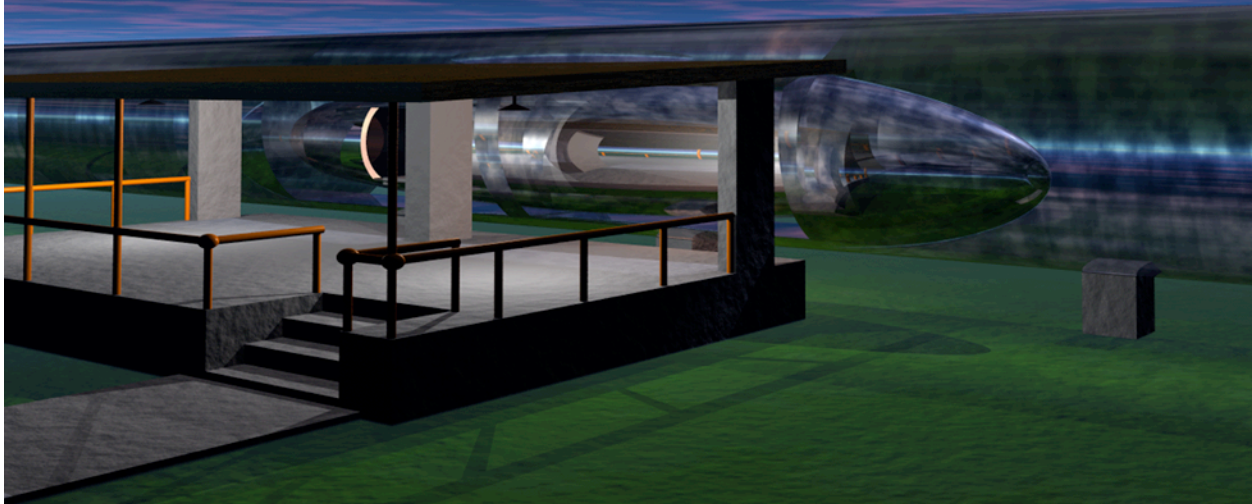




The Sword Review

Fantasy, Science Fiction & More

Currently Inside
***"Beauty and the Beast:
Good, Evil, and the Art of Writing"***
by Rachel Thomson



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Beauty and the Beast: Good, Evil, and the Art of Writing

Rachel Thomson

I have been a lover of fiction since I first stepped out of the wardrobe as a child still breathing Narnian air. Fantasy in particular has planted visions within me that will haunt me till the day I die—nor do I wish to be free of the haunting. People who didn't read voraciously as children may never understand how much the books we read influence who we become. While daily life was still teaching us to do dishes and homework, books were teaching us about heroism, loyalty, courage, heartache, true love, and places so beautiful you could die for longing to see them. The ideals I picked up as a child in Narnia and Middle-Earth, in Kipling's India and Arthur's Britain, are with me still.

A writer of fantasy myself now, I labour to paint visions of my own. My goal? To create something so beautiful it hurts. In the process, I find myself tangling with the problem of evil. The fact is, every beautiful story has its beast. The conflict between good and evil lies at the root of most stories, though modern literature does its royal best to confuse the fact. I love fantasy because it isn't ashamed to paint in black and white. Maybe that's why its heroes shine so brightly. Tolkien's elves could not be so tragically lovely without the evil of Sauron hanging over them. Without the treachery of mankind, Aslan is little more than a talking animal. A candle is nothing until it's in the dark. You get the idea.

Any story that does not address evil in some form is not addressing life. Yet I am aware that there are authors who, in describing the beast, have become its accomplices.

In grappling with the problem of evil in the world, writing can be a form of exorcism for the writer. Once our nightmares are on paper they cease to control us.

In L.M. Montgomery's classic children's novel *Emily of New Moon*, Emily Starr goes to stay with her great-aunt Nancy, whose unscrupulous tongue brings Emily's childhood innocence to a crashing end. Emily is fascinated by the stories, but "[they] made her feel unhappy somehow, as if something very ugly were concealed in the darkness of the pit they opened before her innocent eyes."

There are writers who plunge into evil, until reading their books becomes a macabre baptism. I once heard author Neil Gaiman talk about his graphic novel "Endless Nights," in which he wrote a story on madness. A psychiatrist friend read it and asked Neil if he needed to make an appointment with him. No, Neil told him, that wouldn't be necessary—his demons were all out on paper now, but maybe the doctor should check up on other people after they read it.

In grappling with the problem of evil in the world, writing can be a form of exorcism for the writer. Once our nightmares are on paper they cease to control us. The trouble is, they are now suspended on a bridge of words, waiting to enter into the heart of a reader. The history of my imagination has dark places in which new depths of horror were opened to me, and a piece of my innocence was forever lost. I wish I could go back, and I hope that my writing will never do the same to anyone else—God

forbid it should serve the same purpose as Aunt Nancy's tongue, destroying childhood in those who read it.

Others feel that the beast does not belong in storytelling at all; that if we're to be responsible authors we should stick to tales on the level of Dick and Jane. Those of us who write fantasy know that this is not an option. Evil can't be overcome by ignoring it. You have to buckle on your sword, swallow your fears, and overcome evil with good. In a way, that's what fantasy authors are doing every time they set their Frodos on the road to Mount Doom. Many of us realize, as I do, that this world of ours is in the midst of its own epic battle—our stories are one way we hope to tip the scales in the heroes' favour.

As writers, we have the ability to enter the hearts and minds of others. This is a great power, and as Peter Parker's Uncle Ben once said, "With great power comes great responsibility." Evil is powerfully attractive and the feelings, images, and thoughts it brings on are not easily shaken. In the pages of books I have seen purity, love, and wonder; I have also seen violence, madness, and perversion. Some of those images still haunt me, too, but I wish with all my heart that I could be rid of them.

Many successful authors have made careers of exploring horror, fear, and degradation. Like maniacal ringleaders, they cage evil and charge the masses to see it. Its power to fascinate and addict is evident in readers who cannot turn away. Much noise has been made over the years about the destructive power of music that is filled with obscenity and violence. Surely authors have as much moral responsibility to their readers as musicians do to those who hear them.

It's getting harder and harder to find stories that do not attack the innocence of their readers. As a culture, we care little for the purity of Luthien—the charms of Morgana le Fey are much more to our liking. But then, writers have never been content to let culture sit where it is. Writing has the power to awaken hearts to that which is good and beautiful. It has the power to plant courage and character in those who take it to heart.

Curiously, it's much harder to write beauty than it is to write ugliness. Evil seems so much more real than Good, and far more attractive. In my own writing at least, I hope to reverse the trend. Writing has the power to lift the eyes of a reader out of Hell and into Heaven—this is my goal.



Rachel Thomson is a freelance writer and editor. Nonfiction keeps her busy but fantasy is her first love (next to God, her family, and life itself).

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