

Circle Sermon

I wonder if you ever think that your own life resembles that of a novel, as I have. Certainly one's life has a narrative stream, and the narrative can be seen looking back. Looking forward, life is a series of junctions, to take one road or the other, and it may or may not make sense taking one junction after another. But looking back it seems to have some kind of a shape, a way that you arrived where you are.

I'm writing a novel at present, and I'm using a very nice piece of software to help that divides everything into scenes and chapters, lists the characters, records their history, states who is narrating, lists places, counts items, and there are places for story summaries, images including maps and even a visual storyboard that builds itself up as you go along writing.

If you were to write your life story in a novel form, then it would need to be like a novel: with some sort of hook straight away to give interest to the reader: and then if not the hook then lead rapidly through establishing scenes to an inciting incident, a key early event that means something is now unresolved, and resolving it is the main narrative thread for the whole novel.

Resolving the conundrum means going through a series of challenges and blockages, and the story is the overcoming of these blockages.

I wonder if this is what life is like: a series of blockages or predicaments to be overcome. Or perhaps to build upon, as personal growth.

If there is no inciting incident, and then no conflicts or blockages, then there is no story of any interest. It won't engage the reader. There might be description, and all sorts of happenings, but there will be no arrow of direction through time: just time and incidents.

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Equally, our own lives without overcoming would be just drifting along: even personal diaries develop narrative streams among many incidents.

A novel should have what is called a dramatic arc that consists of a hook, establishing the scenes with essential background matters, the inciting incident, obstacles and conflicts, then the climax of a large-scale crisis, and how it is all resolved including the way matters have improved in the end scenes.

One should not be formulaic, however, because the inciting incident may lead only to a sub-plot that opens out into a main plot. There are of course sub-plots. They can begin unconnected, but must come together. I wonder if we consider the subplots in our own lives, and how seemingly unrelated friends and events do interact.

Through the plot and subplot comes the possibility of discussing relevant themes or topics. The question then is, what themes are there in your own life? Almost certainly one of them is the economy, and another is the provision of health services. Ancestry is another common theme. Hobbies and interests raise all kinds of themes.

And so do settings. By coming to this church we each put ourselves into the broader plot-line and context of the Presbyterians who became Unitarians, and we exist now as part of today's secularisation of thought and practice that makes any church-life so difficult to maintain. In the end, history is biography, and history is institutional as well as personal.

If you keep a diary, like I do, then you'll already know the difference between conversation and dialogue. Dialogue is essential and revealing but conversation can also be indeterminate and passing. A good diary ignores conversation and records dialogue, or about the dialogue.

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In a novel, conversation ought to be dialogue. Dialogue drives the plot and provides information about the circle of characters. It is better to do dialogue than describe. Dialogue should be sharp, essential and clear, and always be clear at the earliest point who is doing the speaking.

A novel can contain red herrings, that is plot lines that go nowhere even if at first they seem to be part of the resolving of the central issues of the plot. The red herring allows the writer a bit of deception and makes the reader have to remember more and perhaps make the novel more interesting and not so obvious.

But how many parts of our lives have been red herrings. The future is suddenly all mapped out to find it is going nowhere. What if, the central plot line for so long turns out to be a massive red herring?

And of course novels have a plot twist where something unexpected is part of the resolution, or stronger still is the reversal where the resolution is completely reversed from the driving narrative of the novel. Imagine a man whose father died of an industrial disease, the inciting incident. The son goes and enters radical politics, but along the way blockages and characters so interact and the environment so changes that the son ends up introducing legislation that reduces benefits as a stick to make the poor work and cuts taxes for the well off as a carrot to entice them to invest.

The obstacles, blockages, and conflicts in a novel, and in life, can be subtle or extreme. In a novel, conflict should be dynamic, so that a sense of crisis builds and there can be a crisis point; in life unresolved conflict may build one on to another until there is a crisis. So the crisis comes late in the novel, but can come any time in one's life.

Real life probably involves a series of crises, but if there is a main one

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then the crisis is overcome and this frames your life.

But, let's be honest. A novel is an artifice, and although it can be like a life, real life is never as neat as a constructed novel.

Life stories presented like novels inevitably become fictitious at least in part. But perhaps our lives are like fiction. There might already be a sense of unreality of things, or a synchronicity of events. Sometimes real life is such that if you wrote it as a novel, no one would believe you.

But to write a novel is to inhabit another world, a different world, and we are imaginative creatures. If the characters gain psychological lives, then they must be driven by the author consistent with themselves. The whole setting and interactivity of a novel becomes its own world. The author's imagination goes into overdrive.

So yes, every life is like a story or more, but not every life can be made into a novel. But, like the social anthropologist who ends up writing a long essay, if you write down your life you will inevitably see some parallels with the novel and its construction. We are meaning-making characters, each and everyone of us.