

## The Participating Reader

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There aren't many writing ideas I'm doctrinaire about. Here's one: the idea of the participating reader. Let's agree that reading is an activity, takes work, burns calories. And unlike a movie or a TV show, reading requires we participate. If you doze off on the couch, that DVD or TV show rolls on merrily without you. Not so with reading. When you fall asleep over a book or magazine, nothing changes except possibly for that damp spot you made drooling on the page. So let's agree every reader is working, participating. But the better question is how readers participate and how we want them to participate.

Over the years, over the centuries, really, we've changed our minds about this from time to time. Here's one way, a pretty old way, to participate: I, the author, will drive; you, the reader will relax and look out the window. What I mean by this is that all the issues of my work will belong to me, and I'll tell you how to think about them. You can already see, reader, how little fun this way of participating might be. At this extreme position, the writer has all the power, the reader none. Except for this power: to simply put the book or magazine down and not finish what that she started.

So let's consider this, too, there are a variety of ways to ask a reader to participate, with a variety of results, but there is one wholly undesirable result we don't want. We don't want the reader to quit on us. I think we all probably agree.

Now what? Let's face it, we writers are both omniscient and omnipotent: We know everything about our characters and ideas, and we have the power to manage them however we choose. These are remarkable powers to turn women into men, make them taller or shorter, fatter or thinner with just the alteration of a few words. And we have the power to look into the thoughts of all our characters, too, and to make them change their minds when it suits us. These powers apply to poets and essayists, too. We can insist on the primacy of our ideas, of our values, and build forms that are designed to prove the rightness of our views.

Now might be a good time to ask yourself, fellow writer, if your overly insistent need to control your work is actually freezing your readers out. And now might be an equally good time to consider the down side of letting those readers in, in letting them have some of your powers: They may get it wrong; they may misunderstand or misinterpret what you're writing. Yes, this is a possibility we're setting ourselves up for. And it almost certainly will happen.

But consider this: As banal as it seems, life's like that: subject to all sorts of perplexing situations and requiring of us humans (even those of us who aren't writers) to make judgments. For fiction writers who want their characters to look like they belong in our world, the real world, this means building scenes with

ambiguity built in. And taking the chance that, as in life, the events involving our characters will be misunderstood.

If we're not careful, we can allow for too much play (play as in a loose axle) in what we write. What we write means something, but not everything. As open-ended as that "something" seems, it's not fully so. We can ask too much of readers, put too much responsibility on their shoulders, and we can play cruel tricks on readers as well. Both seem to violate our reader's sense of participating, of being in on the questions with us.

For instance, a writer of genre fiction such as the murder mystery asks this of the reader: that he read for clues to the question, "who done it?" In asking us to read this way, the author is also asking us not to spend too much time thinking about the swirling emotions that must go through the characters' heads and hearts as they consider the most egregious of human actions. But that's OK. That's the kind of participation this kind of story requires, and readers can be happy with this arrangement as long as the author is fair and honest so far as the story goes. There are Sherlock Holmes stories that don't play fair, though, where Holmes sees evidence he doesn't really share with us readers until the denouement. He's not smarter than we are; he just has a narrator who protects him. At such a moment, a reader has a right to feel cheated.

So does a reader who encounters certain metafictional stories such as those by Robert Coover, "The Babysitter" or "The Magic Poker"—stories designed to trick us again and again into participating in one reality while quickly shifting to another. And a reader may feel disenfranchised by a writer like the James Joyce of Finnegans Wake, whose book is so self-referential that it seems to have only one reader, the author himself.

How do we imagine that ideal participating reader? I'd like to think my reader is smart, thoughtful, inquisitive. I'd like to think he or she can bring a sense of involvement in my stories or essays to the point of filling in the gaps I offer. In a wonderfully helpful essay "Omission" in the September 14, 2015 New Yorker, John McPhee, that wonderful explainer, explains how much can be left out of what a person writes if he credits the reader with thoughtful intelligence.

Sometimes I tell writers we can think too specifically about our readers that may narrow our expectations too much. This can be a special problem for us Alaskans. Our weather, our odd usages can sometimes be a problem. Sometimes we need to trust our readers to extrapolate a bit. Sometimes we need to explain; it can't be avoided.

I sometimes imagine my reader as a thoughtful, curious stranger who is in the next seat on a long plane ride. A person who would interject good questions at the right moments, and guide me in helping him along, but still wanting to consider what I have to say on his own terms.