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# The politicisation of writers

Many years ago when I was a book publisher, I published *The Political Police in Britain*. One rather conservative reviewer suggested that the notion of police being political was nonsense because they were, of course, politically neutral.

What he failed to appreciate is that political is not necessarily the same as party-political, and that a neutral police force effectively defends the status quo so they cannot be neutral. The police, *de facto*, are political and so are writers.

Whether a writer joins their trade union and takes part in that political process (I will come to this later), all writers are political to differing degrees, and the extent of that politicisation may actually be reflected in how well they write. And if they are not aware of this the probability is that they are not writing anything of great depth.

Classic stories from *The Jungle Book* and *Casablanca* to *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* become classics precisely because they work simultaneously on several levels. They usually have the following characteristics:

1. an accessible story that is easy to read (or as a movie, easy to watch)
2. they are entertaining and what they promise is obvious
3. they have accessible and strong characters with clear goals facing many obstacles
4. finally, they provide a strong subtext with a moral message or theme, that is, the politicisation of the story.

It is the subtext or underlying theme which is missing from most of the thousands of scripts circulating around the industry. It is the subtext that gives a story layers that may take two or more 'readings' or viewings before they percolate up into the understanding.

Why don't more writers attempt to layer their stories? Is it that they don't think about it or don't think it is necessary? It certainly is not easy to do well, but while many of the how-to books and courses suggest that there should be a theme that organically links all parts of the script, few suggest either the techniques of layering stories or the politicisation of stories. Every story, in any format or genre, is capable of having additional depths or layers.

It is generally considered better to decide on the characters before deciding on the 'plot' or the genre, since those should be dictated by the identity of the characters. Ask yourself what the moral, ethical, political or aspirational underlying theme is, then put the characters into interesting and entertaining situations in which the subtext will be relevant.

Why would a writer be prepared to spend several months working on a 110 page script yet ignore this? When asked to pitch a proposal for a film script, most writers fall into the trap of telling the story rather than describing what kind of story it is. This may be because many writers don't actually know what kind of story they are really writing, other than it is a story about X who does Y and then Z and then ... The story is not the same as the way you tell it.

Some writers, however, are conscious of the political nature of what they do; they deliberately hope to take their audience to moral or ethical places the audience may not have been, make them face dilemmas or situations they may never have faced, and force them to think about who they are, how they relate to other people and what they would do in those situations.

This may result in the audience changing their minds or their values or changing their behaviour and this is what politics is all about: getting people

to behave in a certain way.

Other writers are even more overtly political. Paul Abbott's recent television drama *State of Play* questioned the relationship between the press and the government. It presented a compelling sequence of powerful situations in which the audience - together with the characters - make choices and anticipate the imagined consequences. *Coronation Street* is currently making us question our views on homosexuality and how we seem to fail to deal with differences between ourselves. The examples are common enough. So why are most scripts all sound and fury, signifying nothing?

Is it because some writers are satisfied just because they are writing, filling the pages to earn a living without questioning what they are writing, while others are writing with a different purpose: to change the world?

What about the other aspect of the politicisation of writers? Britain will probably never have a writers' strike. In the States the Writers' Guild of America is so strong that they can and do strike when they need to redress the imbalance of power between writers and the film and television industries.

The WGA offers systematic negotiations on behalf of writers and producers must be signatories to WGA terms because WGA members - the vast majority of professional writers in the States - will not work for non-signatory producers.

This is unlikely to happen in the UK but a younger, more dynamic and more political Writers' Guild of Great Britain is beginning to attract a wider range of writers and increase its membership. The biggest problem faced by the Guild may not be predatory producers and broadcasters, but those professional writers who take an 'I'm alright Jack' approach. They make a good living without being members of the Guild and therefore see little reason to pay dues to an organisation about which they probably know too little.

They may not know how much the Guild does in areas such as ensuring that money from international collecting societies reaches the beneficiaries (many of whom are the same well-established writers), in establishing better overall terms (not only minimum terms) that benefit those well-established writers, and in contributing to the defence in court cases such as the recent *Stones in his Pockets* case in which the writer fought off claims by the director to be credited as co-author.

Never before has it been so worthwhile or so important for writers to be politicised. The benefits that accrue to all writers as a result of the re-energised Writers' Guild may continue to be overlooked by some even though they and their agents enjoy those benefits. It is time that they stood up to be counted.

As Sean Egan's important article about the changes to the commissioning process demonstrates (page 61), writers continue to be at the bottom of the food chain. If they write passionate scripts with something significant to say about the world in which we live, their films and television dramas will reach world markets and our industry will become more profitable.

If writers actively support their Guild, they will also find that their professional lives improve as the more united writers are, the better they will be able to look after the long-term interests of all writers. The main beneficiaries will probably be the well-established writers whose substantial earnings will grow proportionately. So without sounding like those other and often discredited (party) politicians, get out and vote for your future.

Julian Friedmann