

It Is My Hope That glub glub glub

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Every now and then I find myself involved in reading a large stack of manuscripts---(or once, it was finished books, when I was a judge for the National Book Awards)---and I find myself wondering how publishers do it day after day after day. pBut I guess the answer is that you make your way through them by maintaining the hope and maybe the expectation that the next one will be something absolutely wonderful.

The manuscripts I am currently reading are by unpublished writers, and I am reading them as part of the panel of judges for an award to be given this spring. A few are awful, but most are not, and I am hoping that any minute now one will leap out at me because of its brilliance and wit and eloquence.

But something is vaguely troubling me. pEach manuscript is accompanied by a cover letter describing the writer's experience, education, and background, and usually with some background about the particular manuscript they have submitted. It's helpful, for example, if you are reading "The Curse of the Narwahl," a mystery set in an aquarium, to know that the author has worked for forty years as a marine biologist.p

But it sets my teeth on edge to read further something like, "It is my hope that this book will teach children to care more about the environment."

Okay, I made up that title and that author and that book. As far as I know there is no aquarium mystery in my stack of manuscripts, though if something called "The Curse of the Narwahl" shows up, I will have to apologize, and to hire a lawyer, I guess.

But what HAS shown up again and again, and will continue to, I suspect, is the sentence in the cover letter that uses the word "teach" or learn." pAs in, "Readers will learn that bullying can have serious consequences.." or "This story teaches young readers how grandparents are a wonderful source of.." pp

Okay for non-fiction. For textbooks. pFor sermons and Sunday School lessons.

But please, not for novels. p

I often receive emails from kids, usually for school assignments, with questions like "What did you intend for readers to get out of (title)?" or "What is the message of this book?"

And sometimes I sigh and try to reply with an answer that they can use in their term paper or exam. pBut what I really want to say is: I simply wanted the reader to enjoy the story. To love the characters. To care about what happens. To be scared, or sad, or angry, and to worry. To be excited in the middle of the book, and relieved at the end.

I don't want there to be a message. Or a moral. Or a learning experience.

I acquired pinformation about poison from Madame Bovary, and a pretty good understanding of British country-house life from Bride

shead Revisited

and

Atonement

. pBut I didn't learn that infidelity was ill-advised or that religion was pervasive or that veracity and guilt were entwined, encompassing things. pl simply became Emma pand Sebastian and Bryony for those all-absorbing hours, and I reveled in the mastery of language and characterization, and I probably learned things about myself.

I don't know why so many would-be writers of fiction for young people feel as if they must impart Wisdom and Great Truth. p

Sigh. Now: back to the narwahl, whose curse is that his reader is going to drown in good works and sanctimoniousness.

I am such a grouch today.

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