

Absolutely!

Chuck Domehead never goes anywhere alone, except the potted meats shop on 12th Street. "I never go anywhere alone!" he proudly proclaims, inserting his thumbs beneath the waistband of his polyester pants and puffing out his chest. "Except Maynard's Mushy Meats. I always go there alone ... except when Mother visits."

Chuck is an absolutist—

"But within limits!"

Thank you, Chuck. And that brings us to today's topic: absolutists.

Here are just a sampling of absolutist statements I carefully curated from the vast imaginary crowd of absolutists that occupied my front stoop earlier this afternoon:

"I'm a Raw Foods absolutist, except carrots."

"I'm a 'Refer Madness' absolutist, but marijuana should be legalized."

"I'm a Graowf's Wisdom absolutist, as long as I agree with him."

"I'm an anti-clown absolutist, except when they bleed."

"I'm a Freedom of Peanut Cookery absolutist, but not boiled."

I've never seen a clown bleed. I don't think clowns have blood inside them, just a rainbow of liquid latex. Or maybe just rainbows. Or gas.

My 2nd cousin's aunt, on my mother's dad's uncle's side, once punctured a clown. She decorated a cake.

When Chuck goes to Maynard's Mushy Meats, with or without his

mother, he always takes a list. Chuck is a chronic list maker. He believes that a list ensures the best possible outcome to any outing. "I always make a list, except when I don't need one!" Maynard fills Chuck's reusable grocery bag with the meats on Chuck's list while Chuck waits. "I'm a Go Green absolutist! Well, except when it comes to the A/C. My palmist says I have Thermal Cloud Syndrome, so any warmth is extremely uncomfortable – debilitating even – for me. I'm like the planet. That's why I'm a Go Green absolutist!"

We did not eat the cake, even though it didn't go stale in the mail.

Chuck is also a moral relativist. "I believe that morality is absolutely relative. Right and wrong is different for each person, except for a few obvious things, like murder and cutting in line. Those things are always wrong, because of science."

The cake was pretty.

Science has yet to entirely fathom the mysterious depths of clown humor. People laugh at clowns, but the reasons why people find clowns – or anything – funny are not entirely clear, though Carl von Haigerbund, imminently a psychologist, has posited a theory (in his 2nd go at his doctoral dissertation) that it has to do with the uncanny quality of clowns to remind every living person of his/her father. Doug Stramboleeny, astrophysicist, asserts that it is due to social peer pressure, where the preconceived, even if false, cultural notion that clowns are funny causes people to laugh so they don't look foolish to the guy in the next seat with the chili stain on his "Breadboards and Circuitses" t-shirt. "Dr. Stramboleeny has PhD's in astrophysics and physics, so he's an expert in sociology, too," Chuck explains, "but he's wrong, because of biology."

Chuck finds clowns funny because of evolution. "Well, sure,

there doesn't *seem* to be a survival advantage to finding clowns funny, but once you toss a few million years in the recipe, well ... there you go!" Chuck believes the human species is the result of natural selection guided evolution. "I'm an Evolution Absolutist! Except for abstract reason. That can't possibly be a product of pseudo-random mutation, or we couldn't trust even our theories about evolution. But thank the universe we've had all that time, or where would we be then? Still sucking the slimy skin off the primordial ocean, I'd say!"

Get your good-natured elbow out of my ribs, there, Chuck. "Sorry." It's OK.

Chuck explains, "Certain things are so clearly non-negotiable, that they must be treated with absolutitude. You know, like $1+1=2$ and experts are always right – well, except Dr. Stramboleeny – and, ... uh ... $2+2=4$, and ... oceans! You know, stuff like that."

I asked Chuck, "So, what sets those absolutes in stone, so to speak, would you say?"

Chuck chuckles. "I'm an absolutist," he says, "except when I'm not."

Here, Chuck, have some cake.

Heaven and Hell

I listened to a pair of homilies posted by Fr. Andrew Dickinson, one on [hell](#) and one on [heaven](#).

Now, I've thought about heaven and hell a lot, and I know they are spiritual rewards and sufferings more than material. I've

heard the many cliché definitions, and I've tried to make sense of phrases like "one with God" and "total separation from God" and honestly they are no more useful than the words "heaven" and "hell". One can imagine this or that about them, but distilling it down to something the mind can grasp has traditionally been, for me at least, elusive.

Fr. Andrew's homilies gave me a couple of words, though, one for each, that I could use like peg hooks, to hang everything upon in a way my mind can wrangle with it all. I thought I'd share.

Heaven, the one homily asserts is "peace." The kind of peace we all long for: where we want the right things and we want them for the right reasons, and we want to feel them in the right way. It is the peace of perfect relationship with all that is. It is the state of being refined into the perfect manifestations of who we are and being accepted and appreciated unconditionally for it, and doing likewise for all else, which also is refined into the perfect manifestation of what it is. It is the peace of harmony.

Hell, the other homily asserts is "hate". The homily puts it "saturation with hate". I thought, after I had listened, "can it be that simple?" I thought about demons. It is their past time, among others, to foment hate. Hate destroys, and out of their envy of God and man, demons seek to destroy. Envy is the longing to deprive the other of something we desire which another possesses and we do not. Whether the envious one obtains it, or even could, is not important – someone who envies only wants that the other should not have the it that is the subject of the longing. Envy requires hatred. It requires that the thing longed for be so consuming that depriving the other of it, even by destroying it, is deemed better than the other having it. And so Satan, in his envy of God, seeks to destroy what God has made.

But demons have a power to manipulate thoughts and feelings in

humans. Deprived of any protection from God, they could fill a person, mind and soul, with hatred. They can inspire feelings associated with hatred, such as envy and anger and pride. They can taint thoughts with hatred, consuming even pleasant memories with negativity to the point of making them unpleasant. Freed from the restraints of God's hand, demons can pit human souls against one another with the bitterest, cruelest, most utterly hateful malice of which humans are capable, which is, as history has demonstrated, unfathomable. Demons could, if not held at bay, douse a human soul with hatred to the point that it is entirely and totally saturated with hate.

And this, where all beings and all things are saturated with hate and the malice that results, is hell.

In the Lord's Prayer, aka "the Our Father ...", there is this line "Thy Kingdom come." The Kingdom of God is, in the words of St. Paul, "righteousness and peace and joy". But what if one's desire is not the Kingdom of God, if it is in fact to reject the Kingdom of God? The absence of the Kingdom of God is none other than the utter absence of God. There is only one such place: hell.

Also in the Lord's Prayer, is the line, "Thy Will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." The Will of God is the Kingdom of God, Heaven, the Kingdom of Peace, throughout the universe. "Thy Will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven" is the petition to God that that which is in Heaven be made present here and now on Earth. One who refuses to pray for God's will on Earth desires a Kingdom without Peace, and a total rejection of God and God's Will is a total rejection of that Kingdom. The only such place is hell, and those who refuse, desire hell on Earth – an Earth filled not with peace, but with hate.

As I thought about it, I could not help think of the brouhaha that has arisen through this past election cycle, and

especially after Donald Trump was elected. Many people, on both "sides" are fomenting hate. Clinton supporters are calling names, burning effigies, destroying property, assaulting people. Trump supporters are calling names, gloating vindictively, ridiculing, and (intentionally or not) egging anti-Trump sentiment along. Clinton supporters are envious of Trump supporters, with all the hate that accompanies envy. Trump supporters are vengeful, with all the hatefulness that accompanies vengeance. I am deeply saddened by what is happening. The demons are ecstatic, in whatever way demons feel ecstasy. People are not looking toward peace at all. They are even planning how to act in hatefulness for years to come, acts that fall squarely in the realms of envy and vengeance. All that remains for the Deceiver and Prince of Lies, Satan, to do is fear-monger people into thinking their behavior is good and justified, and he is doing it quite effectively in the guise of "rights" and "policy" and "what-if's". But there is nothing good in hate. Hate is never just.

I'm not going to try to analyze it all and say this is why or that is why. I do not take sides in this battle of hate against hate. Both "sides" have offered their prayer: "My kingdom and not Thine come. My will and not Thine be done on Earth." God is Love. Rejecting God's Kingdom and God's Will for mankind results only in the antithesis of love: hate. And a world filled only with hate, saturated with hate, is hell.

Scripture, Tradition, Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell

So, I ran across this article on the moral argument for Hell. The problem today is that people are wont to say one of:

- there is no Hell
- no human will go to Hell
- because there is a Hell where God would send people, God does not exist

The article claimed "Doing a limited Google Search of the Internet I wasn't able to readily discover a succinct, yet comprehensive, treatment of this subject. Therefore, I think one is called for here." It then went on and on building a whole case for Hell and whatnot out of Scripture. It had some fine points I wrinkled my nose at, but wasn't terribly bad until it cited the author's exchange on the Internet with someone which initiated the whole article:

Some person: "Did Jesus descend into hell to watch as people were being tormented with fire and brimstone, yes or no?"

Author: "No he didn't. Could you PLEASE cite the BIBLICAL reference for "Jesus descending into hell"

[emphasis, the author of the article]

Later in the article itself, the author said, "the idea of Purgatory was an invention of the Roman Catholic Church. It is a completely unBiblical concept and actually an anti-Biblical concept since it teaches that sinners go there to be purged of unrepented sins, when in fact, no-one but Jesus pays for sins"

This is where I stopped reading, because it was clear the author, despite a PhD, has not done his homework.

I want to cover four things:

- Tradition
- purgatory
- Jesus' descent into Hell
- what Hell is

It won't take long.

TRADITION

There is no Christian denomination that practices Scripture Alone. None. If a churchy person says to you, "Scripture alone is the sole source of truth," run away. Sola Scriptura is the doctrine that states that the Christian (Protestant) Scriptures are the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine and practice. To this I make five points:

- The Scriptures do not claim that the Scriptures are the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine (or practice).
- Different Christian denominations have different lists of which books are a part of the Scriptures.
- No two denominations that claim Sola Scriptura have the same set of doctrines.
- There is no Christian denomination that does not have a governing body that interprets the Scriptures to derive instruction on matters of doctrine and practice.
- The Scriptures were completed after the Christian church was established and written by the church, not the other way 'round.

In other words, it is the Scriptures as interpreted by the doctrinal authority of the church that acts as the authority in matters of doctrine and practice for a given congregation.

And how does the governing authority of the local church interpret Scripture? Through the lens of its theological tradition. Sola Scriptura is one such tradition, originating with Martin Luther. Some point to 2 Timothy 3:15: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof ..." as Scriptural evidence for Sola Scriptura, but of course, it isn't. The text does not say "Only Scripture ...,"

it says "All Scripture ..." – in any language you choose to translate it.

In any case, the only supreme authority in matters of doctrine and practice is God Himself. Scripture and the Church are merely messengers.

So Scripture is authoritative only when interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit teaches through – you guessed it – the Church. Scripture is a tool to add in understanding the Will of God and for communicating it. It is not the end-all, be-all singular source of Truth.

Here's the kicker: when a local church says, "Sola Scriptura!" it implies the corollary "There is no interpretive authority of Scripture!" Scripture, in that case, is useless for teaching, for reproof, etc., etc. You can't expound on Scripture while under the restraint of Sola Scriptura. The only way in which you can use Scripture to back doctrine and practice is to acknowledge that Scripture must be interpreted through a sacred Tradition that is endowed by God with equal authority to Scripture. Only then can Scripture even hope to be profitable for anything. A church that denies that can make up whatever it wants, even teaching heresy through mis-interpretation of Scripture.

PURGATORY

Purgatory is a doctrine taught mainly through Tradition. We've established why Tradition is as relevant as Scripture, but there are Scriptural references to Purgatory. The most obvious are in books that Protestants reject (e.g., 2 Maccabees), but here's a reference from one every denomination I've ever encountered includes in its canon:

1 Corinthians 3:15 "If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire."

We Catholics call that passing as through fire “Purgatory.”

So when the author of the article I read says Purgatory is an invention of the Roman Church and isn't Biblical, he's not got a bean to stand on. In fact he owes us beans, because he is also wrong about what the Church actually teaches. He says the Catholic Church teaches that “sinners go there to be purged of unrepented sins.” That is not true. Sinners pass through Purgatory to be cleansed from sins of which they are repentant but have not received formal absolution. There is also a concept of temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven that must be paid. Punishment is a bad word to use, by the way, in my mind for all this. Yes, it is a punishment, but it isn't like a spanking, it's a purification – a means of purging the effect of sin from the soul, so to speak. It's never pleasant. No one wants to do penance. But punishment hasn't got exactly the right connotation.

So Purgatory is a purification process. It's the passing through the gates – the gates opened by (and only by) Jesus. It's the putting on of the white robe, so to speak, before entering the court of Heaven.

JESUS' DESCENT INTO HELL

First, most of us know this doctrine from the Apostles' creed, which originated sometime probably before 400AD and is accepted by many (most) mainstream Christian denominations and probably many others that aren't so mainstream. It says: “He was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead.” The “dead” is understood to be the place where the dead awaited the opening of the gates of Heaven. In most cases it is considered to be a spiritual waiting room just outside the main rings of Hell. That's an oversimplification, but the point is that it is considered a part of Hell where souls of the righteous were waiting until Christ's work on the cross re-opened the gates of Heaven to mankind.

But even if the author's church poo-poo's the Apostles' Creed,

or like some Methodists leaves out the Hell line, then there are Scriptures that refer to Jesus' descent:
e.g., Ephesians 4:9, Acts 2:24, 1 Peter 3:19, Zechariah 9:11.

So, there are those BIBLICAL references the author wanted.

HELL

The author never actually got to what Hell is. This is the part I always find amusing about protestant know-it-all's: they poo-poo the Catholic Church and then go off to try to show what the Church has already worked out in great detail. They get really proud of themselves for coming up with something nice, tidy little demonstration of their point. But when you stand their magnum opus up against the Catholic teaching on exactly the same thing, the protestants really look frightfully immature. You just can't start a church and whip up some doctrine out of Scripture and expect to have a fully-fleshed, consistent, coherent theological system like the Catholics who have been working it out for 1,983 years.

So why is there a Hell and why does God send people there? Let's trace this from Genesis:

- God drops Adam in Paradise so suited to him that he can live there naked. God gives him super intelligence and direct access to Heaven and then makes him a woman designed specifically for him with the same gifts of intelligence and access to Heaven as well as beauty and no clothes. God tells them to live there and be happy and to be fruitful and multiply (we know what that means!).
- God says all that is yours so long as you don't eat of that one tree in the middle of the Garden. Eat that, and you will die.
- Adam and Eve decide all they've been given isn't good enough, so they eat the fruit.
- God, who never backs out of a bargain, holds Adam and Eve to it. So now they have to die. To die, they must not be allowed to eat from the Tree of Life, so out they go, nor may they have access to Heaven, where there can be no death. I

could go on and on about the logical consequences of opening themselves up to death.

– God, who is ever merciful, uses their fallen state to initiate a plan to restore them to Grace without ever acting in contradiction to the Justice his initial bargain demands.

– Jesus' redemptive act (I won't go into the details about how I see the deep magic involved that makes it really, concretely work) re-opens the gates of Heaven and enables resurrection of the human body.

That last point is the key to understanding Hell. Without Jesus, the only place Adam and Eve could end up would be Hell. The breaking of the covenant in the Garden demanded it. They chose to go where God would not walk with them.

Hell is the place where Adam and Eve would go were it not for Jesus. Heaven is the place only open to those in a state of perfect Grace. All who have faith that Jesus is the the one and only hope for mankind's access to Heaven live their lives striving toward that faith. Those who do not believe that Jesus is the doorway to Heaven, or who do not believe that there is an afterlife (and thus have no need for Jesus) make the choice that Adam and Eve made in the Garden: they choose to accept the consequences of death.

So Hell is not a place that God **sends** people. Hell is a foregone destiny from which God **rescues** people. Heaven and Hell are not about God's **punishments**. They are about God's **mercy**.

The author of the article never really seemed to get that.

Heed Jesus' signals and you get to take the exit: to Heaven. Don't heed Jesus and you stay the Just highway of humankind: to Hell.

All of this hinges on individual faith: "believe and be saved" is a very theologically packed phrase – too packed, perhaps, which is why it sounds trite – but it is very precisely

accurate. And it really is that simple. People are always over complicating it.

ONE LAST THING

Oh, and by the way, the author quotes a lot of Catholics, both Church Fathers and recent orthodox Roman Catholics like G. K. Chesterton, so, well ...

Lost and Found and the Story Spine

Today I started work on the second draft of my first novel. The first task I've decided to undertake is to review and revise the plot structure.

Recently I took a little course offered by the fine folks at [One Story](#). Ann Napolitano did a five day course entitled "Lost and Found: A New Way of Looking at Plot", which I highly recommend, by the way, if she offers it again. In the discussion forum for the course, I learned about [the "Story Spine" concept](#), which Ken Adams invented as a way to assist actors in improvisational theater and Pixar included in its "rules" for story development. I have begun my re-plotting effort by combining the technique Ann introduced with the Story Spine approach.

Lost and Found approaches plot from the perspective of what the protagonist is "missing" and how the search for it develops and resolves. In a sense, you take the journey of discovery with the characters in the story as they seek to deal with the conflict by examining what it is that has them off-kilter to begin with. The "missing" thing can be a person, a thing, a feeling, ... anything.

The Story Spine goes like this, where you fill in the blanks:

Once upon a time _____,
until one day _____,
because of that _____,
because of that _____,
...
until finally _____,
and ever since that day _____.

I think in a novel you probably get some iterations over the because of that.../until finally sequences, but that's neither here nor there. It's a tool for grasping the bare minimum sequence of cause and effect that make the story.

What I noticed as I thought about Lost and Found and the Story Spine is how the quest for what is missing follows the Spine. So, identify what is missing, put the protagonist's paws on ground at "until one day" – the point at which it goes missing or can't be ignored – and your off and running. I tried it with a couple of short stories and it worked, so I figured I'd give it a go with the novel.

The novel is called "The Last Tanuki". It takes place on a distant planet called Tereathon where the human/animal genetic hybrid inhabitants live deep beneath the uninhabitable surface in gigantic caverns. The story centers on Aria, a tanuki hybrid. She's a young adult and has been out on her own a few years.

The first thing to do was to identify what was missing. They are several:

- Aria's parents went missing when she was a pup (parents missing)
- Aria's step-parents are killed in the first chapter (step-parents missing)
- An attempt on Aria's life is made in the first chapter (Aria's security/safety is missing)

- Aria's Uncle Cato, who made unwelcome and inappropriate advances toward Aria when she was 13, shows up in league with those who made the attempt on her life, turning Aria's emotional state upside down (Aria's peace of mind is missing)
- Aria pretends to be a cross between two different genetic families of hybrids because tanuki are viewed with superstitious suspicion by others and are sometimes attacked. Crosses, though, are considered inferior, so she faces some kind of discrimination either way. (Aria is missing the acceptance and equality others have. She is also missing companionship)
- Those who made the attempt on her life are apparently looking for a map they think she has through her father (the map is missing)

Those are the main things. The goal of Lost and Found is to narrow that to the most important. I went one step further, though, and asked: what is missing? what does Aria believe is missing?

I have trouble with theme in stories. I could tell throughout the first draft that this book was struggling to find its message ([Dorothy Sayers would have said](#) I was not tuned in with the Idea). Anyway, as I thought about what was missing and why, a theme began to emerge: children suffering for the sins of their parents. This is actually most of the characters' problems, so I used it as a lens to examine what was missing, and one thing popped out above the others: the struggle for acceptance. Aria's situation in that context is nearly a microcosm of the entire world of Tereathon.

So it was pretty clear that the most important missing thing is acceptance of crosses and tanuki. The rest of the missing things just serve to provide events for Aria to deal with the real issue: discrimination and its affect on her. However, Aria only sees that as a fact of life in her world as a whole, and she grew up knowing nothing else, so she can't really see

the forest for the trees. To Aria, the most important thing immediately missing is that map: only that can free her from the terror of her life. Minus the immediate threats, Aria would say the most important thing missing is her parents. Their motorcar was found having crashed, and while they are presumed dead, their bodies were never discovered. Aria, however, has always held out an impossible hope they might not be dead, though by the time the book takes place, it has been 16 years and her hope is almost extinguished.

That isn't a perfect analysis, but it's good for now. It provides a backdrop for the Story Spine.

Now in the original sequence of events, the story opens with the threat on Aria's life. The other precursors are revealed in changes in point of view and in flashbacks. I didn't like those very much, and by reaching back into the Story Spine of Aria's life: that is, just by starting off my thinking with "Once upon a time ... until one day ..." a whole world opened up. Another lesson I've heard in numerous places is to start your story deeper in on round two. I think a better way to put that is, consider starting your story some-when else. In this case I looked at it as Aria's story, and since the map and Aria's parents figure so prominently, maybe that is a good place to start. I wrote that, the original, and several other possible starting points down, and it was clear after a short time that the one that offered the most cohesive plot was to start with the events of her parents disappearance, but just as an action sequence that hints at the map and something of life on Tearathon. Given that point in time and space, I now had a "Once upon a time ..." and an "until one day ..." all based on what Aria is missing and believes is missing:

Once upon a time, there was a tanuki/human genetic hybrid girl named Aria who lived with other animal/human hybrids known as animalians on a distant planet called Tereathon. Tanuki were treated with superstitious suspicion, and sometimes violence, and cross-hybrid family offspring were held in disdain. The

surface of Tereathon was uninhabitable and for untold generations animalians had dwelled beneath the surface of the planet in massive underground caverns. The girl's parents went missing, their car found wrecked and abandoned, and were presumed dead. She was raised by step-parents who were not tanuki and thought it safer for her if she hid the patterns in her fur and passed herself off as a cross rather than live as a tanuki. This is how she grew up and the habits she developed.

Every day Aria went about her business, trying to keep a low profile so as not to offend "normal" animalians. She was content to just live quietly and get by in a world that treated her as less than equal and forced her to repress any expression of her true self.

Until one day her step-parents were killed in a suspicious factory fire and her uncle, who had molested her when she was 13, showed up, and she began receiving threats on her life along with demands for a map that had allegedly passed to her through her father.

Because of that, she discovered a connection between her father and an animalian who lived in town. She went to see him (Graowf) and his friend (Prox) to learn if they knew anything about her father and the alleged map.

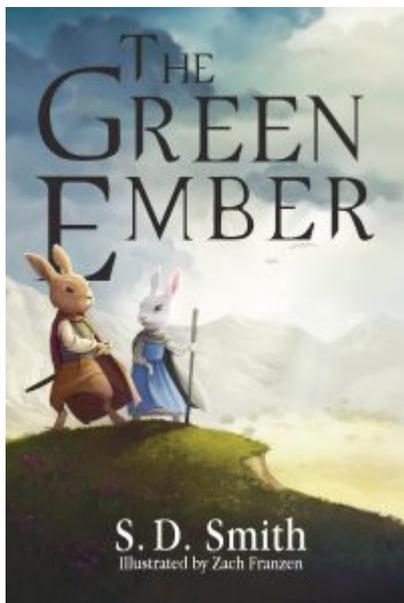
Because of that, Graowf ...

And I'll stop there so I don't reveal anything. I will probably go back and revise the Spine, cutting it down to its core – it seems to wordy. I'll also construct a detailed outline that follows and that I'll use for writing the second draft. Regardless of what I do, you see how the process is working for me. Lost and Found and the Story Spine seem to me quite useful tools for working a story plot. I'll post more on my thoughts about them as my novel progresses.

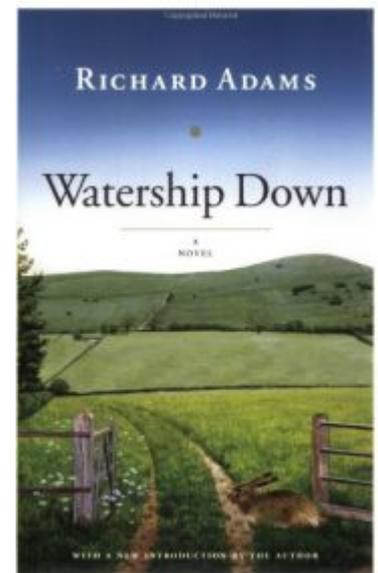
What tools do you use to help you develop story plots?

A Tale of Two Rabbit Tales

I'm in the midst of reading The Green Ember by S. D. Smith to some of my kids. At the same time, I am reading Watership Down by Richard Adams to myself. I've not read Watership Down before, but you may have. The Green Ember is a very recent book.



Both of these books are novels about anthropomorphic rabbits, but they reflect two contrasting approaches. The Green Ember rabbits are like humans with rabbit bodies. The Watership Down rabbits, on the other hand, are like rabbits with rudimentary human intellect.



Both of these books are very good, and I'm enjoying them a great deal. I may write a quick review of The Green Ember in the future, but for now I just want to share something from Watership Down.

It's a scene where the rabbits are being pursued and must cross a stream, but some are too weak to swim. One amongst them (Blackberry) sometimes demonstrates flashes of imagination, such as only humans have, and this scene is the first where his ability saves them:

Hazel had no idea what he meant. Blackberry's flood of

apparent nonsense only seemed to draw tighter the mesh of danger and bewilderment. As though Bigwig's angry impatience, Pipkin's terror and the approaching dog were not enough to contend with, the cleverest rabbit among them had evidently gone out of his mind. He felt close to despair.

I thought the feeling of despair that Hazel's fear and bewilderment generated out of an idea that he had no capacity to comprehend is a very insightful observation on Adams' part. It's a fear of something that to Hazel is supernatural, pushing him beyond his ability to bear. A few paragraphs later Blackberry has gotten Pipkin and Fiver onto a piece of wood and wants to push him out to float him across, but he isn't strong enough.

No one obeyed him. All squatted, puzzled and uncertain. Blackberry buried his nose in the gravel under the landward edge of the board and raised it, pushing. The board tipped. Pipkin squealed and Fiver lowered his head and splayed his claws. Then the board righted itself and drifted a few feet onto the pool with the two rabbits hunched upon it, rigid and motionless. It rotated slowly and they found themselves staring back at their comrades.

"Frith and Inle!" said Dandelion. "They're sitting on the water! Why don't they sink?"

"They're sitting on the wood and the wood floats, can't you see?" said Blackberry. "Now we swim over ourselves. Can we start, Hazel?"

Even seeing it, Blackberry's comrades can't understand what is happening. They can't make the connection between floating wood and things on top of floating wood not sinking. The situation is further demonstrated by Hazel's response:

During the last few minutes Hazel had been as near to losing

his head as he was ever to come. He had been at his wits end ... He still could not understand what had happened ...

I was reminded of Jack London's story, "White Fang", where we are invited to a brilliant insight into the mind of a wolf-dog and the relentless, ruthless law that drives everything in his world: eat or be eaten.

I have often contemplated the possible connection between immortal, spiritual souls, imagination, and rational self-awareness and moral thought. I think more and more that they are inextricably linked. Self-awareness requires the ability to imagine oneself in some other experience. Imagination allows one to envision possible outcomes and other places that may not even exist or that one has never seen. Rational self-awareness allows one to reflect upon thoughts and actions and determine their moral significance. The ultimate destiny of immortal souls is determined by moral choices. The ability to comprehend the concept of life after death requires imagination and self-awareness.

As Watership Down progresses, the rabbits can't help but question instinct and action. Just by granting them the ability to talk and interact in even a rudimentary human fashion, they can't avoid consideration of the significance of their presence and influence on whatever they touch. No matter how feral they remain as characters in a story, the mere presence of rational self-awareness and imagination forces a progression to moral choice.

Apply the thought to your pets or to the squirrels in the yard, or any other animals and consider holistic necessity of their being: material souls and near-absence of rational thought, and then how they can just survive, with no tools, in any natural habitat that can provide for their needs. But mankind? Most of us would die within days in any wild place if dropped there naked and without provisions of any kind. I

wonder at times that perhaps this Earth is not our natural habitat at all – that Eden, with its gateway to Heaven and atmosphere of Grace is the only place that man is truly fit to be. But that is another post. For now I'll just say it seems fitting that our rational minds with their fertile imaginations enabling us to make and use tools is all that seems to enable us to survive here, and that we survive here because we have the capability of tools. There is a holistic necessity to our being to allow us to persevere day in and day out, just as the animals are equipped for their survival.

And all of this returns to stories like “White Fang” and The Green Ember and Watership Down. The species in books must possess all the qualities that are holistically necessary: all the parts that together comprise a creature able to be and survive within the world of the story. There is a challenge in getting that right, and whether the characters are humans in animal bodies or animals with human intellect, the pieces must fit as beautifully and miraculously as they do in the real world or the whole imaginary universe crumbles for the reader.

The Terminal Velocity of Squirrels

Squirrels, it is said, can survive a fall from any height, but I bet no one has thrown a squirrel out of an airplane at 30,000 feet. Clowns, when unconscious, will not survive a fall from 30,000 feet: they'll just mutate into a mess. Coincidentally, an unconscious squirrel would probably not

survive a fall from 30,000 feet either. The reason for this similarity between falling clowns and falling squirrels has to do with their mass and the area of the interface between a falling creature and the air. A conscious squirrel will spread-eagle and will quickly reach a velocity at which the air resistance against his furry silhouette will match the force of gravity tugging at him. This velocity is called the squirrel's "terminal velocity." An unconscious squirrel will tumble and roll and may even end up in a head first nose dive, reducing the interface between his fuzzy body and the air, thus reducing his drag force, and fatally increasing his terminal velocity. A clown, thanks to his hair, big feet and hands, and baggy pants, can deliver an impressive drag coefficient when it has a mind to. It's also why clowns scare people. And that brings us to today's topic: scary choices.

Earlier today, I read a statement by someone in response to an online post about some Christians who vandalized the Darwin fish off the back of someone's car. The commenter said, "Stuff like that is the reason why I'm no longer a Christian. I'm a pagan and a Satanist."

Others might say that the Christians were just demonstrating evolutionary advantage and an actualized self-worship manifested as idealized egoism, but not me. I'd never say that.

If you threw Darwin out of an airplane at 30,000 feet he would not die, because he is already dead. But if he were alive and you threw him out at 30,000 feet he would probably perish, unless he evolved wings or baggy pants on the way down. The Darwin fish, if you don't know, is a bastardization of the Jesus fish. The Jesus fish is an ancient symbol that Christians used as a secret knock to get into one another's houses during persecutions. If you take the Jesus fish, put legs on it, and stick "DARWIN" inside its body like Jonah, you get a Darwin fish. Darwinian evolutionists use it to let Christians know that they can replace the Christian God with

science and the result will still stick to the trunk of a car. Christians, such as myself, find this odd because that's common sense: it's still a sticker. So, we just shrug, shake our Rosary beads, and wonder why sticky-backed lungfish named Darwin are venerated by atheists while a nice, clever, witty guy like Jesus is anathema.

Charles Darwin could not stick a Darwin fish or a Jesus fish to the back of his car because he didn't own a car. The modern car was patented in Germany in 1886, years after Chuck's death in 1882. I suppose he could have surreptitiously stuck a Darwin fish to the back of Gustave Trouvé's electric car in 1881, but by then Charley had been suffering chronic ill-health for about 40 years from overwork and was near to death, so I doubt he'd travel to France. Besides, there was no evolutionary advantage to sticking any kind of fish on Trouvé's car. But you can't blame him for trying. And besides, it'd be a fun and largely harmless prank.

Charles Darwin was neither a pagan nor a Satanist. For most of his life he was some sort of Christian or other. At the end of his life he was a self-proclaimed agnostic. Maybe he evolved further into an atheist near the end, or maybe he turned back, but we'll never know. It doesn't really matter which to this discussion, however, because he was unequivocally not a pagan or a Satanist. Nor was he a clown – though I did once see a picture of him wearing loose-fitting checkered pants. I don't think they were baggy enough to significantly change his drag coefficient.

Darwin's wife, Emma, was also his first cousin. I'm not sure where to go with that, so I'll just say that there is no evolutionary advantage to overworking yourself into chronic illness. Emma's sister's name was Fanny. The name Fanny makes my five-year-old laugh out loud. Emma and Charles had 10 children in 17 years, between 1839 and 1856, and Emma was 48 when she gave birth to their youngest kid. That's a good run for a human – genetically superior, I'd say. A definite

evolutionary advantage. Good choice Chuck made there! Charley was a doting dad, I understand.

The formula for terminal velocity is: $V_t = \text{sq. root}(2mg/pAC)$. For those of you who don't know what those obvious symbols mean, I have a fish for your car. "Vt" means "velocity terminal". "sq. root" means "squirrel root". "mg" means "milligrams" and "pAC" means "political action committee". Thus, we can read the formula as "velocity terminal equals the squirrel root around 2 milligrams per political action committee." The rest should now be obvious if you are properly evolved and enlightened.

Most of the folks I know who have a beef with God have never met Him. They seem to be particularly pissed off at Jesus, because they effectively say, "Jesus seems like he was a really good man and a wise teacher. I don't want to have anything to do with Jesus."

Some of these people claim to have met God, but decided to give him the cold shoulder even though He never did anything to hurt them, all because some self-proclaimed Christians they met were jerks.

I've met a couple of atheists who are jerks. I've met a pagan who was a jerk at times. I met a Muslim who is a jerk toward non-Muslims. I've only met a couple of Satanists, but didn't spend enough time with them to determine whether or not they are jerks. Every group of more than about a 100 humans seems to have at least one jerk in its midst, so I'd be surprised to learn that Satanists don't have their fair share of jerks. Thus, I think it is safe to assume there are at least a couple of Satanists who are jerks.

I don't think Darwin was a jerk. I don't think he'd have stuck a Darwin fish on his car, if he could have owned one of each, or even on Gustave Trouvé's car. I also don't think that Darwin gave up his Christian faith because some Christians he

knew were jerks, and I bet he knew some that were. I know I do. Darwin doesn't strike me as the type who would let others control him that way. And even though Darwin and I might disagree on the origin of squirrels, I'm willing to bet we'd have respected one another as reasonable men even though we disagreed.

Regardless, I know we'd agree on this: it's amazing that squirrels can fall from 30,000 feet and probably survive. It's all part of what makes them perfectly suited for living lives scampering and leaping about in the trees a hundred feet in the air. Whether they are the result of a long evolutionary process or an instantaneous one doesn't change the marvel of squirrels and that every detail of a squirrel and its behavior is perfect for being squirrely. There is nothing else in the universe better suited to being a squirrel than the squirrels we have in our back yards. No matter whether you believe in God or not, you have to admit there is something pretty fantastic and even miraculous about that. I bet if you go out and spend a couple of hours watching squirrels (or any animal) in your yard, you'll come away at least a little bit awed.

And that, my friends, is what humans alone are perfectly suited for doing. That's what makes you and me so deserving of respect, no matter how different we are or what we believe about God or the origin of squirrels. That's what makes us human and demands and enables to embrace rather than punch one another in the face: love.

Interesting Juxtaposition

Tweet 1 posted by an atheist 3 hours ago:

Some things are so complicated for me to think and feel

about, they make me want to throw up...

Tweet 2 posted by a Catholic priest 1 hour ago

“When a man devotes all his thoughts to the praise and service of the Lord, he proclaims God’s greatness.” Ven Bede on today’s feast.

Hard Work and Determination

I just skimmed an article in The Guardian by Suzanne Moore that lamented the economic inequalities faced by the young adult generation in England. It claims that “...‘leaving home’, finding the one job for life, the one partner for ever, getting married, having a baby, buying a home, these remain the sum of desires, however unrealistic they may be.”

Unrealistic?

I don’t know about England, ’cause I don’t live there. But Ms. Moore claims the problems exist in the US as well, and I do know about that. So assuming Ms. Moore is correct about the congruence between the worlds on either side of the big pond, then I can speak to this from my experience here in the States.

The economic problem is much less capitalism than it is entitlement. The social problem is not that the goals are unrealistic, but that the expectations are.

When young people talk about “buying a home,” they seem to be thinking about 2 story, 2 garage, perfect lawn suburbia, right out of college. When they talk about “the one partner for

ever [sic]", they mean a high IQ, sexy until death, perfect roommate, never changing, Barbie or Ken. When they think about "getting married" they imagine a Princess Diana wedding and a honeymoon in the tropics that doesn't ever end. "Having a baby," means, to them, when they have just the right amount of money and spare time, producing the perfect, flawless child of their preferred biological sex that will generate in them warm feelings of parental ecstasy, and when they look for that "one job for life," they mean the job that will pay them more than their work is worth on the first day of work while ensuring them a lifetime of pride and fulfillment.

That's what these young people expect. That is unrealistic. The truth is, and always has been, that "buying a home" means purchasing a modest house that is not beyond ones means, often a one-story brick ranch with no garage (and maybe a single car carport) and a lawn that looks more a patchwork quilt than a meadow, and most often, after having rented for years after college. The truth is that "one partner for ever [sic]" means sticking with the same person no matter how rough it gets or how imperfect he/she turns out to be when the honeymoon glow dissipates. The truth is that "getting married" means a wedding where it might rain and a reception where people serve themselves and a honeymoon in Myrtle Beach rather than Hawaii (unless the couple happens to live in Hawaii, then it means a honeymoon in Hawaii rather than Myrtle Beach), and "until death do us part" even when one partner takes on new interests, gets fat, suffers brain damage, or turns out to have a hot temper or gets depressed daily over newspaper headlines. The truth is "having a baby" means getting whatever the genes toss up when the sperm hits the egg, along with any genetic abnormalities that happen to occur, and it means choosing to make time and sacrifice luxuries in order to have the money so that the time is right now, and it means as much parental frustration and exasperation as it does parental ecstasy, and realizing that both are equally precious. The truth is, that "one job for life," means finding a place of

employment where one can get paid a fair wage for the work one does in a job that is sometimes or even often unpleasant, and sticking with it while doing ones best for life, and starting with a low salary that hard work and dedication over years turns into a good salary rather than always chasing the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Ms. Moore asks this question:

“For all these things are interconnected, and in an age of student debt, a labour market that is keeping wages low, insane rents and clear evidence that having a baby does not produce huge happiness, or even relationship glue for many couples, why are these things the measure of adult life?”

To which I answer, because the measure of adult life is not what one gets, but what one gives. It isn't about wealth, mansions, self-gratification, and personal happiness: it's about responsibility.

And that is something the world truly possesses in short supply.

Candy Wrappers

God speaks to me through Dove candy wrappers. Really. The first time I got my paws on one of those Dove chocolates with the almost pithy phrase printed on the inside, I had just prayed asking God to affirm for me that my decision to be confirmed in the Catholic Church was the right choice. I was received into the Church on the evening before Easter, at the Easter vigil Mass, like many (most?) people who become Catholic as adults. The following day at the weekly meeting of the group I joined with, there was a reception. As I was

going through the food line I was thinking about whether I had done the right thing, figured I'd just ask God for some encouragement if I had, and that's when I picked up a Dove chocolate, unwrapped it, and discovered this phrase printed inside: "Believe in the power of a magical night."

Since that day, I've approached Dove chocolates with reverence. I don't buy them, I wait for them to be given to me. I only eat one a day. I say, "Well, let's see what the Lord has to say to me today!" whenever I unwrap my one, free Dove chocolate.

I was given about a half a dozen for Easter this year. Every now and then I eat one. Since Easter I have been told:

- "Do what feels right": I wore a tail. It felt right.
- "Quote your dad": I could only think of two "I never get sick," and "I have to do everything myself." I don't think these are what are meant. I've asked my mom to try to recall some things he said. He's dead now, so I can't ask him. I consider this one to still be in progress.
- "Leave your phone behind": I did that often anyway, now I do it more frequently.
- "Coin a new catchphrase": This took awhile, but finally, "I'm on vacation!"
- "Get dressed up with no place to go": I haven't done this yet, so it is pending. I need to fix the jaw hinge on my fox mask before I can.
- "Get lost on purpose": I can't seem to succeed at this one. So it is in progress.
- "Walk to the beat of your own tuba.": I've always done this one.

I'll post updates on those unfinished ones.

Has God sent you a message?

Tea Bags of Love

Many years ago, I bought my mate, a wonderful wife and mother of 5'2", a pump pot for Christmas. The next day, I brewed it full of hot tea, and ever since that day, I have been filling it with fresh hot tea every morning I possibly can and she is at home, which is most of them. I explain to her that it is my way of saying "I love you" without actually using words, and that the day I do not make her tea when she is at home and I have pump pot, hot water, and tea bags at my disposal is the day I have stopped loving her.

The Bunn-O-Matic Corporation was founded in the 1950's, maybe 1957, by George Regan Bunn. After a painstaking 15 minutes of Internet research, I was able to trace the lineage of George R. to the famous food service tycoon, Jacob Bunn. George R. of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin was the son of Willard and Ruth Bunn, also of Chippewa Falls. The Bunn's must really like Chippewa Falls, incorporated 1869. Willard Bunn, Sr., George R.'s daddy, was the son of George Whitfield Bunn. George W. (not the Bush, the Bunn) was the son of Henry Bunn and Jacob Bunn's brother. That makes George R. some sort of grand-nephew or something.

The pump pot I bought was a genuine Bunn, and it lasted several years before my wife finally wore out the pump. That's the quality of a Bunn product: years of pumping pleasure. That's also an indicator of how much tea she drinks and how much love I have demonstrated. After the pot broke, I immediately bought her another one: an identical Bunn.

Jacob Bunn was a close, personal friend of Abraham Lincoln, who acted as attorney for his bud Jacob. John Bunn, Jacob's bro, was his partner in business and also a friend of Abe, and

a multimillionaire. I couldn't find much about George R. despite all my painstaking research, but I think that his numinous flair for naming companies is demonstration enough of his greatness. Were there a George Regan Bunn around today running for US President! But, alas, we're stuck instead with a poor and frightening facsimile and that email server mistress.

The only complaint I have about the Bunn pump pot is that it doesn't dispose of the tea bags, which I refer to as "love bags." In the morning, before I brew the fresh pot of tea, I dump out the old, stale tea (which, by the way, remains warm for at least 48 hours in the Bunn pump pot), and out come yesterday's tea bags with it, like clumpy clods of sweaty love, plunking into the sink afloat the bitter burnished umber of bygone's acrid affections.

George's inventiveness was due to his coffee obsession, which inspired him to found a division of Bunn Capitol Wholesale Grocery Company devoted to developing a device to brew coffee in a way that kept the grounds out, because they tickled his throat or something. But it is a testament to his God-given gifts for invention that they also serve equally well for use with tea.

Today, when I got home from my day job, which does not involve inventing beverage dispensers, but usually involves quite a bit of coffee, I found yesterday's love bags in a clammy mound on my desk next to my keyboard and the new US flag that came in mail today for donating some money to the USO. The thank-you letter accompanying the flag mentioned funding morale-building snacks, which I'm sure include coffee, with my donation. I hope our troops overseas are provided with Bunn equipment along with their morale snacks.

George was a veteran of the US Marine Corps and served during WW II. I think George would smile as wide as a hungry lion in an orphanage if the US military supplied its overseas troops

with Bunn beverage equipment.

Yesterday's love bags have been a source of tension in my house for some time now. After years of emptying, filling, emptying, filling, emptying, filling the pump pot of/with tea, I got kind of tired of having to do both the emptying and the filling seeing as I rarely ever drink even a mouthful of the tea found therein. The tea in the pot is unsweetened and decaffeinated. I don't comprehend tea like that, and it doesn't comprehend me, so we avoid one another in the interest of domestic tranquility. It would be like drinking something other than black, caffeinated coffee or drinking non-alcoholic beer – what's the point?

By the way, George is credited with introducing the flat-bottomed coffee filter. Perhaps he was inspired by watching barges as a tot in growing up in Chippewa Falls as they made their way up and down the Chippewa River. We'll probably never know, because George died in 2002, probably taking the secret of his inspiration with him to heaven.

My wife has more than once promised good-heartedly and with the most sincere intentions to empty her pump pot nightly, and to her credit, every time for several days after she succeeds in a most admirable fashion. Eventually, however, the trials of staying up late and doing all the things she does to ensure the house runs smoothly despite the inadvertent, deleterious misadventures of the rest of us, catches up to her and the pot-memory switch flips off. After a few on/off cycles, I determined that I should help her keep the switch on, so I suggested that I leave the love bags in the sink if it so happens I have to empty the pot myself. I assured her this was in no way indicative of a faltering love, but just the opposite: a loving hand to assist her in rising above the vexations of my inadvertent, deleterious misadventures.

The tea bag was first commercially produced in the early 1900s by Thomas Sullivan of New York before George R. Bunn was born,

so George may have had the same problem I do after he invented a beverage dispenser and expressed his love for his wife, Nancy, daily by preparing her a Bunn-O-Matic pot full of tea every morning! What a coincidence!

Unfortunately for me, my oldest daughter is disgusted by finding my love bags in the kitchen sink. She's complained for some time now to me about it, to no avail, because I simply explain that I didn't leave them there, her mother did, as it is her mother's responsibility to empty the pot, and thus, any part of that activity that I undertake to complete is just helping her out: a sort of additional expression of love.

George was a Catholic and member of Christ the King Parish (probably in Springfield, Illinois, the town, coincidentally, where Abraham Lincoln is buried. How's that for full-circle?). He was probably pious and devout, because he was endowed with blessings of inventive giftedness (inventiveness is Divine) and was a chronic philanthropist. He and Nancy were married 62 years, also probably because he was a devout and pious Catholic who really meant "until death do us part" when he said it.

I suspect my daughter, in a vengeful rage, put the clammy love bags on my desk to spite me. I didn't think much of it, chuckling and simply moving the muculent mass 6' 5" to the right onto my wife's desk.

Tomorrow will be another day. Love bags will slurp into the sink anew and a fresh Bunn-full of hot tea will brew. The world will turn and turn and turn, and warmth of wife and children will remain, and the legacy of George Bunn will forever be at the center of the love we lavish and pour out upon one another in a kind of perpetual Christmas. God bless us, every one!