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# Snuffing the Flame: The Moral Implications of Stereotypes

Lisa de Rubilar | October/November 2008



### [NOTES](#)

If we're careless, half-hearted gods, our characters will be little more than single-cell blobs that slither from here to there across the page. If we're control-freak gods, we'll create automatons whose software guides them neatly through cow pastures or meteor-blasted civilizations to inevitable triumph or destruction.

In her essay "Moral Fiction," author Mary Gordon makes a provocative statement: "If your primary motivation in life is to be moral, you don't become an artist. You do good works." <sup>1</sup> When I read those words, I was at first bewildered; then appalled. "So should I throw in the pen and grab a shovel?" I wondered. "Does the desire to write fiction somehow negate moral strivings?" I was preparing for battle in defense of the moral writer, when I paused to define *moral*, particularly in regard to art. It's harder than one might think. A lot harder. As in: *If fiction can make us better people, why aren't literature professors the most angelic souls on the planet?* My outrage wasn't worth much if I couldn't formulate a rational response to Mary's assertion; so I gave up and turned my attention to stereotypes. Defining *stereotype* was easy. Stereotypes reduce the tangled mass of existence to a manageable form. Stereotypes allow us to label people and communities so that we can

see them more clearly-so we can tell if they're *us* or *them*. Stereotypes are useful in promoting the human impulse toward xenophobia...

Nearly all of us would agree that-human nature or not-promoting hatred and fear of others isn't a particularly moral undertaking. Who is more despised among artists than peers who use their craft in the service of despotism? But are propagandists the only ones at fault? Unexpectedly, as I explored the topic of stereotypes in literature, I gained a toehold on the slippery slope of what morality means in regard to the fiction, poetry, or nonfiction we *all* write.

By definition, stereotypes are unimaginative. This doesn't seem a harsh criticism; accountants are unimaginative too, but they're generally nice people. (Or is that a stereotype?) However, I've long believed that the root of all evil isn't money, but a failure of the imagination. The perpetrator of any crime, large or small, doesn't fully imagine another human being. Other people are little more than props on the stage of life; objects of adoration; sources of pleasure or irritation. The road rager sees only an old geezer behind the wheel, not the owner of Jerry's Cafe, whose wife is dying of colon cancer. The thief sees an arm ripe for the purse-snatch, not a woman who raised three children by herself and has saved ten years for this trip to Rome. When the inability to imagine another human being is multiplied by a whole community, social class, race, or religion, the result is at best, stereotype. At worst, genocide.

In his book *Turning Life into Fiction*, Robin Hemley makes a telling comment about the novelist Ian MacMillan, who writes mostly about Eastern Europe during World War II. "His vision is often harrowing," Hemley says, "But it is so precise and, at its core, humane, that his work never treads on the sensational."<sup>2</sup>

Hemley's use of *precise* and *humane* in the same breath caught my attention. Stereotypes are always (again, by definition) *imprecise* and, like all failures of the imagination, *dehumanizing*, or *inhumane*, a term that brings to mind every kind of atrocity. The practice of inhumanity is never a benign pastime. I think we can all agree: it's immoral.

I was also struck by something Natasha Saje says in passing, in a recent essay on poetic technique.<sup>3</sup> First she quotes the witches' lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf  
Witches' mummy, maw and gulf  
Of the ravined salt-sea shark,  
Root of hemlock digged I' th dark,  
Liver of blaspheming Jew,  
Gall of goat and slips of yew  
Slivered in the moon's eclipse  
Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips...<sup>4</sup>

In her analysis of these verses, Saje says, "The names and parts of common and exotic animals (shark, wolf, dragon, goat, etc.) and *humans animalized* (Turk, Jew, Tartar) are... humorous (or would have been to a Renaissance audience)."<sup>5</sup> By using a label to refer to a human being (Turk, Jew, Tartar), that person is somehow "animalized," which I take to mean, reduced to an animal-like simplicity. Thus the potential for crass humor. But "animalized" has a more sinister connotation. To call someone "an animal" is to dismiss him or her from the human family, to suggest that accepted moral boundaries don't apply to our treatment or perception of that person. Again, not a moral thing to do. Most persecutions and prejudices are the result of this animalization process.

But what does that have to do with writers, sitting alone at our keyboards, pecking innocently at the keys? Typing letters of the alphabet. Which make words. Which can form labels. Which result in stereotypes. Which dehumanize. Which leads to-and I don't think I'm overstating the case-distrust and hatred, conflict and

violence.

It's not for nothing that Jesus followed the edict, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (which, by the way, takes imagination) with a story—a vividly imagined story about a man who fell among thieves.<sup>6</sup> Unless we believe the only moral acts are wordless acts, we story-tellers, we word-smiths, we keepers of the language, darn well better do *something*.

The least we can do is to spurn stereotypes. To some extent, doing so is a matter of craft: avoiding clichéd language; using specific details rather than vague generalizations; writing good dialogue. But I've come to believe that steering clear of stereotypes is primarily a habit of mind. Whether our characters are fictive or "real," we can either strive to see them in their mysterious, elusive, human entirety, or we can cut them down to a more manageable (and skewed and incomplete and inhuman) size.

If there's anyone who refuses to do the latter, it's Gabriel García Márquez. I recently reread his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*,<sup>7</sup> and was amazed again by the sense of scarcely contained life burgeoning in every direction—and not just human life. Even the parrot that lives in Doctor Juvenal Urbino's home has a florid history intertwined with his owners', refusing on one occasion to speak to the president of the republic, and on another leading firemen on a crusade through the house. Certainly García Márquez is a master craftsman, but I think his writerly methods arise out of a desire and willingness to create not just characters, but souls; not just a setting, but a universe. He is nothing less than the god (lower-case g) of his book—as are we all, like it or not, whenever we pick up a pen or sit down at the keyboard.

If we're careless, half-hearted gods, our characters will be little more than single-cell blobs that slither from here to there across the page. If we're control-freak gods, we'll create automatons whose software guides them neatly through cow pastures or meteor-blasted civilizations to inevitable triumph or destruction. But if we're gods of a book-universe patterned after our own, in which infinitely mysterious beings in possession of free will interact with each other and with the laws of nature—gravity, entropy, death—our creations will be bigger than any ideas we have of them. They'll be dodgy, difficult to handle. Our attempts to contain them in words will seem almost like one of those apparently senseless religious rituals, such as baptism. And yet, as the Reverend John Ames explains in Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, baptism doesn't "enhance sacredness, but... acknowledges it... and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me... The sensation... of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time."<sup>8</sup>

Wisława Szymborska also tries to capture the sheer mystery of *beingness* in her poem, "Astonishment." While the entire poem is "astonishing," a few lines demonstrate the awe that must accompany any consideration of one's own existence:

Why this specific self, not in a nest,  
But a house? Sewn up not in scales, but skin?  
Not topped off by a leaf, but by a face?<sup>9</sup>

In her address upon receiving the Nobel Prize, Szymborska said, "(I)n daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases such as 'the ordinary world,' 'ordinary life,' 'the ordinary course of events.' But in the language of poetry where every word is weighed (and I would add that every word is weighed in good prose as well), nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world."<sup>10</sup>

In *Gilead*, Reverend Ames is hyper-aware of the astonishing nature of his own existence—and that of every person in his apparently circumscribed provincial Midwest town. For this reason, it seems to me that much of the advice that he gives his young son can be applied to the writer as well. For example, he says (and I'll

make two word-substitutions: *characters for people* and *writer for ministry*):

When (characters) come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the "I" whose predicate can be "love" or "fear" or "want," and whose object can be "someone" or "nothing" and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful. To see this aspect of life is a privilege of the (writer) which is seldom mentioned.[11](#)

When we use stereotypes, we snuff astonishment; we buy into the idea of an "ordinary" world, an "ordinary" existence.

In Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, I also found guidance for writers.... If we are to avoid stereotypes, we must have this urge to go look, to really see.

I don't subscribe to the notion that we fiction writers aren't in control of our characters. We are, after all, artists, not mediums. Yet the people we create in our minds are reflections of people we know in our lives. We might consider the (rather scary) fact that they are reflections of the way we perceive those around us. If we fail to imagine their deepest thoughts and motives and feelings, how can we possibly imagine people onto the page? For nonfiction writers, if we fail to imagine our mother as a teenage Elvis fan who couldn't imagine *us*, how can we imagine anyone else's inner life? Again, the Reverend Ames has something to say on the subject:

Every human being is worthy of honor, but the conscious discipline of honor is learned from (the) setting apart of the mother and father, who... may be cranky or stingy or ignorant or overbearing. But... at the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object.... I know that if you are attentive to (your mother) in this way, you will find a very great loveliness in her.... You (will) see her as God sees her, and that is an instruction in the nature of God and humankind and of Being itself.[12](#)

I don't use the author-as-god metaphor lightly, and certainly it only goes so far, but I use it to emphasize the attitude we must have toward the people in our books: a willingness and ability to look beyond their façades; an extending of our own being toward theirs; a determination to allow them free-will; a refusal to reduce them to objects.

In her poem "Jonah in the Belly," Lon Young implies that this is what God (capital G) was trying to teach the recalcitrant prophet, who, having learned his lesson inside the whale's gut, prays,

Take me back. I taste it now; I taste the salt  
even of Ninevah and her people, and tears for them  
in gales, in flood. *It is enough*  
*that you regard them.*  
Save me, Lord.  
I've swallowed my pride and softened the bones  
of my skull until it's as supple as a gourd  
sprung new in the night.[13](#)

In Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, I also found guidance for writers. His protagonist has been looking for a job in New York City for months. During that time his landlady, Mary, has never dunned him for the rent he owes. But one day he returns to the boarding house and smells cabbage cooking, "the third time within the week," and:

...it dawned on me that Mary must be short of money.... This concentration upon cabbage was no

accident. Why hadn't I noticed?... What were Mary's problems anyway?... She had kept me going for months, yet I had no idea. What kind of man was I becoming?... *Suddenly I felt an urge to go look at her, perhaps I had really never seen her.*[14](#)

If we are to avoid stereotypes, we must have this urge to go look, to really see. In an interview published in this magazine, writer Bret Anthony Johnson says:

...(T)he fundamental job of the... writer (is) to fully and convincingly imagine the inner lives of others, and that requires profound and prolonged compassion.... I think you have to be able to understand what it would feel like to commit the most heinous crimes-you have to be able to reach that level of imagination... (O)nce a character is fully and deeply developed, regardless of what sins they commit, most readers will find it impossible not to love them.[15](#)

As writers, we can hardly do less. Our craft allows us-if we let it-to know what it means to love our neighbor, because we can *become* our neighbor. Even when that neighbor doesn't at first appear worthy of love.

In her novel, *A Changed Man*,[16](#) Francine Prose writes about characters who belong to two organizations, one a neo-Nazi group and the other a human rights organization. Not for a moment do we think Prose approves of a neo-Nazi world-view, yet her depictions of the members of the group are largely sympathetic; on the other hand, she portrays quite negatively the internal machinations of World Brotherhood Watch. Her skinhead protagonist, Vincent Nolan, gets sick of his dead-end life, and decides the best way to begin anew is to turn himself over to World Brotherhood Watch as a kind of poster-boy for reformation. Yet, despite the novel's title, at the end of the book he seems to be pretty much as he ever was: likeable, impulsive, self-effacing. The book isn't a diatribe, but an exploration of a man's attempts to find value in himself. Another character in the book, Meyer Maslow, the saintly founder of World Brotherhood Watch, yearns to do the same. Here's a man who's dedicated his life to making the world a better place. Yet he's prone to self-absorption and a willingness to use other people for his own ends. What's more, he's aware of and tormented by his own weaknesses. Under Prose's pen, both Vincent Nolan and Meyer Maslow-as well as the communities that have shaped them-transcend stereotype to become something human and humane.

The same is true of the characters and the community in Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz's novel, *Palace Walk*.[17](#) The women in the book live as virtual prisoners in their home, an isolation encouraged by their culture and enforced by Al-Sayyid Ahmad, the husband and father of the family. Al-Sayyid is a hypocrite. While espousing strict adherence to the Qur'an, he goes out carousing every night. He drinks liquor, shamelessly takes mistresses, and is self-righteously cruel to his wife. When he finds out she left the confines of their home and walked down to a nearby mosque, he throws her out of the house. Yet Al-Sayyid is not despicable. We can't just write him off as a creep. Before kicking out his wife, he waits for her to recover from a broken arm. He loves his children, and in a way, he loves his wife. He wants his family to have the nice things he never had as a boy. Our hearts break for him as, at the end of the book, he tries to think of a way to tell his wife that their son has been shot dead in the street.

Our craft allows us-if we let it-to know what it means to love our neighbor, because we can become our neighbor. Even when that neighbor doesn't at first appear worthy of love.... Under Prose's pen, both Vincent Nolan and Meyer Maslow-as well as the communities that have shaped them-transcend stereotype to become something human and humane.

"You make a better door than a window," my father used to say if I stood between his easy chair and the television set. A stereotype is a closed door. That door may contribute to a house's curb appeal, but it doesn't tell us much about what's going on inside. If we want to know, we can sneak up to the windows and take a peek, or better yet, we might knock on the door and walk in.

One writer who did this is William Albert Allard, whose essay on a Hutterite community appeared in a recent

issue of *National Geographic*.<sup>18</sup> Allard could have written: *The Hutterites are an insular religious group that move into neighborhoods, buy up large tracts of arable land, and shun contact with their neighbors. A small group of elders demand obedience to their every whim. Some brave young people, unable to bear their lives of oppression, break free and discover that there's more to life than slitting hogs' throats and hanging them up to bleed.*

This is what Allard actually wrote in one of his photo captions:

Men do the killing. One day they're chopping the heads off poultry, another they're butchering a hog, all for the largely self-sufficient colony. Everyone wears Old World dress, and they believe the Bible says that males are dominant. For all that the colony is up-to-date in farming know-how, buying the best equipment and making as much money as possible from selling grain, calves, and other farm products.<sup>19</sup>

And another caption:

All the things that keep Darius awake-how to pay the propane bill, how to split the colony, how to stay on his diet-fall away as another day for my friend ends early on his couch.<sup>20</sup>

What's the difference between Allard's descriptions of the Hutterites and mine? Notice that Allard doesn't use loaded words-like *insular* or *oppression*-that tell us what to think. Notice how he states the Hutterite belief that males are dominant without directly sharing his own opinion on the matter, then balances that potentially negative fact with a positive observation about their "up-to-date farming know-how." Notice how he draws us into the world of a single individual, and how he reminds us that Darius has the same kinds of problems we do-including how to stay on his diet. Notice, most of all, his affection for the people.

That affection is genuine. While Allard was visiting the community, he found out that his adult son, who was battling cancer, was within hours of death. Since he couldn't get home in time to say good-bye, Allard stayed in the community, finished his assignment, and did find comfort among the people he had come to love. Allard doesn't deny that the Hutterite community is inward-looking, or that obedience is considered a virtue, or that some young people leave. But Allard gets inside the community, and he also gets beyond it, into the hearts of individuals who make it their home.

Too often, though, anti-stereotypes are themselves stereotypes: the kind-hearted prostitute, the lascivious priest, the opera-loving street cop. So it's not enough to draw up lists of anti-stereotypical personality traits, hobbies, and hang-ups. We must strive for nothing less than capturing the human "incandescence,"...

As I read Allard's essay, I couldn't help but contrast his approach to that of another author who's written about a religious community: Jon Krakauer. His book *Under the Banner of Heaven* is anything but friendly toward the people he writes about. Nevertheless, he can be very funny, such as when he describes the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Staged on a historical site, a hillside near Palmyra, New York, the outdoor play tells the story of *The Book of Mormon*. I admit I laughed, too. But having attended the pageant last summer, I could compare my experience with the one he describes. According to Krakauer, my visit was "a pilgrimage" to "one of the holiest sites in Mormondom."<sup>22</sup> Yet on this holy site I was also participating in some sort of "Mormon jamboree."<sup>23</sup> If I'd met Krakauer there, he might have pegged me as one of those jamboreeing pilgrims. Yes, I happen to be a fifth-generation member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (i.e., "Mormon") and my husband happens to be the lay bishop of our congregation. However, we've lived in New York for five years and had never traveled to the nearby pageant, nor would we have gone last year except that it was a convenient spot to meet some old friends. Before the pageant started, I noticed crew members climbing up several lighting structures on either side of the hill; I think there were four on each side. Krakauer describes "a steel forest of fifty-foot light towers."<sup>24</sup> He also notes the "curious menage" of costumes including "headgear adorned with towering antlers."<sup>25</sup>

It's always easier to laugh at one's own community than to have someone else do it. Nevertheless, there was a basic disconnect between my experience of the pageant and Krakauer's description of it. The same can be said of the majority of his book. Krakauer's sarcastic language, his propensity for exaggeration, his juxtaposition of events to imply cause and effect, all serve a purpose that doesn't have much resemblance to the truth of Mormonism as I've known and lived it all my life. What bothers me is that readers think that Krakauer has done the research so what he says must be "true."

Krakauer's description of the pageant is the most innocuous example of his attitude and methods. His underlying aim, after all, is to support his thesis, stated on the cover of his bestseller: "On July 24, 1984, a woman and her infant daughter were murdered by two brothers who believed they were ordered to kill by God. The roots of their crime lie deep in the history of an American religion practiced by millions..."<sup>26</sup> You can almost hear the James Earl Jones voice-over.

Unlike Allard, Krakauer allows himself little more than contempt for the people he's writing about. While he lists many bibliographic sources, he uses no direct footnotes, and includes few interviews with members of the Faith. And so he relies on stereotypes, which sell books and are great talk-show fodder, but which, as I've said, not-so-humorously dehumanize the subject.

Wallace Stegner's book of essays, *Mormon Country*,<sup>27</sup> is superior to Krakauer's for many reasons. Stegner was not a member of the Church, nor did he view the culture or community with an uncritical eye. But he is admiring as well as critical, sympathetic as well as faultfinding. In reviewing their history, he says that during the prosperous Illinois years (in the 1840s), early Mormons became "arrogant," then adds, "But arrogance is the other side of insecurity. Their memories were branded with... stonings and tar-and-featherings, the massacre at Haun's Mill, the hatred and the murders."<sup>28</sup> Stegner selects a single pioneer to follow on his journey west. He quotes from Archer Walters' journal, on the morning a high wind blew down all the tents:

"I thought of going through needful tribulation, but it made me cross." Anybody but a Mormon would have had a stronger word than "cross" for it. And always there were the coffins. "June 15: coffin for William Lee, aged 12... June 17: coffin for Job Welling's son.... July 26: Brother Henry Walker struck by lightning in the very middle of the (wagon) train. Buried without coffin because no boards available."<sup>29</sup>

Archer Walters himself died of dysentery two weeks after he arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. Stegner says he chose Walters, "not because his story is the most exciting but because it is typical as any that can be found."<sup>30</sup> In reviewing the same troubling frontier history that Krakauer does, Stegner notes, "The Gentiles (i.e., nonMormons) from that day to this, have blown up (certain) exploits into ogriish proportions...",<sup>31</sup> and, "All this is history, and dead; the bitterness that once adhered to the Mormon question is sweetened and forgotten in all but the most unreasonable breasts..."<sup>32</sup> (and this was back in 1942). Stegner also devotes a chapter to "Mormon Trees," the Lombardy poplars, which he sees as "symbolic, somehow, of the planter's walking with God and his solidarity with his neighbors.... (The Trees) look Heavenward, but their roots are in earth. The Mormon looked toward Heaven, but his Heaven was a Heaven on earth..."<sup>33</sup>

When I mentioned to writer David Jauss that I'd found *Mormon Country* to be a less stereotyped portrayal of the community, he commented, "It figures that Stegner's a fiction writer." Nonfiction writers shouldn't be offended by that statement. I think what Jauss meant was that fiction writers are more accustomed to-or should be-imagining themselves in someone else's skin, or imagining a community from within. But this is a skill that's just as valuable to the writer of nonfiction as fiction.

For example, in the preface to his recent biography of Mormonism's founder, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling*, Richard Bushman says: "My aim has been to *imagine him* as fully as the record allows."<sup>34</sup> He admits, however, that he struggled with how to handle

a rhetorical problem (that) vexes anyone who writes about the thought of Joseph Smith.... Out of

respect for the varied opinions of readers, it would seem judicious to (say) "Joseph Smith *purportedly* received a revelation..." ...But there are reasons for not inserting a disclaimer every time a revelation is mentioned... The most important is that Joseph Smith did not think that way. The signal feature of his life was his sense of being guided by revelation. He experienced revelation like George Fox, the early Quaker, who heard the Spirit as "impersonal prophesy," not from his own mind but as "a word from the Lord as the prophets and apostles had." ... The skeptics in (Smith's) world must be allowed to speak, to be sure, and the contradictions and incongruities in (his) record have to be dealt with. But (my) book *attempts to think as Smith thought* and to reconstruct the beliefs of his followers *as they understood them*.[35](#)

Whether we're writing a biography, an essay, a novel, or a poem, the best way to avoid dehumanizing stereotypes is to try to see the world from within—from within the mind of a character; from within the heart of a community. This isn't to say we have to write in first person. Nor does it mean our own viewpoint won't be apparent. But it does mean our judgments will be as nuanced and complicated as the people we write about.

The virulent animosity people feel toward anyone who shirks work or accumulates personal property is enough to discourage most laziness and packrat tendencies. But what happens when this repudiation of personal possessions is applied to mental acquisitions? The unexpected downside of the utopia is a squelching of artistic and scientific innovation.

One way to avoid stereotype is to explore aspects of our characters that are at odds with the stereotype. For instance, in real life my husband, the Mormon bishop (any stereotypes come to mind?), is also a nuclear engineer. I taught him to drive, since he's from Santiago, Chile, where he didn't need or own a car. He loves catching toads and bugs for kids to look at. In a fictional story, the accountant might also be a punk rock fan; or the supermodel might be an authority on William Blake. Too often, though, anti-stereotypes are themselves stereotypes: the kind-hearted prostitute, the lascivious priest, the opera-loving street cop. So it's not enough to draw up lists of anti-stereotypical personality traits, hobbies, and hang-ups. We must strive for nothing less than capturing the human "incandescence," as Robinson put it:

the "I" whose predicate can be "love" or "fear" or "want," and whose object can be "someone" or "nothing" and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick."[36](#)

It might seem that capturing a person's essence is easier when we write about our own, familiar community. Mahfouz, for example, wrote from within his own Muslim Egyptian community. But I don't think that made it easier for him to avoid stereotypes. In fact, it might have made it more difficult. When we write from within a community, the risk is that we'll manipulate our characters' thoughts and actions to conform to community expectations, which leads to sanitized stereotypes. Or we might succumb to the contrary impulse, thumbing our nose at convention and creating anti-stereotypes in which every member of the community becomes some sort of generic fuddy-duddy or cad.

Then there's another kind of risk writers must face, not on the page, but in their lives: the risk of disapproval or rejection by members of their community. I'm not speaking here of political rejection, by which writers are exiled from their homelands, but the emotional rejection of their peers.

Ursula LeGuin indirectly illustrates this kind of rejection in her fantasy novel, *The Dispossessed*,[37](#) about a people who have abandoned the materialism and greed of their home planet to establish a utopian society on Anarres. They call themselves anarchists because their society has no laws, just a shared belief: *nothing belongs to you alone*. But there *is* a powerful governing force within the society—peer pressure. The virulent animosity people feel toward anyone who shirks work or accumulates personal property is enough to discourage most laziness and packrat tendencies. But what happens when this repudiation of personal



possessions is applied to *mental* acquisitions? The unexpected downside of the utopia is a squelching of artistic and scientific innovation. Shevek, a physicist who decides to leave the planet in order to explore his theories, is pelted with stones by angry neighbors as he climbs into the rocket ship bound for Urras. Yet free for the first time to develop his ideas in a supportive environment, Shevek is nauseated by the glut of *stuff* around him, the poverty he sees in the streets, and the realization that only a privileged few are allowed to develop their mental gifts. He returns to the home world he loves, although he realizes he'll never be fully complacent there, and will continue to be misunderstood by both worlds. This is the quandary for the writer who attempts to speak both *for* his other own community, as well as *to* the larger society.

When Maureen Whipple's novel about Mormon pioneers, *The Giant Joshua*,<sup>38</sup> was published in 1942, the early practice of polygamy had been an excommunicable offense for nearly half a century. Nevertheless, because she explores the topic in the book, many of her peers in the Church felt she had betrayed them to a hostile and derisive public. Others through the years have praised her for dealing openly with a difficult subject. She herself said in the preface:

Most of the Mormon pioneers are gone now and much of the gallant courage, the unconquerable faith of the old West goes with them... But I believe we detract from their achievement when we paint them with too white a brush. These people of whom I write are my people and I love them, but I believe that what they (accomplished) becomes even greater when we face the fact that they were human beings by birth and only saints by adoption."<sup>39</sup>

It is significant that despite Mormons' long experience with revilement from without, Whipple's plea for understanding was directed to her peers, not the wider society.

Krakauer's book demonstrates why, sixty-five years later, many Mormons are still loath to have *anyone* delve into a subject now linked to criminals and fringe extremists. On the other hand, Phyllis Barber (who has written extensively about the Mormon community, including in her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*<sup>40</sup>) points out, "...the agents I've encountered often think (a) story is too narrow, too small, unless, of course, it focuses on polygamy and Mark Hoffman and something sensational like the banning of nude statues from BYU. They don't seem as interested in the intricacies of what it means to betray/try-to-live-to-perfection the Mormon standard, for want of a better phrase."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, historians like Lyman Bushman, as well as other essayists and writers, have stepped forward to tell the story from the inside-although I'm afraid their books lack the negative, sensationalist spin that would make them bestsellers.

We may be tempted to capitalize on the most salacious or demeaning stereotypes of our community to sell books. This is the kind of exploitative stereotyping that Percival Everett rails against... in the real world, the "Street Lit" genre sells very well.

Which brings me to another insidious danger of writing from within one's community. We may be tempted to capitalize on the most salacious or demeaning stereotypes of our community to sell books. This is the kind of exploitative stereotyping that Percival Everett rails against in his novel, *Erasure*.<sup>42</sup> The cover of the book shows a grinning African-American boy holding a toy pistol to his head. Somehow the fact that it's a toy gun makes the gesture no less appalling. A red X, as though written in blood, partially obscures the title.

The book's protagonist, avant-garde novelist Thelonious Ellison, has a penchant for writing esoteric novels set in ancient Greece. But when he visits a Borders bookstore, he finds his latest book not in the Literature or Contemporary Fiction section, but in African American Studies, despite the fact that "the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph."<sup>43</sup>

Filled with indignation, he stumbles onto a prominent display of the runaway best-seller by Juanita Mae Jenkins, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, which begins, "My fahvre be gone since time I's borned and it be just me an' my momma an' my baby brover Juneboy." Thelonious says, "I closed the book and thought I was going to

throw up."[44](#)

Unfortunately, this kind of book is no figment of Everett's imagination: in the real world, the "Street Lit" genre sells very well. In her recent study of the phenomenon, writer Erica Williams laments that the market is "saturat(ed) . . . with inadequate and debasing portrayals of blacks."[45](#) She decries the fact that:

...African-American literary culture is being dominated by books which feature criminality and sexualized depictions of hood life in the ghetto.... Not every black male is a pimp, thug or deadbeat dad. Not every black female idolizes drug dealers and prostitutes her body and soul. While African-American literary movements of the past such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement uplifted the African-American community and addressed the plight of urban black America, Street Lit offers no panoramic view of the black experience, only depicting the lowest denominators of the culture.[46](#)

The fictional Thelonious isn't the only one sickened by the stereotypes perpetuated by Street Lit, but his response is unusual. He channels his disgust into a parody based on the Juanita Mae Jenkins model, a parody in which he includes all the ugliest stereotypes he can come up with. He calls his book *My Pafology*, and asks his agent to send it out under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh. The novel is offered an advance of \$600,000. Nobody "gets" that the novel is a parody. Nobody "gets" that he's lambasting "an industry so eager to seek out and sell... demeaning and soul-destroying drivel."[47](#) Although he knows he's selling out, Thelonious accepts the advance because he needs to put his mother in a nursing home. But he insists on changing the title to a certain word that begins with F, and still nobody bats an eye. The book is hailed as deep. It becomes a best-seller. Apparently nothing is too shocking for the reading public-or the critics either. They call it "a true, raw, gritty work."[48](#) The book is awarded the country's most prestigious literary prize.

Meanwhile, in his real life, Thelonious's mother is fading into Alzheimer's. He attempts a romance, which fails when he discovers the woman likes his book. His sister, a medical doctor, is murdered by an anti-abortion protester. His housekeeper, who has lived with the family for fifty years, finds love and gets married. His brother, who has recently come out, won't believe that Thelonious accepts that he's gay, and stops returning his calls. The truth of Thelonious's "ordinary" life is so much more interesting, deep, gritty, true than the sensational "truths" of black life that comprise his parody.

*Erasure* is about how truth is erased, both the truth of racial identity and the truth of one man's existence. It is about the poisonous, soul-destroying result of exploitative stereotyping.

Immediately after reading *Erasure*, I picked up Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. (*Of course it wasn't by accident that Percival Everett's novelist is named Ellison, or that his title invokes the same lack of visibility.*) *Maybe if I hadn't just read Erasure*, I wouldn't have been shocked to find in Ellison's book the kinds of exaggerated stereotypes that Everett deplors. I recognized the degenerate sharecropper, the toady college president, the anti-union laborer, the corrupt activist, even the Invisible Man himself, as caricatures, not people. I told myself, "I must be wrong! *Invisible Man* is known as the classic description of the black experience in America!" Even the book jacket of *Erasure* proclaims that its "anger and brilliance... puts you in mind of *Invisible Man*." Yet I found the two books to be antithetical. Everett wants us to see the human being behind the stereotype. Ellison uses stereotypes to illustrate societal blight. Earlier, I quoted from his book to show how we writers should learn to look, to really *see* the people in our stories. But when it comes right down to it, Ellison never lets us see the landlady, Mary, as anything more than a kindhearted, female blur. Again, this is partly an issue of craft; but mostly it's a matter of mindset. Ellison was more interested in the symbolic or representative nature of his characters than in their individual reality. *Invisible Man* isn't so much a novel as a philosophical treatise. This is not to say that Ellison didn't have important ideas about society, racism and human nature, nor that in 1947 his book didn't have a powerful impact. But how much more powerful, how much more meaningful would his book be today if his characters lived and breathed on the page? Instead they, and their tribulations, seem passe, if not lifeless.

But the ravages of human invisibility live on. Now we're in the age of *Erasure*. Racism, misogyny, and prejudice are no longer overtly acceptable in our society, yet all around us we see dehumanization at work: in the pornography that gluts the Internet, the glorification of violence that passes for entertainment, the media's ho-hum response to government-sanctioned torture, and the vapid and sensationalist bestsellers that fill our bookstores.

I think again of the blood-spattered X on the cover of *Erasure*. Caricatures and stereotypes may seem as harmless as toy guns, but they do something devastating and immutable: they *erase* the human soul.

Toward the end of the book, Everett indicates where his central image of erasure comes from. In 1953, the artist Robert Rauschenberg took a drawing by Willem de Kooning, erased it, signed it, and sold it as his own. In the novel, Thelonious imagines a conversation between the two artists:

Rauschenberg: Well, it took me forty erasers, but I did it.

de Kooning: Did what?

Rauschenberg: Erased it. The picture you drew for me.

de Kooning: You erased my picture?

Rauschenberg: Yes....

de Kooning: Look at what you've done to my picture.

Rauschenberg: Nice job, eh? It was a lot of work erasing it. My wrist is still sore.... I've already sold it for ten grand.

de Kooning: You sold my picture?

Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing.[49](#)

Maybe the root of certain evils *is* money. But worse than selling out to make a buck is doing it for free-and not having enough empathy or imagination to know the difference.

Now, having written this essay-having spent a great deal of time thinking about stereotypes, considering the stereotypes of my own community, and finding literary stereotypes where I least expected them-I find that I can answer Mary Gordon's assertion that *If your primary motivation in life is to be moral, you don't become an artist. You do good works*. My answer is this: as writers, our moral work, our *good works*, are carried out one letter of the alphabet at a time. And whenever we sit down to write, we'd better be creating human beings, not erasing them. Not snuffing "the incandescence in them," the ineffable, uncontainable, almost unsayable "flame on a wick."

## AWP

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