

What Happens Next – 7.11.2021
Literature, Creative Destruction and Supermarkets
Angus Fletcher QA

Larry Bernstein:

Fabulous, Angus. I'm really interested in how it's going to change the teaching of literature in schools. In your book you have a chapter on Hamlet, for example, and so maybe I'll start with that because that was a play that I was taught in high school. How would you teach Hamlet that's different from the way that I was taught? What are your objectives and what sort of homework assignments or essay writing would I do differently in your paradigm?

Angus Fletcher:

So, first of all, in my classrooms I don't assign Hamlet. Even though I'm an expert in Hamlet, even though I published a whole book on Hamlet, I don't assign Hamlet. And, in fact, I don't assign anything. I tell my students to bring in their favorite works of literature or whatever it is that they're reading, or in advanced classes I tell them to bring in literature from people they admire, or like, or respect. To find a parent, or a mentor, or a hero of theirs and find what their favorite poem was and bring that in.

So, the whole point of the way that I would like to teach is to empower students to bring in their own readings, as opposed to assigned readings to students. Because I think, on a most fundamental level, the whole joy of literature and the whole emancipation of literature is being able to walk into a library and choose what to read. I mean, that primordial sense of possibility is the number one thing that literature gives us, the sense that we can create something new as opposed to being told something old.

And that idea of being told something old is, I think, what most of us get when we're in school. We get this book, it's an old book, and then we get this anxiety. We feel we have to interpret it or analyze it in a way that pleases our teachers, and it makes us conservative. So, first of all, I just want to get rid of all of that. If you wanted to read Hamlet, if you came to me and said, Angus, I love Hamlet, I want to read this. Then I would say, absolutely, let's read it together. But if you wanted to read something else, we would do that.

Then, whatever it is that you brought in, whether it's Hamlet or something else, the first thing is we would not read it for its themes. We would not spend a lot of time arguing about what it meant. That's the approach that was developed in the Middle Ages to read the Bible, where people just got into endless arguments. And you will notice that in modern literature departments, it's the same way. All people do is argue over the meanings of texts, and then everybody gets their own meaning, and then we spend a lot of time talking about ambiguity or whatever as a kind of high value of literary works. And that's just another way of saying that we're all having an argument that we can't resolve, and that's not helpful.

What is helpful is to start by identifying what your emotional response or your imaginative response is to a text. And that means bringing in all these questions that we're not allowed to talk about in school anymore. So, for example, what characters did you like? Why did you like

those characters? Were you surprised by the story? Did you feel a sense of suspense? Did you feel fear, did you feel joy? Bringing in all those kinds of questions, that starts to allow us to process your brain's natural and normal psychological response to literature.

And then, finally, instead of having you write a paper in which you use supporting evidence, which is supposed to teach critical thinking, instead what we would do is we would have you write your own work of literature. We would have you write your own creative work. And we would, in that way, teach creative thinking. And by teaching creative thinking, what we would do is we would help empower you to leverage the imaginative potential of literature and carry it outside of a classroom to solve problems in your own life. Whether you're a scientist, or an engineer, or a doctor, or an artist, or a politician, or a business person, to leverage that creative potential in literature. So that instead of having an argument and writing a thesis and using evidence, you would instead be using your brain to create, to generate, and imitate the same force that went into the literary work to begin with.

Larry Bernstein:

That's very consistent with your screenwriting class. So, you would always have a screenplay like *The Princess Bride*. And then you would say, okay, look at how the author wrote this screenplay to follow a certain structure. Why don't you, at home, try to write a TV pilot or write a screenplay that would focus on that approach. So, this idea of being a creative person is a consistent theme of yours.

Angus Fletcher:

Yeah. Well, one of the things that's kind of curious about my background is I started out in neuroscience. I did not start out in literature at all. I started out in neuroscience and I started out in neuroscience in a neuroscience lab. And what we thought in that lab, as everyone did at the time, was that the brain was basically like a computer. That it basically operated like artificial intelligence operates. And it just took in a lot of data, and it crunched that data, and then it came up with judgments. And the only time the brain misfired, we thought, is when it had emotion or something like that that came in and kind of corrupted its judgment and interfered with its decision making.

But the more you understand the brain and the more you understand the mechanics of the brain, the more you understand the brain does not work at all like a computer. It's not logical. It doesn't take on huge amounts of data, it doesn't do any of that. What's special about the brain is that it's creative. I mean, the human brain is enormously creative and it has a series of machine mechanisms inside it, built into it, that are not magic, that don't involve the soul or imagination, but are there that you can study in a nuts and bolts way that generate creativity. And so, the reason I left neuroscience and went to literature, to get my PhD in literature, was because I wanted to study creativity.

And I thought, literature is a great example. That's where creatives go. They go to create stories, they go to create art, I want to understand how that operates. And so, I was surprised, as I think many people are surprised when they get into literature classes, to realize that actually most of what you do in literature classes today is critical thinking, which is a species of

logic, which is the same thing that a computer can do. And so, ever since I had those early classes, I've thought to myself, well, we need to turn this education around. We need to tap back into what it is that people respond to intuitively about literature, which is its creative force. And everyone, when you read a book or a story, the first thing you do is you enter into the character's perspective and you start imagining yourself as that character. And you start imagining, what would I do as this character?

And we've all had the experience as a child, when we read a book, which we entered into maybe a fantasy world or science fiction world or what have you, where we start imagining our self in that world. And we thought, where would I go in this world, and how would I journey in this world, and how would I do these things in this world? That's the immediate primordial power of literature.

And so, even though my background and my training, started out in neuroscience, ended with a PhD in literature, I've gradually transitioned over my career to teaching more and more MFA classes in creative writing and to working more and more in creative industries, like Hollywood, because I think that's ultimately what literature should be used for. And the fact that it's now used in classes to teach other things, like arguments, is to me very counterintuitive and not very scientific. And so, I would really like to see there be more emphasis on creative writing at a young age in schools, and more of an emphasis on if you like a movie, write your own movie. If you like a poem, write your own poem.

And that, to me, I think is really how we learn from authors because, ultimately, do we go to Shakespeare to learn right and wrong? Do we go to Maya Angelou to learn right and wrong? Or do we go to them to learn how to write, how to create, how to think, how to imagine, how to develop characters, how to tell a story? I mean, that's what they're experts in. That's always been kind of the focus of my training and kind of my work. And I'm really glad you responded to the screenwriting class.

And that, I think, in general is something that most people respond to in education, is a feeling of being empowered to do something that they want to do. And I think what most of us most want to do is create.

Larry Bernstein:

We had this education scholar, E.D. Hirsch, on our call a few months ago. I don't know if you know his work, but he focuses on the importance of content. He thinks that all American children should have a similar syllabus. And, therefore, we would be exposed to the same sort of work and, therefore, all Americans could have a collective conversation. He feels the same way about the French. The French would have their own literary works, and they should have their own conversation, and should be able to speak with each other. What he fears is that in many American classrooms we learn different books, different novels, different plays, and, therefore, it limits the conversation and undermines the learning experience on a national basis. He doesn't care so much about what the books are, he just wants there to be a lot of overlap.

What you're heading for is almost no overlap, everyone gets to decide on their own, even within the same classroom. How do you think about E.D. Hirsch's concern about a national conversation with all this academic freedom of choice?

Angus Fletcher:

Well, I think that's a totally non-biological concern that he has, frankly. That's an ideological concern. So, I mean, humans, our brain evolved to function in diverse and shifting environments. And we have a lot of anxiety that is misplaced, that somehow being surrounded by a lot diversity and change is bad for us. It's healthy for us. Humans evolved as empathetic, curious creatures. We're very adaptive, we're very good at changing. And the more variety we have in our lives, the more stimulation we have in our lives, the happier we are.

What causes us to be unhappy is not a variety of stories. What causes us to be unhappy is economic fragility, or poverty, or a sense that our personal being could be damaged or harmed. So, we don't like instability or variety in a sense that I could wake up one morning and then find I was thrown out of my house, but we love the idea that we could turn on the TV and see something totally new. I mean, nothing is better in life than making a new friend, and then realizing that she knows something about the world that we don't know at all. And nothing is better in life than going on a journey or a vacation to a different part of the world.

So, if we could have more of that variety, that cultural variety in our lives, we would be much more emotionally happy. And that's the bounce we need, is emotional variety, intellectual variety, cultural variety, but economic stability, medical stability, so that our bodies and the kind of basic wellbeing and needs are taken care of in that way, and our minds are allowed to bloom, and flourish, and explore, and branch, and go in any direction we want.

So, I could not be further apart on that issue, but hopefully that's a kind of positive debate for the people who listen to this podcast to have among themselves.

Larry Bernstein:

A couple weeks ago we had Aljean Harmetz, a Hollywood correspondent, who had written a book on the history of the making of the movie Casablanca. And in your Teaching Company course, you had a full segment on the screenplay Casablanca. A number of our listeners went out and re-watched or watched for the first time Casablanca in the last couple of weeks. So, I thought this would be a good way to sort of employ your techniques in the context of thinking about the structure and the making of the screenplay Casablanca.

Angus Fletcher:

I should be honest and say that I, myself, had not watched that film until I was asked to do that Teaching Company course. And I kind of grew up in a kind of, and I was kind of trained in the kind of newer Hollywood, where everything was about color movies, and animation, and kind of fast, fast, fast. And first of all, just watching that movie was just a tremendous pleasure because, to me, it was such an uplifting and hopeful and joyous movie. I mean, even though it's a movie in black and white, it's a movie that touches the heart. And it's a movie that by the time

you get to the end of it, you feel just a deep, powerful, hope. A deep, powerful sense that people can be redeemed and that the future can be better.

And so, I did with that film what I do with all my work, which is started out with a kind of scientific research. We worked with a large population of audiences to kind of talk and determine what their emotional responses were to the film, and we found out that my response was relatively consistent. In fact, really was consistent in the sense that most people who get to the end of that film feel a sense of emotional renewal and hope. And we then went into the technology of the film, in terms of what it was doing and how it was building that.

And the film takes a lot of technologies from 19th century romanticism. And in the romantic era, as people will know if they're a fan of poetry and painting from that era, the kind of core of the art is to reconnect us with our nature, with our inner nature, with what we were born as. And the idea being that what happens over time is that culture, and logic, and society, and all these kind of artificial things take over and alienate us from ourselves. And the more we become obsessed with the job that we have to do, or the more we get obsessed with the kind of machinery of society, the further we get away from our core self, which is our heart, which is our ability to love ourselves and love other people.

And what Casablanca does is it introduces you, in terms of its story world, into a world that has become that kind of heartless machine. That Nazi world, where this kind of relentless, artificial attempt to engineer a better society that is totally and fundamentally un-human, that kind of makes sense to a certain kind of rationalist mind, but is just profoundly dismaying to all of us sentimentally and emotionally. And then it gives us a series of characters who are themselves alienated,

who feel that it's dangerous to feel and to care and to love. And then what it does, is having kind of put us in that place, it starts to unlock our hearts by looking back to the past. By looking back to Paris, by looking back to this moment where love was possible, where romance was possible. And it creates this ache in us to want to go back to that time, back to our earlier selves, back to our prior nature, back to who we were before the kind of world took over, before this kind of machine took over and alienated us from ourselves. And then that kind of locked state of emotion of aching, of wanting, of desire to go back to the past is held onto by the movie. It's a remarkably static movie in terms of its storytelling and its plot.

That's why a lot of audiences now find it slow. But what it's doing is it's putting you in this state of kind of compressed, wanting to feel without actually being able to feel. And then in the last 15 minutes or so of the movie, all of a sudden everything happens, the past returns to the present, the heart opens and unlocks, and you can just feel again. And it's that moment of feeling of your heart unlocking, of your heart unfreezing, that creates that sense of joy and enthusiasm and happiness that is kind of locked down at the end with that kind of final line and that kind of opening up of a new future.

So hopefully when people watched Casablanca, that's what they felt. Hopefully they felt this sense of renewal, hopefully they felt this sense of tension as they were watching it and wanting to care and wanting to hope but being unable to because everything was kind of locked in place. And then all of a sudden, the moment of release. And that's the kind of way that literature in general works. This literature is this technology for activating different parts of our

heart, our emotions, different parts of our psychology, and then kind of shifting them around and moving them around to generate these powerful responses. Which in the case of Casablanca is a renewal of hope, in a sense that things can be better again.

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah, I love the movie. And one of the interesting aspects in terms of character development, what we don't see is a lot of character development for Victor Laszlo or Ilsa, but we do see character development for the Claude Rains and the Humphrey Bogart characters as they've completely shifted in what they care about and how they behave. How do you think about which characters develop and which ones don't, and is that important as you think about who the audience responds to in this film?

Angus Fletcher:

I think to say that Rick develops is correct, but also what he develops, how he develops is he gets back to who he was before he became jaded and cynical. So that's an unusual kind of, I mean that's like getting back to our true selves. I mean, that's like if any of us have ever had that experience of getting into a job or getting into a stage in our life and we start to lose our way. And we become disenchanted and we start to drift, that's where he is. And so really his character development is getting back to who he was. And at the time that that movie was made, I mean, and I think a lot of times now, people looked around and said, "How have we got here? What are we doing with our world?"

I mean, this is not human. This world we built is not human, and why do we keep running forward in this direction that is hurting us? And I think what's remarkable about what those characters do is they have the bravery to let go of that and go back to who they were. And I think that's why the movie is both powerful, but also plausible. Because all of us have that inside us to go back, all of us can go back to being who we were. All of us can kind of give up the kind of artificial stuff that we've kind of put into our lives. And the things that we're chasing, because we think that somehow that's going to bring happiness and go back to who we were when we were younger and were better people. And I think that's courageous, but it's in us, and to me that's the power of the movie.

And as far as the characters who don't change, I mean, I think to a certain extent when we're talking about Ilsa part of the reason she doesn't change is because she's already kind of whole to begin with. She's always a character who we admire from the beginning and has always kind of held out certainly in the kind of romantic story structure as who we were and the person who, when our heart was truest, we were with her. So I think that's why she doesn't change, because she doesn't need to is because she is the heart.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you feel like there's a universality to that story world? I mean, it came out when the Nazis were basically running Casablanca and then United States invades it around that time. Casablanca wins best picture in 1943, but it becomes one of the most watched films of all time in the decades and even to the current day. What is it about Casablanca that makes it both universal and timeless?

Angus Fletcher:

So I don't think it is universal or timeless, I'm just going to be honest about that because I'm a biologist, I don't think anything is universal or timeless. I mean, I think the dinosaurs made the mistake of thinking that they were universal and timeless. And I think if we humans make that mistake we're gone. But I do think that it has enormous power for a lot of people and is going to continue to have a lot of power for a lot of people. Because what it's pointing to is the nightmare that we've created in the modern world. I mean basically, the modern world is a machine that has gotten away from all of us. I think that's why people tap into it, is because people want to feel, and people want to believe that there's a way out of this prison we've created with empires and kind of these sort of large industrial corporations that have kind of taken over our lives. And they've kind of marginalized us in this kind of huge rat race.

And I think that resonates very powerfully for people and particularly after the second world war, because I mean the whole crisis that the world got into at that point was this idea, this kind of idea, that we were going to build these better societies by imposing them on people. That communism was going to impose a better society or that fascism was going to impose a better society. And I think people just realized, actually, I want to just... I don't want to be kind of thrust into this man-made nightmare. I actually want to kind of return to a simpler state of joy and happiness and hope and friendship, which is what really the end of the movie is about. So the answer I would give is that, yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

My final question for you is your comment about Disney films being exactly the opposite of what you want. Needless to say, like many parents, I indulged my children with endless supplies of Disney movies. Sometimes watching over and over again, Beauty and the Beast, the Lion King, almost with continuous showings. We did have the Wizard of Oz also in that loop. What is it about the Disney films that you found counterproductive in terms of creativity and human development?

Angus Fletcher:

If audiences want more of this, I just, Malcolm Gladwell has written about me on this, and I'm on his podcast in the future on this. But basically this was a very surprising research result to me, because I got together with Marty Seligman and we wanted to look at literature that created optimism. And our instinct was, well optimism is created by fairytales and Disney fairytales are so popular they must be an enormous source of optimism. And it turns out that actually when people watch Disney fairytales the same thing happens, which is that they feel better in the short term and then in the long run they start to feel worse about themselves. And the reason for that is it's very simply that in Disney fairytales, virtue is always rewarded. So good things always happen to good characters and bad things always happen to bad characters.

And that seems like that makes a lot of sense. You'd think you'd want to watch, you'd want your kids to watch movies where bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. But it turns out that when you're depressed or you're feeling down about yourself, what that says to your brain is if I'm feeling sad right now, and bad things happen to

bad people, there must be a reason why I'm feeling sad. And that must be that I'm bad, I must be being punished for being bad. And if I'm a bad person, I'm going to get worse and worse and worse and worse. So we just see that these Disney movies actually lead to catastrophizing and sadness. And actually what makes people happier is movies like Up, Pixar's Up, or Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, movies that are about kind of random serendipity. That's what really helps people get their hope back, because hope involves something good coming from something bad with no reason whatsoever. And Disney movies are just far too logical to allow for that human optimism.

Larry Bernstein:

All right, Angus, thank you so much.