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On Words Part Two: Writing

Writing is about reality, not fact. To suggest the reverse requires extreme fuzziness of mind; to champion it, lunacy.

A friend sent me a note. It's about my writing and asks a common question: Are the stories published at McManna.com true? My usual answer is, "No, but they're real." That's a chintzy answer of course, but the question isn't so good either, and I long ago stopped caring if I answered it well.

This time is different. I know and like this person, and he/she (I'm not giving anything away) deserves better, even if the question is a bit of a smeller.

Are the stories true? No, but they're real — real accounts, about real people, behaving as they really behaved. That's different from true.

"True" is a meticulously specific word that demands an accordance with *both* reality and fact. Most of my stories do not do that. For instance...

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The Associate Vice-President of Office Supplies character in Talking About the Weather is real, although the person I had in mind when I wrote the story did not oversee office supplies. He oversaw office furniture. He *really* was an Associate Vice-President, but that's different than being a *real* Associate Vice-President. The former exists, the later is probably impossible. Also, I never had an outdoor conversation with this fellow as snow fell on our heads. It was rain. And we both had umbrellas.

The Fickle Finger of Free is the real account of real van chairs that really did spend three days and nights on the curb in front of the building where I worked, until a man named Burt *gave me* \$50 to take them away. I offered the chairs to Burt for free, but he insisted on paying. That's what happened, but there's nothing truthful about accepting \$50 for stuff you couldn't give away.

Everything I've written about my niece and nephew is real.

Slugger Joe still enjoys popsicles, but his truth no longer lies on a baseball diamond. It's moved under the hood of his car.

Madeline's mind really did motivate her to unplug an arcade video game in order to get even with some older kids who had pushed her to the back of the line. And she really did refuse to wear gloves after volunteering to play goalie. If you ask her today, she will deny that either event took place. I guess that's the difference between the truth of early childhood and the self-conscious reality of one's teenage years. By the way Madeline, I have pictures.

(Digression: Goalies are real. But they're habitually disconnected from the truth, particularly when a ball gets by them. At such time a goalie will blame his/her teammates for the error, including those teammates who are on the bench. That really is how goalies behave.)

Occasionally a note comes along that criticizes something I've written (if that's the right word for it) on Twitter. If ever there was an example of the difference between real and true, Twitter is it.

The notes typically go like this, "You just don't like rap music, that's what's wrong with you." I suppose I'm meant to feel rebuffed, but I never do. I feel fully buffed, and not just because I really don't like rap.

As far as I'm concerned nothing on Twitter is real, ergo criticizing what someone has written (there's that word again) on Twitter is a very poor use of time — even if you're a goalie.

Many folks have attacked my views on talent. Their common opinion, separated from all the goo and drivel, is: Anything is achievable so long as one works at it enough. There's not an ounce of reality in that opinion.

"Working at it enough" produces experience, and experience cannot generate talent. It is true that experience can *develop* talent. But it's equally true that talent must exist before development can occur. *Any philosophy that treats talent as a product, instead of a prerequisite, is wrong.*

There is an all too common idea about writing that sticks in our head and causes a good deal of trouble. It's the idea that writing's purpose is to label items that exist in the world in which we live. To tolerate such an idea requires fuzziness of mind; to champion it, lunacy.

The world in which we live is very brief. It is so brief that, in a very real sense, we can't *do* anything in it. We can only *be* in it. To understand this world, we must make propositions about it, and those propositions are made out of words and grammar. That's writing.

Writing is the bridge that runs from the evanescent world of immediate experience to all the possible worlds which are not the evanescent world of immediate experience. These are the worlds that came before, or might come next, or should come next, or, importantly, should not come next.

And the bridge runs both ways. If our *talent* for writing is poor, our understanding is poor, and our future is poor.

You may want to object and claim that our future is hardly dependent on our talent for writing. If so, you're not thinking. Writing is the only discipline we have that exists outside of the evanescent world of immediate experience. Without writing we bump along from moment to moment, with writing we freeze time and "look around," analyze, hypothesize, manipulate and form a view of the world.

Are the stories published at McManna.com true? No, they're my view of the world presented to others. They're real.

The world out there is made of truth stuff; but the real world — the world we can examine, understand and present to others — is made of words and grammar, the stuff we call writing. If we do not (or cannot) write, we tell no stories. And without stories there is no reality.

Writers live *or* die by the reality of the stories they tell; we all do.

This document available at:

<http://www.mcmanna.com/onwordsparttwowriting/>

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