



Leaving Stuff Out

A M Carley

When the audience knows more than the character does

Re-reading an interview with Stephen Sondheim, I came across a lovely moment.

When the audience starts to know something the character doesn't, they get excited – and who wouldn't? We get it, why doesn't he get it, but when he finally does get it, it's so much more devastating than when we got it. I don't like to make generalizations, but so much first-rate drama throughout the centuries is about characters who don't know as much about themselves as the audience does.

Stephen Sondheim

He's talking about writing lyrics for actors in musical theater. I read it, thinking about dialogue in fiction and creative nonfiction. Specifically, about editing dialogue. Pruning.

As a writer you learn about the reader's point of view, and the readers's experience of what you are writing. You learn that some readers really want to get involved in your work, taking their time, while others flip through in a rush.

The Active Reader

You learn to trust the reader.

And you learn the active reader – the reader you want – derives a lot more juice from their part of the bargain when they can wonder about something, or figure something out – when there's a subtext to unravel. To use Sondheim's example,

An actor can only be grateful to have a song in which he says, "Everything is white," while he's sitting on a blue set.

Stephen Sondheim

... it's their job (the audience's or the reader's) to draw some inferences from the character's behavior. Why does he claim everything is white? Is he nuts?

You learn to trust the reader.

When you edit your work, you consider the degree of incompleteness that leaves enough out, but provides sufficient context for the reader to engage.

Writing, as it is being consumed, involves the relationship between the writer's words and the reader, an asynchronous

one at that. That's it, aside from the significant intangibles of book design.

Trust

In Sondheim's world of musical theater, there are more interpreters and filters at work – actors, singers, instrumentalists, and possibly dancers too – between the audience member and the writer/composer's product. Those are concerns for Sondheim and his ilk.

Reading, though, is between the writer and the reader, time-shifted. So, the writer must put all the clues and context and subtext in place, on the page, ready for the reader to discover and enjoy. And then the writer must walk away and trust the reader.

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