

[3272 words]

## **Can we ever truly know why an author writes and can the answer be found in their work?**

There are many answers to the question “Why do writers write?” This essay considers what these answers might be, and investigates a number in detail, with particular reference to two apparently contrasting works: Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Beryl Bainbridge’s *Master Georgie*.

It might initially be thought that the most accurate and authentic source of answers to the question ‘Why do writers write’ would be the writers themselves. Many writers have been asked this question in interviews, or have published their reasons in journal articles, blogs, memoirs and so on. It might also be expected there will be no single common reason, given the variety of circumstances, cultures and backgrounds that writers come from. We might however hope to find one or more common threads in their answers. The reasons put forward, are often surprisingly diverse, as shown in Table 1.

Author	Reason for writing	Reference
George Orwell	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <i>Sheer egoism</i>. To be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups in childhood, etc.</li><li>2. <i>Aesthetic enthusiasm</i>. To take pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story,</li><li>3. <i>Historical impulse</i>. The desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity,</li></ol>	(Orwell 1946)

	4. <i>Political purposes.</i> The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.	
Anthony Burgess	Books like John Buchan's <i>Thirty-nine Steps</i> (1915), Graham Greene's <i>Travels with My Aunt</i> (1969), Dashiell Hammett's <i>Maltese Falcon</i> (1930), and Raymond Chandler's <i>Big Sleep</i> (1939) are distinguished pieces of writing that, while diverting and enthralling, keep a hold on the realities of human character. Ultimately, all good fiction is entertainment, and, if it instructs or enlightens, it does so best through enchanting the reader.	(Burgess, 1999)
Isabelle Allende	I just need to tell a story. It's an obsession. Each story is a seed inside of me that starts to grow and grow, like a tumor, and I have to deal with it sooner or later. Why a particular story? I don't know when I begin. That I learn much later...	(Hodin, 2013)
David Baldacci	If writing were illegal, I'd be in prison. I can't not write. It's a compulsion.	(Hodin, 2013)
Sue Grafton	I write because it's all I know how to do. Writing is my anchor and my purpose. My life is informed by writing, whether the work is going well, or I'm stuck in the hell of writer's block	(Hodin, 2013)
William Faulkner	Really, the writer doesn't want success... He knows he has a short span of life, that the day will come when he must pass through the wall of oblivion, and he wants to leave a scratch on that wall — Kilroy was here — that somebody a hundred or a thousand years later will see.	(Hodin, 2013)

Neil Gaiman	The best thing about writing fiction is that moment where the story catches fire and comes to life on the page, and suddenly it all makes sense and you know what it's about and why you're doing it and what these people are saying and doing, and you get to feel like both the creator and the audience. Everything is suddenly both obvious and surprising... and it's magic and wonderful and strange.	(Hodin, 2013)
Steven King	To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the inner music that words make.	(Hodin, 2013)
W.H. Auden	I think what Dr. Johnson said about writing is true of all the arts: "The aim of writing is to enable readers a little better to enjoy life or a little better to endure it." The other thing that the arts can do is that they are the chief method of communicating with the dead. After all, Homer is dead, his society completely gone, and yet one can appreciate it. Without communication with the dead, a fully human life is not possible.	(Hodin, 2013)
Stanley Fish	If you've found something you really like to do – say write beautiful sentences – not because of the possible benefits to the world of doing it, but because doing it brings you the satisfaction and sense of completeness nothing else can, then do it at the highest level of performance you are capable of, and leave the world and its problems to others.	(Fish, 2007)
Milan Kundera	The novel is a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters.	(Kundera, 1988)

*Table 1: Authors reason for writing*

Although Table 1 contains comments from just a very small subset of all writers some common threads do emerge. Writers often write because of some irresistible inner compulsion; they write because they take joy in the craft of assembling words into a satisfying whole; they write as a means of considering the world we live in and they use that writing to comment on our world by describing worlds of their own invention that mirror or contrast with our own world.

These reasons will be considered in more detail, using two examples: *Master Georgie* (Bainbridge, 1998) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin, 1969). Both authors have had long and successful writing careers and have given some insights in numerous interviews and journals into their motivation for writing.

In the early part of her career, Bainbridge says she simply writes about her childhood for her own personal satisfaction:

*Interviewer:* But you'd want to think of your writing as having some sort of enduring significance, wouldn't you? You'd want to see it as containing some higher truths?"

*Bainbridge:* Higher truths? Oh no. Not at all. If it has any higher significance, it's only to me and not to anyone else. Had I not written my books I would probably have been in a mental home by now. Writing gets rid of everything. That is the only reason I ever began to write. I wanted to write out things that happened in childhood. There was no other reason at all. (Taylor, 2007).

Bainbridge also states that she writes out of obligation to her publishers, with whom she had a close personal relationship:

I like writing, I mean I don't think of it as a job, on the occasions where I have not written, I stopped writing for about six years, that's a long while ago, and I felt very uncomfortable, the reason I go on writing is not because I have to, because I feel obliged, my publishers have helped me so much, I feel you can't just say suddenly, I'm not going to write any more. (Taylor, 2007).

Later in her career, she had exhausted all the material she wanted to use from her childhood, but still felt the compulsion to write, and consequently looked for a new set of source material, arguing it would complete her education:

I want to do more books that I have to research. Writing *Watson* gave me a real taste for libraries and newspaper cuttings and things. Remember, I left school at fourteen and I still have incredible pockets of ignorance. In a way, I'm completing my education. (Bainbridge 1988).

However, by the end of the career, Bainbridge had returned to her original position, saying that in some way, even the historical novels were influenced by her own life experiences – that she was essentially a biographical writer, documenting the lives of her characters but still drawing on her own personal experiences:

When I write a novel, I'm writing about my own life; I'm writing a biography almost, always. And to make it look like a novel I either have a murder or a death at the end. (Bainbridge, nodate, cited in Scurr, 2000).

Le Guin on the other hand takes a less personal view, using the alien worlds she creates to highlight aspects of the social, sexual and political human world that she is interested in:

As I see it, writing and the arts (and the sciences, and all learning) don't play a role in ensuring our freedom; they are our freedom — the heart of it. (LeGuin, 2014).

By making up worlds and peoples, I can recombine and play with what we have and are, can ask what if it were like this instead of like this—What if nobody had a fixed gender, as on the planet Gethen? What if marriages, instead of two people and one couple, consisted of four people and four homo- and heterosexual couples, as they do on the planet O? If nobody in a world had ever waged war, how would people and daily life in that world differ from ours, and in what ways? (LeGuin, 2016).

I send imaginary people to imaginary planets to learn other ways in which we might inhabit our own. I feel some urgency in obtaining this information, since we're inhabiting our planet in an increasingly destructive and unwise way. (LeGuin, 2016).

Fortunately, Harvard gave us a superb education, which equipped some of us, at least, to begin to learn how and when to overturn the table and the tea urn. And why. (LeGuin, 2014).

Nevertheless, at heart, LeGuin is a writer who is deeply attracted to and respectful of the craft and act of writing. To her, the simple act of producing the written words clearly provides its own innate satisfaction:

I love living almost as well as I love writing. (LeGuin, 2020a).

Writing is my craft. I honor it deeply. To have a craft, to be able to work at it, is to be honored by it. (LeGuin, 2020b).

### **Similarity and Contrasts**

While LeGuin states she loves the craft of writing, it is less clear that that is the case in Bainbridge's public statements. Indeed, Bainbridge's method for novel production involved a period of research and consideration and then a period of several months writing, which from her description does not sound entirely enjoyable:

I work day and night. I don't go out. I sometimes don't go to bed, but just nap on that sofa. I often don't have a bath, because the treat of having a long bath after five days and washing my hair revitalizes me .... I live like that day and night for about four months, then it is over, the book is finished, and I have a long bath. (Bainbridge, nodate, cited in Gupta, S 2000):

This suggests that Bainbridge seems to be satisfying some internal need to get the words onto the paper to fulfil her vision of the book rather than for the simple pleasures of assembling sentences and paragraphs into a greater whole.

The next sections examine the two novels to see how compatible they are with the author statements made above.

## Themes

In *Master Georgie* Bainbridge concerns herself with themes of 'truth' vs 'perceived reality', the question of whether one can ever know another person, the randomness of the hand of fate, the nature of sexuality in society. As the novel develops Bainbridge slowly reveals the deceptions, lies and half-truths in the relationships between the characters and in the way the characters present themselves in society. The Crimean War was the first to be extensively documented by photography and throughout the novel the photograph is used to show the unreliability of surface images. There are numerous scenes in the book where the truth, if it can be determined at all, can only be found beneath the surface of the photograph, eg the final scene in which the dead body of Georgie is used to make up the numbers in a photograph.

The story is told from the viewpoints of three characters - Myrtle, Mr. Potter and Pompey Jones. As each take their turn, the reader is shown the thoughts and feelings of each but is limited to the view that the narrating character has of the other characters.

Bainbridge questions how one can ever know something simply by looking at it. At one point a fellow character enquires as to why Myrtle often looks sad. "*It's the way I am on the outside*", she replied. "*Inside, I assure you I'm quite happy.*" (Bainbridge 1998:91).

Crucially the central character of George Hardy is never used as a narrator, and although the other characters eventually reveal much about themselves, George remains something of a mystery, a dark spot on Bainbridge's photographic plates. For instance, Bainbridge never reveals the real reason that George wants to go to the Crimea and take his entire family with

him. Does he want to do something noble, or is he trying to somehow escape himself and what he sees as his own worthlessness? Bainbridge leaves it up to the reader decide.

In *The Left Hand Of Darkness* LeGuin examines the themes of truth, duty, loyalty, friendship, the role of sex and gender in society. Underlying all these issues though is the notion of survival, both political, cultural, physical and psychological. Estraven and Ai both seek Winter's peaceful survival in ways that will meet their differing and partly overlapping objectives. Estraven strives to unite the cultures of Karhide and Orgoreyn and avoid all-out war, while Ai seeks a more galactic unification with his Federation. Together Ai and Estraven undertake a desperate and difficult journey across the Gobrin ice and in doing so resolve the psychological obstacles to their friendship as Ai finally understands and accepts the nature of sexual relationships on Winter and comes to see Estraven as a trustworthy friend. However, LeGuin chooses a plot that results in Estraven being killed in the final scenes of the novel. Although this death is apparently worthless, Estraven has actually achieved his goals, and LeGuin presents the reader with the realisation that the future is now in the person of Estraven's son, who asks Ai to tell him about the worlds outside Winter – thus underlining the final success of Ai's mission.

### **Form and Structure**

In *Master Georgie*, the story takes the form of a linear narrative, George Hardy, surgeon travels to the Crimea with his adoptive sister Myrtle, brother in law and amateur geologist Dr Potter and photographer's assistant and fire-eater Pompey Jones. The narration is split between these characters. It is notable that the central character, Hardy, never acts as narrator and Bainbridge only allows us to see him from the viewpoints of the other characters. The

story is told in a linear fashion, except for the very beginning, where the 12-year-old Myrtle tells about her past, using six long chapters, also referred to as "plates" as a reference to the photography theme.

In *The Left Hand Of Darkness* LeGuin's account portrays an alien world, largely through the experiences of an earthly visitor, but also through scientific reports, the journals of Estrevan and native accounts of myths and legends. The structure of the work is therefore more complex than *Master Georgie* as the reader is asked to understand and co-relate these various sources of information.

## **Summary**

*Master Georgie* is Bainbridge's seventeenth novel. As in her other works, Bainbridge writes uncluttered, unfussy direct prose, with carefully honed precision. The reader is presented with a sequence of vivid vignettes as the story proceeds and will take considerable enjoyment in the depth and imagery of her similes, phrases and prose. There are elements that will unnerve, ruffle and discomfit the reader, who will find that their understanding of the characters and their relationships must constantly be revised as the story unfolds. There are moments of dry humour as well as outright strangeness. All of this underlines Bainbridge's basic premise: we are mysteries to each other, and the world is a mystery to all of us. The net effect though is a book with a cool emotional temperature, that is more likely to be enjoyed for its intellectual challenge rather than any emotional engagement the reader might feel for its characters.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is just one of twenty novels by Le Guin, work that has earned her a position as one of the finest speculative fiction writers of her generation.

Although her work originally was seen to come out of the genre of Science Fiction from the ‘Golden Age’ of the 1950s and 60s, she established and held firm to her desire to illuminate the experience of humans on this world using high quality, vibrant descriptive writing of the landscapes, weather, topography, folklore culture and society of alien worlds. In *The Left Side of Darkness* LeGuin does, in Burgess words ‘enchant her readers’ (Burgess, 1999) as she describes Ai and Estraven’s 81 day journey over 840 miles, through a frozen glacier land, to save a King and two worlds, with one of the finest sustained accounts of tension and adventure in the annals of speculative fiction. While the book is a fine tale of adventure, and a tender story of friendship and love, it also is a considered examination of sexual roles and their effect on the politics, morals and behaviours of society – and it is this combination of ingredients that has led it’s deserved position as one of the major works of speculative fiction of the twentieth century.

### **How does this relate to my work?**

I find both books instructive when considering the form and content of my work. For me, Bainbridge’s work is the more difficult to relate to. It leaves me asking: ‘Is Bainbridge simply relating, with close historical accuracy, the paths of the characters through her novel? Or is she trying to say something specific about the nature of love, infatuation, sex. It seems to me that Bainbridge takes the role of an observer (albeit an expert one) that recounts the events in her novel and passes the entire responsibility to the reader of relating these events to the world that the reader lives. This is too extreme a position I feel for my own writing. I prefer the somewhat more explicit style of LeGuin, where a more explicit exposition of the situation each character finds themselves in is given in the novel. For example, LeGuin tells us not only about the mechanisms of kemmer but also allows her characters to tell the reader

the advantages to society of this behaviour. By postulating a race of people on Gethen who are not encumbered with having to live up to the expectations of gender identity and whose characteristics develop in response to environment and situation, LeGuin suggests that this would lead to practical advantages (reduced social and political conflict, a wider shared responsibility for child rearing, giving equality to all society members). These points bear directly on the political (cold war, Vietnam war) and social (feminist movement, increased sexual freedom) environment in which *The Left Hand of Darkness* first appeared. I feel this more open style results in a more accessible work of fiction and thus I would aim in my writings to be more like LeGuin than Bainbridge in this respect. Both books have shown me the effectiveness of multiple points of view, something I also plan to use in my current writing.

Returning to the original question – as readers, can we know if Bainbridge and LeGuin satisfy their personal need to write? We can certainly speculate that this is the case and try and support this view with the type of evidence presented here. Ultimately though, we can never know. Perhaps we should satisfy ourselves with exploring the experience of reading these two intriguing, fascinating and accomplished works and simply focus on our personal responses rather than striving too hard to determine their authors' original motives.

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