

On Genre

By Tom Crosshill (Latvia)

I believe that most literary writers are better off disregarding genre classifications in their work. For context, I'll touch on three domains in which genre plays a role: the commercial, the academic, and the creative (limiting myself to Western, English-language fiction).

Genre clearly serves a commercial purpose. Confronted with the bewildering selection of even a small bookstore, a reader needs guidance to inform their purchase. Genre provides it, signaling the experience the reader is likely to have. Speculative fiction is likely to generate a sense of wonder; crime the emotions of mystery and justice; literary fiction -- a genre in itself -- a delight with language, with character, with structure and form. This guidance is imperfect, of course, and ill-defined, but it is an essential aid to the overwhelmed.

In the academic context, the benefits of genre classification are more dubious. There's value in cross-genre comparisons -- the study of subjects, themes, literary techniques common in different genres. Moreover, popular and commercial fiction is worthy of academic study in its own right. Unfortunately, genre classifications are more typically used to judge works as worthy or unworthy of attention. According to this fallacious reasoning, just because most works in certain commercial genres have low literary value, any work that self-identifies with these genres must also have low literary value.

This ignores the incredible breadth of genre literature, lumping together purely commercially driven projects -- media tie-in novels, by-the-numbers action novels, formula romances -- and works of literary quality. While statistically and financially the former may dominate, there's no lack of the latter. Take as an example my own field, speculative fiction. Today SF of high literary quality is written not only by SF writers -- Ursula Le Guin, Aliette de Bodard, China Mieville, Kij Johnson and many others -- but also by writers embraced by the literary mainstream -- Cormac McCarthy, Margaret Atwood, Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon and more. Against such a background, the use of genre classification as a measure of literary value is lazy and misguided at best, and malicious at worst.

Consider the value of genre to the writer. Long decades of contempt by 20th century critics and academicians led to self-censorship of genre elements by literary writers. When included at all, such elements were often restricted to the confines of magical realism. Literary fiction effectively robbed itself of a rich set of tools and devices. In a better world, a literary writer would not hesitate to use properly motivated genre elements -- elements that support and advance her story and themes -- for fear of the literary police.

Conversely, a writer won't improve his work by the addition of zombies or vampires or other genre flavor of the day, merely so he can cash in on a particular genre's popularity. Not only would such elements not serve his story, but -- insofar as commercial writing is a learned craft -- he would lack the skill to execute these elements successfully.

Genre can be useful to the writer to the extent that it suggests the expectations of the audience. If your work will be marketed as a thriller, you'd better thrill; if as science fiction, you'd better amaze; so on. But where literary quality is concerned, genre considerations are likely more a detriment than an aid. If your work calls for kitchen sink realism, do that. If it calls for dinosaurs from outer space, that's fine too.

In conclusion, I am happy to observe that today's Western literary establishment is becoming more accepting of genre elements, spurred by the efforts by such visionaries as Chabon, Lethem, Atwood, McCarthy and others. There is still a pronounced tendency to judge a work by the author. A speculative piece by a known realist writer will be praised, while a piece of comparable literary quality by a known genre writer will be dismissed or more often ignored (China Mieville's brilliant *The City & The City* is a recent example). On the whole, however, it has become possible to write literary speculative fiction and attain some measure of critical and academic appreciation.

In support of continuing this trend, I reiterate my initial recommendation. While genre classifications are useful in the commercial arena, academics should use them with great caution - and writers hardly at all.