

Michael Martone

Hermes Goes to College

T*his essay is based on a paper delivered at the 2008 AWP Conference in New York, for a panel titled “Bending Genre.”*

The First Thing

The very first thing the baby Hermes does is steal the cattle of Apollo his brother. Apollo figures it out, confronts his baby brother, the little thief, in his crib. Hermes hasn't even learned to speak yet, to walk. The first thing he has to do is steal the sacred cattle of his brother Apollo, who figures it out and is about to extract terrible godly retribution for the transgression when Hermes offers up to his brother the second thing he does after he is born. He gives his older brother a little something he has been monkeying with while in the crib. He gives his brother the lyre—tortoise shell and horn and leather straps and string—so that all-seeing Apollo is charmed, calms down, can compose his great Apollonian art.

Confused on Purpose

Robert Scholes, in his little book *Elements of Fiction*, roots out that both fact and fiction derive from the Latin “to do” or “to make.” A fact—the real thing—is a thing done. In fact, fact has no reality once it is done. It has no existence, is unreal. It leaves instead an abundance of residue, evidence, traces, the fact of its once having been done. A fiction on the other hand is a thing made and once it is made it comes into existence. It has a reality. It can be sensed, stored, savored even. Fictions in this way are realer than facts whose evidence of the facts' doneness—letters, say, or reports, newspaper dispatches, diaries, etc.—can all be faked. The truth is for a very long time we have been operating as if fact and fiction were steady and distinct categories when in fact... And all that evidence of fact—the

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material of the real—can be faked of course. We are really always already quite confused anyway.

The Genre of Genre

I am worried that we don't worry enough about the subliminal influences of the institutions in which we find ourselves housed, colleges and universities, which for me seem to be diabolic engines for sorting, categorizing, defining. If you think about it, the kind of writing my writing students are most engaged in is criticism, specifically the critique of fellow students' creative writing. The institution is a critical institution and insists we act critically. We want to think of such influence as benign but it is not. Even here at our conference we have adapted our writing, this writing, to the academic model, to the critical turn of mind. It must be seen as serious, empirical, enlightened. Even now on this panel that is interested in blurring the lines of genre, we still must use words like genre. We are interested in the confusion of genre, the borrowing of technique between the genres, the tension that exists as one genre rubs up against the other. But still we are quite conscious and quite ready to admit to the easy use of "genre" altogether. We worry the categories of fact and fiction. Nonfiction and fiction. Prose and poetry. What we don't worry well enough is the category of category, the genre of *genre*.

The Art of Inconvenience

To invoke "literary" or "genre" is to create a frame where something can be made safe. It is a kind of precinct, a ghetto even. Writers in America seem to have voluntarily committed themselves to some kind of reservation—the university—and assigned their work to very controlled publishing venues—the literary journal, the little mag, the peer-reviewed periodical. Now there are many very nice, tasteful, serious literary journals, etc., but I can't help thinking that one thing these publishing venues are signaling the world is this: This this, this published this, is harmless, tamed, framed, controlled. And that this

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fiction, this nonfiction, this art is not really a part of your life, dear reader. This is a zoo you can visit. I like art in its natural habitat, in the wild. Or if it is in the journals, it is acting like a bug, a germ, resistant to the antibiotic. Art that doesn't know its place. Art out of place. Art that disrupts convention, corrupts expectations. I like the notion of defamiliarization, of attempting to open up received notions and categories to wonder or to, at least, satire. I like art that appears in settings not thought to be artistic, not sanctioned precincts of appreciation. At the crosswalks and the crossroads. Contested spaces. Outside the warehouses of the galleries and the tasteful storage sheds of the literary journal. The prank and the stunt. Art that is inconvenient, that disrupts, that by its nature corrupts, degrades, disturbs boundaries instead of politely sharing, tweaking, or bending them. Art not generically generic genre.

Meet John Smith

I attended a massive state university where it was a widely held belief that each student there was no more than a number. So with only a made-up social security number we created a student, John Smith, and registered him by means of then-current IBM punch cards acquired at the field house registration. Tuition was cheap, then, and everyone in my dorm, whose population was larger than most towns of the state, chipped in a buck or two. We enrolled him in large lecture classes—someone from the dorm was taking the class and shared the notes with the one who took the exam as John Smith. He was a C student. He did not attend the commencement held at the huge stadium and is now on the rolls of the alumni association where he still receives the magazine at the PO Box we opened for him and maintain in Oolitic, Indiana. Sure, I realize with advanced software, heightened anxiety of identity theft and terrorist breaches of security, and the cost of college now actually an arm and a leg instead of twenty bucks a semester hour, such a stunt would be impossible today. Or maybe not—one could hack the system

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virtually now and not have to worry about anything physical at all, but that is a thought for another day.

A Warning Warning

Today I teach at a massive state university where the regulation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic captures our attention. There is a sign, a giant yellow diamond warning, that pictures the international symbol of a human walking. You know these signs alerting you to a crosswalk, and you probably know the ongoing editing of the sign, its evolving story. One day you discover a sketched-on undulating hula-hoop ovaling the waist of the stick figure. That then is erased by the DOT. Then circles are stenciled to the feet, roller skates, that are, in a day or two, painted back over. A halo or horns added to the head. Or trailing lines indicating speed or sweat or blood or comic nerves, the shakes. A cast and a sling appear and are expunged. A red reflective button nose. Wings and goggles. And all the time the maintenance crews come back to set it all back in order. The warning warning sign must merely warn, while art, on the other hand, warns against such maintenance.

Readers World

All through college I worked for a bookstore called, really, Readers World, and Readers World like most bookstores divided its floor of product into genre categories—the wall of fiction with its subdivisions of western, sci-fi, lit, and romance, and the expanse of nonfiction breaking into such groups as gardening and home repair, biography, war, psychology and therapy, self-help and how-to, true crime and nature, travel and religion. Here is a secret of what I learned in Readers World. Readers are not generic in the usual sense. That is to say their cognitive maps organizing information do not correspond with the one in the store or the one in the university for that matter. The primal division for my customers was not fiction and nonfiction but story and not story. Real or not, factual or not. These were questions certainly but not of primary importance.

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Consider the Readers World I worked in was located in a shopping center called Canterbury Green, the boxes of the various stores gussied up in fake timber and wattle and asbestos tile that was meant to look like thatch. Consider too while I worked at Readers World I shelved a brand new magazine called *PEOPLE* and I remember trying to figure out where to place it on the rack on the spectrum from the tabloids, enjoying their first flush of upwardly mobile success, to *Time* and *Newsweek*. The customers seemed to live comfortably in this in-between state. And the conflation of fact and fiction—one I think today is even more pronounced—was collapsing from both ends of the range. Books popular while I worked at Reader's World included *Ragtime* by Doctorow, a fictional animation of history, Mailer's *Executioner's Song*, reportage expanded by fictional devices, Toomer's *Cane*, and Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, a book so blatantly both fiction and non and about the very subject of genre as to make it unclassifiable. And, in fact, we spent the summer moving our copies of *Woman Warrior* from one area of the store to another and then leaving copies, a few copies of the title, in each of several sections, salting the whole store.

Stealing Things In

I have my students in both my fiction and nonfiction classes make books and distribute them as part of the semester's project. Book is a category that is in decay here. I have had a student write a story in the form of a police report, and he filed it as a police report at the police headquarters. Another student wrote a sequence of prose poems on the subject of meat. Her book, bound in blood red wrappers with a bone white spiral spine, she then took to the Winn-Dixie to have shrink-wrapped on a Styrofoam tray by the butcher there. And still another hand-printed his story, about a character who uses a 30-foot strip of sized cloth to floss his GI tract, on a 30-foot strip of sized cloth. But most do books that look like books,

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keeping Kinko's busy with standard staple folds and cardstock covers. I point out to them, as they have to distribute their books as well, that libraries and bookstores have elaborate apparati to prevent you from stealing a book out of their stacks but they have nothing to guard against you stealing your work into the bookstore or the library. And that's what they do, shelving their own work or leaving it to be shelved, allowing the librarian to affix the catalog number, enter it into inventory.

Hermes Clueless

So after this panel, after this conference we go back to our cribs. Do we go back there knowing more? Do we return having learned something or other? I'd like to think we have come here to unlearn. That's not to say "forget" but to return in a state of not-knowing. Once the contraption of tortoise shell and horn and leather strings fell into the hands of Apollo he knew what to do with the lyre. Open up a music department and study the heck out of the thing till it reveals its secrets—its bone, its horn, its leather. Hermes had no idea what his hands created save maybe an improvised distraction, the sleight of hand, of a thief. He's the artist, clueless, making something new out of those old received categories of bone and horn and skin, out of those old scraps and odds and ends something new in the world. Make things. Steal them into the world.

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