

What is Fiction?

BY SUSAN LAWSON

Among the earliest definitions for *fiction*, the Oxford English dictionary lists “that which is fashioned or framed; a device, a fabric.” It is derived from the Latin *fingere*, which means to fashion or to form.

With this in mind, we could say all of literature—poetry, short story, novel, essay, memoir, biography and autobiography—is fiction because it is a way of relating a story that the teller, a writer, *weaves* by placement of words in a discrete form.

Sgt. Joe Friday on the popular 1960s and 70s television show *Dragnet* admonished witnesses to relate, “Just the facts.” But what are facts? All anyone can do is relate the information *they* took in through their senses—what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, felt. Yet any policeman will tell you eyewitness accounts often conflict and eyewitness testimony is notoriously inaccurate. Even official records are full of inaccuracies and missing information.

Objective facts *are* important if the issue is whether someone is guilty of a crime and should be punished. But when we discuss literature facts are irrelevant because literature is a *way* of seeing. Think of it as a window a writer creates through which to render something more precisely, to frame it. In that kind of writing, a writer’s subjective experience becomes *all* important.

I have seen it happen over and over in writing groups: A writer shares something written in first person, and it often is from her life, although it doesn’t have to be. Some members of the group then begin to direct comments to the life reflected in the writing, which they assume is the writer’s, and not the writing itself. They forget that we come to a writing group to test our *words* before an audience, not our lives.

By the time many writers are able to write of painful experiences at all, they are past the point of wanting personal advice. They want, instead, to know if their story engaged you, if it did a good job of creating that window, if after you looked through their window your understanding of the world shifted a bit.

That is why I strongly recommend writing groups discuss the writing members share *as if* it were fiction. That doesn’t mean it’s any less true, anymore than something written in third person is always made up.

Fiction is always something that presents a truth that goes beyond mere presentation of facts.

Pat Schneider, founder of Amherst Writers & Artists, says in her book *Writing Alone and With Others*, “Fiction is the dream of the writer, made visible on the page. It may be the writer’s lived experience or it may be entirely imagined.”

She then relates a television interview Eudora Welty gave in which she was asked if the source of her fiction was autobiographical or imagined. Welty answered, “If I tell you it is autobiography, you will be embarrassed. If I say it is imagined, you will feel cheated. So I will tell you the truth: It’s a mixture.”

Schneider continues, “All fiction is autobiography, because even that which we imagine is a collage of images and meanings that have come into, and have been transformed by, our minds. Fiction is an *autobiography of the imagination*.”

To that, I would add that our psyches are forever at work trying to heal that which has been wounded within us. The nature of each person’s particular wound is present in much he does—how he interacts with his family, how he approaches his work, how he treats a waitress, his own health.

If a person pursues an art form, such as writing, he is even less able to keep this door shut, no matter how hard he tries. For the thing that we most dread has a way of chasing us. We may *think* we’re not writing about our wound, but it’s there in some form—an image, a setting, a character not fully rendered, the story untold.

None of us, no matter how crafty or skilled, can make

our wound go away. What we have to do is open the door and bring it up into the light. Examine it. Turn it around. Find its meaning. And if someone else’s writing unknowingly touches on our own wound, we shouldn’t make them pay for our discomfort or fear of exposure.

I’ll end where I started, with the OED, which identifies the word *story* as a shortened form of *history*. But while the latter is alleged to be factual, the former may or may not be. The difference between the two is found in a definition for *story* that goes all the way back to 1340 C.E. It says *story* is a way of telling that lends *meaning* to events. Celebrate the meaning *story* brings to life in everything you write, read and hear.

