

Realism in Story Writing...

The person who writes for a Conservative Mennonite publisher faces one extremely important question. How can I make my story leave a proper Christian witness, give it a Scriptural flavor, and have it turn out "right" while still keeping it realistic? If you do any amount of writing for publication, you will face this question and should be thinking about it.

Most Conservative Mennonite publishers require stories published in their periodicals to have "ideal" endings. In other words, they are to be brought to a Scriptural conclusion of some sort. The easiest way to do this is to write an idealistic story in which we bend the facts and make the story fit a pseudo-realistic mold where everything is done right and turns out right.

What do I mean? For instance, suppose you are writing a story about a disobedient child. In the story, his father calmly punishes him, then instructs him, probably including a Bible verse that he knows by memory, or knows exactly where to find. The child accepts this correction gratefully and promises to do better.

Or perhaps you are writing about a teenager who is struggling with a church standard. He asks his father about it, and again receives a perfect, pat answer. Probably you will have them discuss the question some more (so that you can work in the extra points you want to make), but the teenager is eager to hear the truth, and mend his ways. The story ends on this "happy" note.

This is very good and many published stories follow such patterns. There is only one problem. It is not really realistic. If you look around, you discover that even in Christian homes real children are not always sweet and obedient. Real teenagers are not always eager and open for their parent's counsel. Real parents do not always have a Bible verse at their fingertips to answer every problem that shows up. They do not always stay calm and sedate in every situation. Maybe we don't like to admit it, but in real life Christian parents sometimes make mistakes and their children sometimes show evidence of carnality.

The Bible recognizes all of this, and gives guidance in dealing with the realities of real life. We do not need to conjure up a pseudo-realistic dream world in order to keep our stories Scriptural. Instead, we can show the realities of life and have the characters finding their way to victory. It is more difficult, but it is possible.

When we become overly-idealistic in our stories, we create various difficulties for ourselves. First, many of our periodicals are read by people who do not know us very well. These people may take for granted that we have found a route in family life that bypasses the realities of normal family life. When (or if) they become better acquainted with us, they are due for a rude awakening. Over and over again, we hear of such families expressing shock, and also relief, that our families are actually about as normal as theirs are. From reading some of the stories in our literature, they had not expected this.

Overly-idealistic stories can discourage Christians, even those who grew up amongst us. Perhaps a reader is facing a struggle in family life. Then he opens a Sunday school paper and reads of a similar situation in which the father calmly and firmly does and says all the right things, and his children or teenagers promptly respond graciously and properly. Then the father turns to a perfect Scripture (off the cuff of course—he never needs a concordance) that wraps it all up. Peace is restored

and everyone (apparently) lives happily ever after. When the reader compares that with the realities of the similar situation he is facing, his first impulse can be to throw up his hands in despair. Evidently he is not a Christian teenager and his father is not a Christian father! He may as well give up because it simply is not working.

Finally, in their desire to reproduce children who act like "story-children," young parents may become overly zealous disciplinarians. They do not allow their children to be children, expecting them to be calm little adults instead. In the battle to turn their children into "story children," they may do actual physical or mental damage to them.

In real life, Scriptural solutions to problems are normally found only after considerable personal struggle and soul-searching on the parts of those involved. I am suggesting that a good story needs to include the realities of the struggle in the Christian life. This way readers can identify with our story and be encouraged. Seldom in real life do things work out ideally. If our stories can show our characters relating to this less-than-ideal real life and coming through in victory, they will encourage readers to persevere and find that victory too.

However, you will need to find a way to portray the realities of life in your story without destroying it with carnal descriptions and details. Too often people feel that the only way to do what I am saying is add vivid details describing carnal actions and reactions. That is not the case at all. Finally the purpose of your story is to help people who are facing similar situations to the one you are writing about. If your story ends up being merely entertaining, or descriptive, you have not accomplished anything. You must find the happy medium between being too realistic and too idealistic. For instance, to have your story character come home from his friend's house proclaiming, "Wow, did we ever have a blast!" or, "Hey, where-all you guys bin?" is not acceptable. That is not the kind of realism I am talking about.

We need to find a proper balance in our writing. Sometimes what happens in real life is too carnal to put on paper, except in relative form, or as a summary. This is especially true of speech. You will find that you almost always have to edit speech, both to keep it from becoming too tedious, and to make it printable.

Along with all this, make sure that your story does not indirectly or unconsciously condone sinful or unscriptural actions. We can do this by including carnal details in a story that are not clarified or made right, especially on the part of the main character. Sometimes we will need to make some changes to a story to avoid doing this. If it will make your story too unrealistic or cumbersome to clarify all of the unscriptural actions you have included in it, then you will need to do some editing. Is that detail really necessary to the plot of the story? If not, take it out. The more you can zero in on the main theme and the main plot in the story, the better your story will be.

Other times you will have to adjust some details, or make it clear that what happened was not ideal from a scriptural perspective. You should try to do this in as natural a fashion as possible, without making your story seem artificial or stilted.

Your editor or reviewers will help you in this, if you are serious about writing. It is an important and somewhat touchy issue. If you overdo it, and portray too much carnal reality, publishers will not accept your material. If you swing to idealism, you will not get your point across like you should. Search for the happy medium in between the two extremes.

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