

FROM THE EDITOR

THE AUTHOR BUNNY EXPOSED!

By Stephen Carter

DO YOU BELIEVE in Santa Claus? The Easter Bunny? The Tooth Fairy? How about the Author Bunny?

I believed in the Author Bunny for many years. Amazing novels and short stories conceived themselves inside her like eggs, perfect and smooth. Then she would find a worthy worshipper upon whom to bestow those stories (usually after midnight).

Oh, sure, the writer had to work to peel those stories and expose their beauty, but the story was already in there. All the writer had to do was find the words to embody it.

How many days did I sit at my computer certain that the Author Bunny had left a little gift for me? How many drafts did I pump out? How many perfect stories did I present to how many critics who said, "Umm, yeah. Fine."

Fine? Obviously you don't grasp what I'm doing here. Don't you see the nuances? Can't you catch the symbolism? Isn't the story's soul blindingly apparent?

I spent many years trying to attract the Author Bunny. But it finally became depressingly evident that I had been tried and found unworthy.

No stories for you, you naughty boy.

But I'm a stubborn cuss. I wanted to be a writer anyway, so I enrolled in a creative writing MFA program where I learned something that made it possible for me to be a writer without the Author Bunny (sounds heretical, I know). That something is a single principle. I'm giving it to you free of charge—just because you're you.

Just as there is a craft to engine design, architecture, and artificial sweetener formulation, there is a craft to storytelling.

I spent five years studying story craft, my main text being Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. Focusing on a screenwriting book when one wants to learn story craft may seem odd, but, as I have found, screenplays are story skeletons. They're the bones that the cast and crew hang flesh upon. You don't have to cut through flowery language, extended metaphors, or languorous passages of description. Rather,

the beams and bones of the story lie exposed before you. And there are ways to know if they can stand, or if the art direction, costumes, actors, soundtrack, and cinematography are simply makeup and an evening gown applied to a corpse.

Though I was obsessed with understanding the components of story, it took a while to learn and apply them. Looking back on my MFA thesis, I cringe. Why in the world did they let me graduate?

Eventually, my work started to pay off. I could tell because the first time I submitted a screenplay to a film festival, they took my twenty-dollar entrance fee and never spoke to me again. The next time around, I revised that screenplay and won third place. I could identify the screenplay's problems and repair them. It was like fixing a toaster.

After that, I won writing contests and was published regularly. But it wasn't because the Author Bunny had put me on his "nice" list, it was because I learned how stories work, just like an architect learns how buildings work, or an engine designer learns how engines work.

LEARNING the craft of storytelling has been great for my career. I can actually make a living with words, which is something I've always wanted to do.

Reflecting on the Mormon fiction I have read, much of it has one thing in common. A lack of story craft. Yes, many of those stories may have lovely language, sympathetic characters, and interesting ideas, but they don't go anywhere.

I've written a lot of critiques to fiction writers focusing on their story's structure, and with almost no exception I receive this response, "What in the world are you talking about? This is how the story goes!"

That, gentle reader, is the voice of one who is in the thrall of the Author Bunny. It's the voice of someone who believes that stories conceive themselves *ex nihilo*.

As Robert McKee writes,

The novice plunges ahead, counting solely on experience, thinking that that life he's lived



and the films he's seen give him something to say and the way to say it [. . .] What the novice mistakes for craft is simply his unconscious absorption of story elements from every novel, film, or play he's ever encountered. As he writes, he matches his work by trial and error against a model built up from accumulated reading and watching. The unschooled writer calls this "instinct," but it's merely habit and it's rigidly limiting. He either imitates his mental prototype or imagines himself in the avant-garde and rebels against it. But the haphazard groping toward or revolt against the sum of unconsciously ingrained repetitions is not, in any sense, technique, and leads to screenplays clogged with clichés of either the commercial or the art house variety.¹

Lack of story craft is the bane of Mormon fiction. In fact, I believe it is the main barrier that keeps Mormon writing from gaining the strength to compete in the national and international markets. Too many potential Mormon writers still believe in the Author Bunny. They put no work into story craft, convinced that it will be delivered to them by a furry anthropomorph. They spend their lives waiting for an egg that never arrives.

NOTES

1. Robert McKee, *Story, Substance, Structure, Style and the Craft of Screenwriting*. (New York: Regan Books, 1996) 15-16.