

I Ain't Got No Satisfaction

It took a double negative from Tin Pan Alley to point it out. I ain't got no satisfaction. I like the song that almost says it right. For so long did I believe 'truth' was stranger than fiction. That's a furphy for this Murphy, because it is not the case at all. My perseverance with the "God's Eye View" in my version of non-fiction was getting me nowhere.

The appearance before the Writers Group of NIDA's Ken Healey and his call for fiction that engages the reader had me realise I was inflicting the reader for my personal gratification. Half-expecting people to rise up in homage to the wonderful experiences laid out on pages I set before them all of a sudden looked pretty fragile. A bit like name-dropping on happenings. It seemed to me that writing fiction was like drinking someone else's drink when they weren't looking. Kind of sneaky, eh?

Whether I battled earnestly under the flag of fact for altruistic or selfish reasons, the result was still a blob. Zero. Not a thing on the score sheet to show for sincerity but a magazine article and a grovel of letters to the editor. Truth mightn't hurt, but it helps you miss out, I was learning. And it is dull. Getting nothing published because I was writing incidentally is incidentally, effort wasted. This is why I come back to the Writers Group. I anticipate that in time, with the encouragement of my fellows in the group, I will be able to capture and embrace sufficient moments of sheer fiction to bring lively words to my writing that others in the group and abroad will enjoy and in return, that my enthusiasm will be a fillip to the endeavours of everyone around me and will also be reflected in the level of satisfaction they gain with their work.

Ken said his client wrote ten plays that were produced in Australia and she could not make a living yet she turned one into a screenplay in America and clicked and hit the big time, working there ever since and earning a handsome living. That's for me, too, even this late in life. Satisfaction, grand style. No more anti-fiction. Hurrah, for the turnabout.

Through all my disappointments I was not without people cheering from the sidelines. What friends and relatives, workmates and acquaintances knew about me and my exploits in conversation over the years warranted "putting it all down." Write a book, they urged. Deed I do or deeds I didn't? Without make-believe, the honest and decent approach has holes in it, I could sense. Without a good splash of fantasy, it was merely reporting and it was as though I was affected by a vacuum over my shoulder that was sucking holes through the story wherever it deserved to be turned into a tale. What I was writing was raw, but it also was chronologically-driven reality. Good prose or poor, personal history doesn't pull crowds.

Ken impressed upon me that the holes I saw in my work that had me struggling to tug emotions, draw conclusions, shape conceptions, harbour fears or dash hopes and expectations of the reader, could be filled with good fibs to help save the story for me, if I strung it all together in 'believable' fashion. I could be entertained, too!

There was a time when in innocence, I was not captive to yesterday's truths. At school at the age of fifteen I was commissioned to write a three-act play by my English master and coached closely by him through the process then, once written and rehearsed, performed it on Presentation Night with class members taking other parts. As I recall, I was 'Stiffener Joe' and I got to sing a solo, "My Ol' Black Billy" while mournfully stoking a make-believe campfire. That single performance ended a burst of industry that I have not been able to reproduce. Years later I was chuffed to learn the play, "Saltbush Bill's Second Fight" was still getting a run in secondary schools.

That might sound like a fair start to a writing career, but the effort had holes in it, too. What I did then with the holes, was better than what I have been doing with the holes since. For at fifteen, I had no idea of what was going on in the real world of adults and grownup shearers. I had a fair grasp of the language and my compositions showed Bob Walshe, my teacher, that I could conjure up images in place of hard facts and might also be able to get away with lacking any knowledge of Australian Bush workers and their behaviour, generally. Would that imagination of mine carry the play on the night?

Banjo Paterson wrote the poem "Saltbush Bill's Second Fight." My job was to turn his lines into a musical. The holes I've referred to were more holes of ignorance than plagiarism. Certainly I lifted Banjo's characters and his storyline and padded his dialogue to shape the poem into three acts, but adding some bush ballads for the company to sing and planning some props to grace the stage transformed his epic from staid, matter-of-fact poem into live entertainment. We determined this was a useful and harmless borrow of the Banjo 'Fight' plot. His shearers fought and they drank and worked and they drank and worked and fought. At my tender age I was not quite sure in what order and with what degree of intensity each of these practices were pursued by Banjo's protagonists, yet I was driven to invent a flow of events and parts for people to play. I believed I had a licence to call in my imagination in filling the gaps due to my adolescent shortcomings so long as I cut down on the cursing while leaving enough body to amuse an audience. Oh, and of course all this was OK if we credited Banjo but heck, he'd been dead twelve years already!

We got a curtain call from the audience, so it worked. I got my satisfaction, on loan as it were. From here on, I will be practicing a brand of fiction that will be my own work plus a few bonus snippets of embellishment I have picked up on life's journey.

Anyone like a lend of the leftovers?

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