

Untold Riches
by
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Remember Donald Duck's rich uncle, Scrooge McDuck, he of the spats, top hat and cutaway coat (though despite his great wealth, he still had no pants)? Remember Uncle Scrooge's money bin, that cubic bunker made of granite or marble, but surely not pre-stressed concrete? Inside, like a rolling desert landscape were dunes of money, coins, bills, bulging sacks of loot knotted closed at the top.

I love the idea of Uncle Scrooge's money bin, because that bin represents the world of literature that we all inhabit. There, on the surface of all that metaphorical money, we sit. And were we to dig down just a little, we'd come to works by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Butler Yeats. Down a little deeper and we'd come to Emily Dickinson, Melville and Whitman. Way down in there would be Shakespeare, and down another few layers Chaucer. And way, way down at the very bottom would be Homer and the various authors of the Bible, the Epic of Gilgamesh.

We're on top of the heap, not because we've done anything special in the literary world, but only because we're in the here-and-now, not the way-back-when. Too often we forget we're resting on this wonderful bin of literature that buoys us up, without which we'd be right down on the cold basement floor trying to figure out how to tell a story. We forget we didn't get here all by ourselves.

When I was too little to read, and before I could ever remember in any enduring way what was read to me, my dad read The Busy Bulldozer to me every night before putting me to bed. Apparently, it was my favorite book because at that moment a bulldozer was working across the street where our town's only hotel had burned down. Before the bulldozer moved on, I'd committed the book to memory and said the words along with my dad.

So in my book bin, The Busy Bulldozer would be down on that base layer, the little narrative that started it all.

Too often we read only in our present moment imagining we created literature. Ingrates that we are, we imagine we invented the whole thing never stopping to think about the tension and suspense we learned from The Cat in the Hat. Before we wrote a word, or even knew how to make a single letter we had been schooled in the craft of narrative.

If we do read, too often we prefer to read the works of our present moment. Until, with luck, we discover the bin and begin to read into it. Most of us writers probably read into literature the way we'd dig into Uncle Scrooge's great bin, from top to bottom. Most likely we didn't begin with Beowulf and read forward into our present moment. That would make a kind of historical sense, but it rarely happens.

Reading into our literary past backward is better than not reading at all. My friend filmmaker Len Kammerling tells his students (film students!) they need to read at least two hours a day.

And I would add, read all sorts of different things. When you do, you'll see how unoriginal many of our techniques are. You'll also realize that they worked, and that they still work. Read a John Irving novel, and you'll see a writer who learned his craft from Charles Dickens. Read Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell and you'll see writers who learned from the Metaphysical Poets. Allen Ginsberg jumped over his near contemporaries T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound back to the long lines of Walt Whitman.

All these writers found something useful to steal from those writers who came before. We all can, even if it's only permission to break the rules of the present moment. That happened to me. In the 1980s, I read Milan Kundera who used old school omniscient narration to toy with his characters (and with his readers, too). And Kundera's use of that technique unfashionable at the time let me know I could do it, too. I'd read Henry Fielding and Lawrence Stern, but it took Kundera to let me see what a writer could still get away with.

And maybe that's an argument for starting our own money bins of books. Sometimes I need a voice to help me find a way into the story I'm telling. Is it Isaac Bashevis Singer's folkloric tale telling? Or Cheever's voice out of the Book of Common Prayer? Or Faulkner's King James Bible? Sometimes it's necessary to stop writing and read, find a rhythm even if it echoes somebody else.

Finally, there's this: How to make a deposit into that vast centuries old bin of literature? Even if it were the equivalent of a dirty penny? To be a penny in all that wealth is something to aspire to. But how? That's another, much harder question. Digging into the money bin and reading is part of the answer.