Of the novelists

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The old buzz-saw states: “*do not anger a novelist; he will put you in his book and kill you.”* Go ahead; ask the person who coined it. Most works of fiction are essentially based on real events. Putting down truth on paper can bring liabilities. Or, worse, the novelist can be accused of becoming a journalist. The journalist knows well what he is dealing with. The novelist rarely does; he is at the mercy of the characters he created.

At times those created characters come to full blown life, even if only in the minds of the readers. One prominent example is Sherlock Holmes. There have been many reports of his receiving letters requesting his help in solving crimes, long after his creator Dr. Watson (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) left this world.

Decades ago, there was a real-life teacher who claimed he could teach anything to his high school students. He was well educated, very mechanically methodical and he would add his written justifications of the grade he issued. In this teacher’s mind, there were pre-set measurements. If the student answer was too short, one would expect to find the comment: “this is a telegram.” The recipient would have no illusions about the result he earned. If, by any chance the examinee would write a detailed essay, the response was invariably: “this is a novel.” Neither was the answer to his question the teacher was expecting. Pity.

Going through that experience teaches a student couple of solid lessons, neither of which that teacher may have even realized he was imparting. First, grading is a very subjective process. That is true regardless of the subject, setting or origins. The second is, the grade is not based on how well the examinee knows her topic. There have been occasions when the teacher may have a certain dislike and the student may be a personification of that. His hair may be too long or short; her fingernails may be a despised color, and so on. The reverse may be the case: the student may have all the qualifications the teacher insist a student must have. That can easily bring up the grade at least a couple of steps. Another interesting aspect of all this is the fact that the teacher may not even be aware of her own biases.

Now, the teacher can be any person and not even in a school setting. The Chief Executive Officer of a corporation will, in most likelihood, choose his subordinates in a very similar fashion. In that case, the grade is not issued as a letter on a paper but by new titles and substantially increased compensation package.

Then, how does a novelist get graded? Let us leave the critic writing review articles on the novel alone; he is exercising his First Amendment rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. If the public buys the novel at ‘satisfactory’ numbers, the novelist may decide she is graded favorably. Making money may have been the objective of the novelist, and she may have reached her objective. The entertainer Liberache is credited with the statement: “[the critic’s words hurt me so much,] I cried all the way to the bank.” Apparently, Liberache had a hefty check he was depositing and the critic’s words did not matter.

Elon Musk reportedly said: “When something is important enough, you do it even if the odds are not in your favor.” Apparently, Thomas Paine agreed with Musk, roughly two hundred years before Musk was born, when he published ***Common Sense***. George Washington ordered his officers of the Continental Army to read aloud the ***Common Sense*** to all the troops. That the author Thomas Paine was British Born and British subject, advocating the American colonies in the British Empire reject British rule, ought to show his odds.

Not every inventor, innovator or successful individual goes to college. Thomas Edison apparently did not even finish grade school. A funeral director invented the automatic telephone switch so he could get more business than his competitor. The Wright brothers made the bicycles turn into aero planes and fly. Quite a few novelists produced sci-fi plots, in which they invented hypothetical devices and functions which did not yet exist. Those devices were later brought to life by the readers of those novels. The said items became part of the culture. Was that because the novels inspired them?

Anyone can write a novel. One can hear the words: “I have a book in me.” A rational response to that is: “well, write it down.” When Samuel Clemens wrote his volume down, the shrieks of his critics were deafening. But what he wrote down was so ‘fresh,’ all the readers ignored the critics wholesale. He was lucky that a publisher agreed to spend the money and printed it. Nowadays the publishers look for an already famous writer before they would do that. And a novelist cannot be famous without printed novels circulating. Essentially, all boils down to advertisement. If one is not read, one cannot be read.

Then there is the small matter of royalties. To be a ‘novelist,’ one must be able to earn a living by the fruits of his labor. For a vast percentage of writers that is not the case. That always means they remain amateurs, wanna be’s, etc. During the Napoleonic wars, in London a British author defended Napoleon in words to the effect that Napoleon had to be congratulated. He was about to be lynched by the community when he was able to shout: “Napoleon shot a publisher.” The resentment of the authors toward the publishers was such that he was set free. William Clemens agreed with their sentiments.

There is no shortage of awards available for novelists. Some writers aim to gain one of them as a means of achieving success. Quite a few of them died of hunger because the award did not bring fame or fortune. The reasons for the awards earned by certain novelists and book titles are not easily understood. They are not always given to high selling authors, or the best use of language, their plots, etc. Some can be on entirely political objectives of the awarder, others purely on material gain; few, on ideological grounds. There are too many examples around.

In the past some authors would supplicate to members of the Royalty. The advance permission to dedicate the proposed book to his or her highness was seen, in today’s terms, as a celebrity endorsement. It was generally assumed that such a name presence would ensure good sales figures. According to some reports Edward Gibbon did so, to Duke of Gloucester, King of England’s brother. Upon presenting the second volume of his monumental ***Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire***, the Prince stated: “Another damned thick, square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh! Mr. Gibbon?”

In the end, the reading and comprehension of the readers makes the difference between success and failure. The novelist can be adored by his readers or despised by them. Especially the latter category is comprised of jealous individuals; their dislike is based on some reason or other. And that category of readers does not seethe in silence; they make their venom clear in writing. In the novel ***Fork Therapy***, one of the characters looks at the title page torn from a book and handed him. The said character puts his finger on the hand written inscription: “Frank looked at the page…swallowed hard. At the bottom of the torn leaf, there was a statement, written in a different color ink which read: ‘the value is in the reader, not what is written in the book, Ms. Carol.’ Right underneath the words ‘the author’ was scribbled.”