use, or will use, another and more elegant definition?) Consider a person who can read and understand this story but does not make any connections you do not spell out and their imagination is not stimulated beyond obvious ways. The qualities of the story they detect are the surface qualities. They imagine the struggle with the tiger! I don’t wish to insult such a person, by the way. Their evaluation matters. And “everyone” is like this sometimes, right? (“That’s not a good reason not to insult.”)

References. Blake, W. 1795. The Tyger.

Available at: <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/William-Blakes-World/201#>

Narayan, R.K. 1984. The Tiger’s Claw. In *Malgudi Days*. London: Penguin Books.

¹ An English schoolmate of mine used to do this, by the way.