

## Fiction

*The difference between lying and the art of Fiction. A little bit of silliness.*

As soon as my mother realized I had the makings of a two-legged encyclopedia, she began to rely more on my cursory knowledge at ten years of age and less on her own God-given maternal sense. As soon as I realized I'd gained my Mom's confidence in my baloney, I began to shortcut reality by making things up. She may have thought getting her information from me would save her time, but she didn't count the cost of my having my facts wrong half the time. Of course, her motives might have been beyond my understanding.

On a Saturday morning in 1953 she addressed a popular issue of the day.

"David, does Desi Arnaz really have a band or is it just part of the Lucy Show?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a fake, Mom, because all he plays is the conga drum."

"The what?"

"Whatever you call it. I could play it just as well. Here, listen to this. And leading a band is just waving your arms."

When she later told that bit of invention to her brother, he laughed and asked where she'd heard such talk.

"From David," she told him. "He reads the newspapers. He reads everything."

"He's a dreamer," said Uncle Jim. "The next time you see him with his head down in a book, check to see if his eyes are open."

I suppose Mom could have made a few lame decisions based on my cut-rate knowledge. Luckily our home life wasn't complicated and we seldom dealt with situations in need of critical analysis. So, any decisions we made seldom hurt us.

And as Catholics we were encouraged ... at least by fifth grade teacher Sister Wilomena ... to ask a priest for advice on our daily dilemmas, although none of us would have been crazy enough to do so. We'd discuss it from time to time ... we were Irish, after all ... but I don't ever remember any of us seeking counsel from Father McKulky. Maybe Dad did so in the years before Prozac was invented and Mom began to use it to ease her bewilderment.

Mom was never a great student. She had been brought up by parents from another century ... she never said which. The scientific marvels that thrilled us

Moderns as we watched the Jetsons on television in the 1950s often left Mom uneasy, as though the world she grew up in was trying to sneak out the back door without warning her. The times were changing. Dad had already begun to use her antimacassars for rags and us kids had dragged the curtain stretchers down from the attic and used them to start a bonfire in the back yard during a neighborhood Elvis record hop.

Mom absolutely could not understand why mankind wanted to go to the moon. She told me there was nothing there to eat and probably not much to do for entertainment. She said traveling to the moon would be like a journey to Herkimer, but it could take longer. Mom had never been farther from home than New York City on her honeymoon, an event that blossomed into a nightmare when she became separated from my father and lost on the subway. Her rescue was rather routine, but she sent a Christmas card each year to the policeman who reunited her with my father. Asked if he thought Mom had changed after New York, he said "Well, I wouldn't trust her travel notes."

As I grew older and looked at my parents with a more critical eye, I began to wonder if Mom was more likely than me to misunderstand things. Dad said anything was possible. It occurred to me that people don't always consciously make things up. Sometimes a strong need for something to be true will convince a person it was true.

Of course, facts are not always factual. I don't remember being particularly interested in literal truth in my boyhood days. Perhaps television was responsible for my attitude. After listening to hours of laughable advertising copy, I formed the opinion that anyone could say just about anything they wanted and most of the audience would believe it, whether they were my family seated around the dinner table at home or kids playing in the baseball lot up the street.

In school I was more careful about the knowledge I claimed in regard to one topic or another. The nuns were astute women and dealt severely with kids who tried to deceive them. At home, I could get away with more stories, and I spun them at will just to see the reactions.

As I continued to make up stories, something began to dawn on me. I began to reject ideas I thought no one would believe. And I began to see that worrying about believability was essentially lying, which is an earnest desire to convince someone of something that is not true. That's not fiction. Fiction is different.

Soon came a lesson. I floated a story in our Cornhill neighborhood that newly elected Pope John XXIII was coming to Utica and we should have a special welcome for him in our part of town. The arrival of the Pope would have been a great story, but no one believed it. And there lay the crux of difference between lying and Fiction.

Telling the Papal visitation story turned out to be great fun, precisely because no one believed it. It was so far-fetched that listeners simply fell into the comedy of it without carefully trying to debunk the story. Some even added their own inventions to the legend.

"Would the Pontiff be staying at the city's posh Hotel Utica?" a friend asked my mother.

"Oh, no," said my beaming mother. "He wants to get a place in North Utica so he can meet Annette Funicello."

Of course, Annette ... of Mouseketeer fame, and later well known for her roles in beach party movies ... spent very little time in Utica. And no pope had left Rome in a few hundred years. But John XXIII showed great and surprising leadership in his first year. One never knew. You could run into the new Pope on the Herkimer Road bus some day. He might be sitting with the astronauts. Or with Annette.

So for me Fiction became defined as a kind of being lied to that you could sit back and enjoy. I could further say it was dissembling for the audience's entertainment instead of my own.

Some years later I thought I saw the Pope and the Beach Blanket Bingo girl stumble across the lawn toward me at the graveside service of my mother's funeral. But it was a much older Uncle Jim in his pajamas and robe. He sidled up to me, dragging along the attendant they had sent with him from the nursing home.

"Were you with her *at the last*?" he said.

"Yes, Uncle Jim, I was."

"Did she mention leaving me any money?"

"No, but she did say you could have her raccoon coat, the one she wore the night she first met Dad at the campground years ago."

"He thought she was a bear when she ran up to him," said Jim. "He almost shot her. There was something to be said for formal introductions in those days."

I gave a great sigh and then said, "Her end was spectacular."

"Oh? Please tell me."

"An angel with a flaming sword burst into the hospital room, but Mom resisted his entreaty to come along with him."

"My, my ..."

"And then he ran to the window, as fast as his little legs would carry him. He flew like a flash, tore open the shutter and threw up the sash ..."

"Was he wearing a red suit?"

"Yes! And there was quite a commotion on the roof."

"That's superb," said Uncle Jim. "Carried off to his workshop by eight tiny thingamajigs, no doubt. Did you make this up or did she?"

"She did, about a year ago."

"You trained her well," he said.

"I never taught her to make up stories," I said with surprise and an edge to my voice.

"I can't imagine," he said, "where else she learned it from."

"She never told me any fiction," I said.

"She told me she was too embarrassed to show you, but she wrote them all down. Hundreds of stories. Some might sound familiar to you. Most are original. She was quite a story teller."

"And I never heard any of them?" I said.

"We all heard her best. About getting lost on the subway."

"That was fiction?" I said. "Why?"

"When they came home two days late, your Dad was too embarrassed to admit he was the one who got lost. Your Mom took the rap."

Eventually I clung more solidly to Fiction and pretty much left lying behind. Lying to others only got me into trouble. Fiction brought a sense of being able to paint the world in my own colors. Now all I would have to worry about when I took up the brush was kidding myself into thinking the world could be what I wanted it to be. That would be enough challenge for a lifetime.

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