

CHAPTER ONE

Every Trip Is a Quest (Except When It's Not)

OKAY, SO HERE'S the deal: let's say you're reading a book about an average sixteen-year-old kid in the summer of 1968. The kid—let's call him Kip Smith, who hopes his acne clears up before he gets drafted—is on his way to the A&P to get a loaf of bread. His bike is a one-speed with a coaster brake and therefore very embarrassing to ride, and riding it to run an errand for his mother makes it worse. Along the way he has a couple of disturbing experiences, including an unpleasant encounter with a German shepherd. And it's all topped off in the supermarket parking lot when he sees the girl of his dreams, Karen, laughing and fooling around in Tony Vauxhall's brand-new car, a Barracuda.

Now, Kip hates Tony already because he's got a name like Vauxhall and not Smith, and because the Barracuda is bright green and goes approximately the speed of light, and also because Tony has never had to work a day in his life. Karen, who is laughing and having a great time, turns and sees Kip, who asked her out not so long ago. And she keeps laughing.

Kip goes on into the store to buy the loaf of Wonder Bread that his mother told him to pick up. As he reaches for the bread, he decides right then and there to lie about his age to the Marine recruiter, even though it means going to Vietnam, because nothing will ever happen to him if he stays in this one-horse town where the only thing that matters is how much money your father has.

What just happened here?

If you were an English teacher, and not even a particularly weird English teacher, you'd know that you'd just watched a knight have an encounter with his enemy.

In other words, a quest just happened.

But it just looked like a trip to the store for some white bread.

True. But think about it. What is a quest made of? A knight, a dangerous road, a Holy Grail, at least one dragon, one evil knight, one princess. Sounds about right? That's a list I can live with. We've got a knight (named Kip), a dangerous road (nasty German shepherd), a Holy Grail (a loaf of Wonder Bread), at least

one dragon (trust me, a '68 Barracuda could definitely breathe fire), one evil knight (Tony), one princess (Karen).

Seems like a bit of a stretch.

At first, sure. But let's think about what a quest is made of. It needs five things:

1. a quester;
2. a place to go;
3. a stated reason to go there;
4. challenges and trials along the way;
5. a real reason to go there.

Item 1 is easy; a quester is just a person who goes on a quest, whether or not he knows it's a quest. In fact, he usually doesn't know. Items 2 and 3 go together: someone tells our main character, our *hero*, to go somewhere and do something. Go in search of the Holy Grail. Go to the store for some bread. Go to Mount Doom and throw in a ring. Go there, do that.

Now remember that I said the *stated* reason for the quest. That's because of item 5.

The real reason for the quest is *never* the same as the stated reason. In fact, more often than not, the quester fails at the stated task. (Frodo makes it all the way to Mount Doom, but does he throw the ring in the fire? No, he does not. Really—go read it again if you don't believe me.) So why do heroes go on these

quests, and why do we care? They go because of the stated task, believing that it is their real mission. We know, however, that their quest is educational. They don't know enough about the only subject that really matters: themselves. **The real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge.**

Frodo may have saved the world from Sauron, but that really just turned out to be a bit of luck. What his quest actually brings him is a new understanding of the value of mercy and who needs it: Gollum, Frodo himself, and probably everybody in Middle Earth.

Or here's another example. You know the book, I'm sure: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957).

Wait a minute. The Grinch is on a quest?

Sure. Here's the setup:

1. *Our quester*: a grumpy, cave-dwelling creature who's had it up to here with the noise, celebration, and general happiness of Christmas.
2. *A place to go*: from his mountaintop cave to the village of Whoville, far below.
3. *A stated reason to go there*: to steal every Christmas present, tree, and bit of decoration he can lay his hands on.
4. *Challenges and trials*: a risky sleigh trip down the mountain, considerable effort packing up the Christmas presents and trimmings, an encounter with a two-year-old girl who puts all

the Grinch's efforts in peril simply by asking a question, and a painfully difficult trip back up the mountain with an overloaded sleigh.

5. *The real reason to go*: to learn what Christmas actually means, to have his shriveled heart expand back to its proper size (or even bigger), and to find genuine happiness.

Once you get the hang of it, you can see how *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* follows the conventions of a quest tale. So does *The Lord of the Rings*. *Huckleberry Finn*. *Star Wars*. *Holes*. And most other stories of someone going somewhere and doing something, especially if the going and the doing weren't the protagonist's idea in the first place.

A word of warning: if I sometimes speak here and in the chapters to come as if a certain statement is always true, I apologize. "Always" and "never" are not words that have much meaning when it comes to literature. For one thing, as soon as something seems to always be true, some wise guy will come along and write something to prove that it's not.

Let's think about journeys. Sometimes the quest fails or is not taken up by the protagonist. And is every trip really a quest? It depends. Some days I just drive to work—no adventures, no growth. I'm sure that the same is true in writing. Sometimes plot requires that a writer get a character from home to work and back

again. But still, when a character hits the road, we should start to pay attention, just to see if, you know, something's going on there.

Once you figure out quests, the rest is easy.

CHAPTER TWO

Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion

SOMETIMES A MEAL is just a meal. Characters in books can get hungry just like people outside of books. More often, though, it's not. In books, whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion.

Communion has for many readers one and only one meaning. While that meaning is very important, it is not the only one. Nor does Christianity have a lock on the practice. Nearly every religion has some kind of ritual where the faithful come together to share nourishment. But not all communions are holy. In books, there are quite a few kinds of communion.

Here's the thing to remember about communions of all kinds: in the real world, breaking bread together

octave (the separation of the lovers) becomes real in the sestet.

Without making any extravagant claims—no, this is not the greatest sonnet ever written—we can say that “An Echo from Willow-Wood” is an excellent example of its form. Rossetti tells a story of human longing and regret within the boundaries of fourteen lines. The beauty of this poem lies, in part, in the tension between the small package and the large emotions it contains. We feel that the story is in danger of breaking out of its vessel, but of course it never does. The vessel, the sonnet form, actually becomes part of the meaning of the poem.

And this is why form matters, and why teachers pay attention to it: it just might mean something. When a poet chooses to write a sonnet instead of, say, something on the scope of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, it’s not because he or she is lazy. Short poems take far more time per line, because everything has to be perfect, than long ones.

We owe it to poets, I think, to notice that they’ve gone to this trouble. And we owe it to ourselves to understand the nature of the thing we’re reading. When you start to read a poem, then, look at the shape.

CHAPTER FIVE

Now Where Have I Seen Him Before?

ONE OF THE many great things about being an English teacher is that you get to keep meeting old friends. For beginning readers, though, every story may seem new. Each book feels unconnected to any other book. It’s like one of those pictures where you connect the dots. When I was a kid, I could never see the picture in a connect-the-dots drawing until I’d put in nearly every line. Other kids could look at a page full of dots and say, “Oh, that’s an elephant.” Me, I saw dots.

Part of this is just how good you happen to be at seeing two-dimensional pictures. But a lot of it is practice. The more connect-the-dots drawings you do, the more likely you are to recognize the picture early on.

Same with literature. Part of pattern recognition is talent, but a whole lot of it is practice. If you read enough, and think enough about what you read, you'll begin to see patterns: things that happen again and again.

It may pay to remember this: **there's no such thing as a completely original work of literature.**

Once you know that, you can go looking for old friends and asking the question: "Now where have I seen him (or her) before?"

Take Bod, the hero of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008). Bod is very young, still in diapers, when he's left an orphan. Accidentally, cheerfully, in fact, he wanders into a haunted graveyard. He's too young to know that cemeteries, tombstones, and ghosts are supposed to be scary, so he's not scared. The ghosts see him for what he is—a child who needs a family. They give him one; they take him in. The graveyard becomes his home. And the graveyard's solitary, brooding vampire becomes young Bod's guardian, carefully keeping him safe against all the perils of the outside world until he's old enough to face them on his own.

Now, forget all the details about graveyards, ghosts, and vampires, and think of Bod as a type. A very young orphaned boy, all on his own in a scary and threatening place. A human boy taken in by a group of nonhumans, with a protective and mysterious guardian who is also not human. Have you met him before?

You have if you know Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle*

Book (1894), where the human boy Mowgli is raised by wolves and watched over by a black panther. Put an orphan boy who needs a family in the jungle, and you have *The Jungle Book*. Put him in a graveyard, and you have *The Graveyard Book*. Even the book's title is a big clue. Neil Gaiman not only used Kipling's story on purpose; he wanted readers to know that's what he was doing.

Which brings us to the big secret: **there's only one story.**

There, I said it, and I can't very well take it back. There is only one story. Ever. One. It's always been going on and it's everywhere around us and every story you've ever read or heard of or watched is part of it. *The Thousand and One Nights*. Harry Potter. "Jack and the Beanstalk." *Romeo and Juliet*. *The Simpsons*.

To me, literature is something like a barrel of eels. When a writer creates a new eel, it wriggles its way into the barrel. It's a new eel, but it shares its eelness with all those other eels that are in the barrel or have ever been in the barrel. Now, if that doesn't put you off reading entirely, you know you're serious.

But the point is this: stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems. Of course poems can learn from plays, songs from novels. Sometimes the influence is direct and obvious, as it is with *The Graveyard Book*. Other times it's less direct and more subtle. Maybe a modern-day miser makes the reader think of

Scrooge. A female character may remind us of Scarlett O'Hara or Ophelia or Pocahontas. After much practice of reading, you begin to notice these similarities.

All this "books look like other books" is all well and good, but what does it mean for our reading?

Excellent question. If we don't see the reference, the connection, then it means nothing, right? Which isn't bad. If you don't know *The Jungle Book* and you don't realize that Neil Gaiman was using it when he wrote *The Graveyard Book*, you can still enjoy the novel on its own. It's a fun story, it works, and it gives pleasure to its readers. From there, everything else that happens is a bonus.

But if you *do* realize that *The Graveyard Book* refers to *The Jungle Book*, you get more. A small part of this is what I call the *aha!* factor. It's the delight we feel at recognizing something familiar, something we've met before. *Aha!* Bod is Mowgli. We get it.

That moment of pleasure, wonderful as it is, is not enough on its own. Once we notice a similarity, it leads us forward. We begin to draw comparisons and parallels between the two books. We begin to think about what it means that Bod is in a graveyard, while Mowgli is in a jungle. We begin to think about wilderness and what it might mean. And we begin to think even more about the big point Kipling and Gaiman are both making: what does it say about people in general that a pack of wolves, or a group of ghosts, must take in a human

baby and keep him safe? When home is a jungle or a graveyard, when animals or monsters become family, what does that mean about the people and communities that are *supposed* to create homes for Mowgli and for Bod?

Well, what does it say? What does it mean?

I'm not going to tell you. But the point is, once you realize that *The Graveyard Book* and *The Jungle Book* are connected, you can ask these questions in new ways, and you have new places to hunt for the answers.

This conversation, back and forth between old books and new, is always going on. It makes the experience of reading books deeper and richer. The more we notice that the book we're reading is speaking to other books, the more similarities we begin to notice, and the more alive the text becomes.

But what do we do if we don't see all these similarities?

First of all, don't worry. If a story is no good, being based on *Hamlet* won't save it. The characters have to work as characters, as themselves. Silas the vampire needs to be a great character, which he is, before we need to worry about his resemblance to Bagheera the black panther. If the story is good and the characters work, but you don't notice the ways it connects to an older book, then you've done nothing worse than read a good story with characters you will remember. If you begin to pick up on some of these connections, however, you'll find that your understanding of the novel

becomes deeper and more meaningful.

But we haven't read everything.

Neither have I. Nor has anyone. Young readers, of course, have a slightly harder time, which is why teachers are useful in pointing out things you might have missed or didn't know to look for. When I was a kid, I used to go mushroom hunting with my father. I would never see them, but he'd say, "There's a yellow sponge," or "There are a couple of black spikes." And because I knew they were there, my looking would become more focused. In a few moments, I would begin seeing them for myself. And once you begin seeing mushrooms, you can't stop. What an English teacher does is very similar; he tells you when you get near mushrooms. Once you know that, you can hunt for mushrooms on your own.

CHAPTER SIX

When in Doubt, It's from Shakespeare . . .

IF YOU LOOK at any literary period between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, you'll be amazed by how much Shakespeare you find. He's everywhere, in every form you can think of. And he's never the same: every age and every writer reinvents its own Shakespeare.

Woody Allen took *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and made it into his film *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*. Naturally.

The BBC series *Masterpiece* has redone *Othello* as the story of black police commissioner John Othello, his lovely white wife, Dessie, and his friend Ben Jago, who resents the fact that he was not picked for promotion.

waiting a decade for their husbands to show up. But they *do* often show characters acting out of the same needs, desires, and patterns. The need to protect one's family: Hector. The need to maintain one's dignity: Achilles. The fight to return home: Odysseus. The determination to remain faithful and to keep hope alive: Penelope.

In two stories about legendary heroes behaving in very human ways, Homer gives us the four great struggles of the human being. No wonder so many writers have often borrowed from and imitated Homer and the other tales of Greek and Roman mythology.

Writers and readers share knowledge of these stories, this mythology. So when writers use it, we recognize it. Sometimes we understand exactly what the writer meant. Sometimes we only get a hint. Still, that recognition makes our experience of literature richer, deeper, more meaningful, so our own modern stories also matter. They also share in the power of myth.

CHAPTER TEN

It's More Than Just Rain or Snow or Springtime

IT WAS A dark and stormy night. What, you've heard that one? Right, Snoopy. And Charles Schulz had Snoopy write it because it was a cliché. It had been one for a very long time back when your favorite beagle decided to become a writer. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a famous Victorian novelist, actually did begin a (bad) novel with "It was a dark and stormy night." And now you know everything you need to know about dark and stormy nights. Except for one thing.

Why?

You wondered that too, didn't you? Why would a

writer want the wind howling and the rain pouring down?

You may say that every story needs a setting and that weather is part of the setting. That is true, by the way, but it isn't the whole deal. There's much more to it. Here's what I think: weather is never just weather. **It's never just rain.** And that goes for snow, sun, warmth, cold, and sleet too.

But let's think about rain for a moment.

Rain can be a plot device; it can make the characters seek shelter, get stranded or lost or stuck somewhere, waiting for it to end. This can be very handy for an author. Rain can also bring along tons of atmosphere. It's more mysterious, murkier, more isolating than most other weather conditions. (Fog is good too, of course.) Then there is the misery factor. Rain can make you more wretched than anything else you'll meet in the outside world. With a little rain and a bit of wind, you can die of hypothermia on the Fourth of July. And there's also something democratic about it. Rain falls on *everybody*. You can be rich or poor, guilty or innocent, male or female, young or old, powerful or weak, and it doesn't matter. Everybody gets wet.

What else can rain do? For one thing, it's clean. So if you want a character to be cleansed, let him walk through the rain to get somewhere. He can be quite transformed when he gets there. (He might also have a cold, but that's another matter.) He can be less angry, less confused, more sorry—whatever you want.

Rain can also bring new life and hope. This is partly because we associate it with spring. (April showers do in fact bring May flowers.) But also think of the story of Noah. Lots of rain, major flood, ark, cubits, dove, olive branch, rainbow. This flood is the big eraser. It destroys life on earth but also allows a brand-new start. Rain can bring the world back to life.

So an author can use rain to do just about anything he or she wants. Other kinds of weather, too. Fog is good. It almost always means some kind of confusion. Authors use fog to suggest that people can't see clearly. Charles Dickens starts out *A Christmas Carol* with fog filling the streets of London—a good setting for Ebenezer Scrooge, who has lost his way and needs ghostly help to find it again.

Snow? It can mean as much as rain. Snow is clean, plain, warm (if it covers you like a blanket), threatening, inviting, playful, suffocating. You can do just about anything you want with snow.

But an author doesn't have a quick shower of rain, or a flurry or snow, or a flood or a blizzard, for no reason at all. Like I said, it's never just rain.

And it never just happens to be spring, or fall, or winter, either.

Here's my favorite snippet of poetry:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold:
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

(Oh, sorry, you need a translation? Try this: "If you look at me, you'll see a particular season. It's the season when only a few yellow leaves, or maybe none at all, are hanging on branches that are shaking in the wind, as if they're cold. Those branches are like bare and ruined balconies for choirs where, a while ago, sweet birds used to sing." But it sounds a lot better the way Shakespeare says it.)

That's Shakespeare's Sonnet 73. I like it for a lot of reasons. But the thing that really works here is the meaning. The speaker of the poem is seriously feeling his age, and making us feel it too. He's talking about getting old, and he's talking about a particular season: fall. November in the bones. It makes my joints ache just to think about it.

Now to the nuts and bolts. Shakespeare didn't invent this metaphor. Fall = middle age was a cliché long before he got hold of it. What he does is *use* this old metaphor in a new way, getting so specific and detailed (yellow leaves, branches shivering in the wind, missing birds) that it forces us to really *see* two things. One is what he's actually describing: the end of autumn and the coming of winter. The other is the thing he's really talking about: standing on the edge of old age.

For as long as anyone's been writing, the seasons

have stood for the same set of meanings. Maybe it's written into our brains that spring has to do with childhood and youth. Summer is adulthood and romance and passion and satisfaction. Autumn is failing health, weakness, and middle age and tiredness (but also harvest, which makes us think of eating our fill and having lots stored up for the winter). And then winter is old age and resentment and death.

Writers know that this is how we naturally think about the seasons, and they make use of that. When Shakespeare asks his beloved, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" we know without thinking about it that this is much more flattering than if he'd compared her to, say, January eleventh. The White Witch doesn't make it eternal spring in Narnia, does she? The idea is practically funny. She makes it always winter (and never Christmas) because, well, she's evil, and so she hates the very idea of new life, new growth, happiness, and forgiveness. It takes Aslan to bring all of those things. And, of course, the spring.

Or take Henry James. He wants to write a story in which America (youth, enthusiasm) comes into contact with Europe (stuffy, dull, bound by rules and traditions). So he comes up with a girl, American, young, fresh, direct, open, naive, and something of a flirt. And he comes up with a man, also American but who's lived for a long time in Europe. The man is slightly older, bored, worldly, shut off to his emotions. She's all spring

and sunshine; he's all frosty stiffness. Names, you ask? *Daisy Miller* and Frederick *Winterbourne*. Really, it's just too perfect. Once you notice the names, you pretty much know things will end badly, since daisies can't survive in winter. And end badly they do.

Every writer can use the seasons, and every writer does so in a slightly different way. What readers learn, finally, is that it's not simple. We can't assume that "summer" means X and "fall" means Y. But writers know there's a set of patterns that can be used in different ways. Sometimes a writer uses the patterns straight, and winter means what we expect it to mean—cold, death. Sometimes a writer turns our expectations around, and summer isn't warm and rich and happy; instead it's dusty and hot and miserable. The patterns are still the same, though, no matter how the writer uses them. And they've been around for a very long time.

So when you open up a book, check the weather, and the calendar too. If it's raining or snowing, if it's winter or summer, if the characters are shivering or sweating—it all matters.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Is That a Symbol?

SURE IT IS.

That's one of the most common questions in class, and that's the answer I usually give. *Is that a symbol?* Sure, why not?

It's the next question where things get tricky. *What does it mean, what does it stand for?* I often come back with something clever, like "Well, what do you think?" Everybody thinks I'm making a joke or not doing my job, but neither one is true. Seriously, what do *you* think it stands for? Because that's probably what it does stand for. At least for you.

Here's the problem with symbols: people expect them to mean something. Not just any something, but one something in particular. Just one meaning. No more. You know what? It doesn't work like that.

Oh, sure, there are some symbols that work in a pretty simple manner. A white flag means “I give up, don’t shoot!” So some symbols *do* have just one meaning. But most don’t. Most have a range, a lot of different possible meanings.

Let’s think about rivers.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Mark Twain sends Huck and the escaped slave Jim down the Mississippi on a raft. The river is a little bit of everything in the novel. At the beginning it floods, killing animals and people. So is the river a symbol of destruction and danger? But Jim is using the river to escape from slavery. So is the river—which flows freely, even overflows its banks—a symbol of freedom? But the river is carrying Jim and Huck south, deeper into slave territory. So does the river stand for slavery? Oppression? A fate you can’t get away from?

The river is both danger and safety. It keeps Huck and Jim away from the people chasing them, and it also threatens to kill them. It also offers a place where Huck, a white boy, can get to know Jim, a black man, not as a slave but as a human being. And of course the river is really a road, and the journey is really a quest (remember, all trips are quests!) that allows Huck to grow up and make important choices about himself and his life.

The only thing we can be sure about this river is that it means *something*. But it may mean something different for every reader. We tend to give writers all the

credit, but reading is also an event of the imagination. The creativity of the reader meets that of the writer, and in that meeting we puzzle out what he means, or what we understand he means.

And so each reader’s experience of *Huckleberry Finn* is different, because each reader is different. We all bring different things to each book—what we’ve read before, what we think about and care about, who we are. So each reader must decide for himself or herself what the river means, and each one will be right.

So what does the river actually stand for? What do *you* think?

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