

The Matter of Fiction—True or Untrue?

An Introduction to the Fiction Writing of Geoffrey Bingham

This article is by no means an evaluation of Geoffrey Bingham's fiction. The critics must do that work, for this article is written by the same Geoffrey Bingham. It is really an apologia for all fictional writing, and especially for the fiction I have written. Fiction for me has always held a high place in my esteem. Not only is it highly entertaining in an elevated level as well as an ordinary one, but it has taught me so much about humanity and of the creation in which we live. I wonder where my understanding of both humanity and creation and then both as the one, would be. I am aware that some writers drift into fantasy and so one has to be sensibly critical of their flights into this imagined world, yet even within the fantasy there may well be insights we can receive.

What prompted this article is an experience I had many years ago. I was giving Christian teaching to a group of men and women well out in the Australian bush who looked for sensible, doctrinal exposition and devotional instruction. A number of my theological writings were available to them. Set out on a table were not only these books but also some of my fiction writing. As a group they bought the theological and devotional books but not one of them bought a book of fiction. I was bemused by this and asked their pastor the reason.

'Oh,' he said, 'they do not think fiction is true.'

'Do they think it is false?' I asked.

He thought for a moment and then nodded. 'I suppose that is what it amounts to,' he replied.

In my mind I was saying, 'Fiction cannot be false simply because it is fiction. It may be that what is written never happened in that form but it is composed of numerous facts which are put together in what is called a fictional form.'

I simply nodded to my past friend, but have stored up the impression of that occasion in my mind. I have cogitated the matter over the years since then, and have reached some conclusions. One of these is that what is fictional may, in some case, be false, but I have only occasionally come across a book of fiction which is false. Some may come to conclusions with which I don't agree, but then it is my privilege to disagree. Most fiction is simply narrative which follows lines we know so well to be things as they are in life. On these grounds I have supposed my friends only feel safe when they are reading Scripture or books about the Bible. Seeing the Bible as inspired by God they can feel secure in what they call 'the real' ie. reality which cannot be gainsaid.

I suppose I could work around the matter by saying that the word 'true' cannot be limited to what has actually happened in history and the word 'false' does not necessarily apply to fiction because it generally does speak of what has happened and does happen. Even so, I don't think I could argue this successfully with my Christian friends mentioned above.

I am inclined to ask whether these folk are readers of C.S. Lewis's religious novels, and whether, likewise of the novels of Tolkien, Williams and George McDonald. Possibly they are in which case they read what is fantasy or allegory, and probably justify their

reading by understanding the references to what they think are biblical principles. Undoubtedly they would be attracted to John Bunyan's novels, for novels they are but of course they are fiction. Because he speaks along biblical lines they would say it is not fiction but fact. This being the case, then they are not against fiction as such, but fiction which is palpably unscriptural. How interesting!

I wonder whether the folk who did not want to read my fiction, were nevertheless readers of fiction. I can understand their distinctions—fiction which is not essentially biblical ought not to be read for it is a waste of time. They are then posed with the proposition, 'Logically I ought not to read fiction at all since it is all untrue. For me to read it, as a Christian, is a waste of time.' Of course the crunch comes when they likewise have to reject all materials on radio, TV, videos and computer showings which are not strictly true. The friends of whom I have spoke and who did not buy my fiction books may well have reasoned, 'Oh, I like fiction, but it does not come into my purview so far as my being a Christian. I like films, plays, operas, songs classical and otherwise, but then they are in a different category. I simply mistrust fiction when it purports to be linked with the gospel.'

I'm afraid it is there that I simply agree that my friends who have that attitude and although I think it is inconsistent with matters of truth and reality I must leave them with their convictions. I would like to argue that the Bible has many fables, allegories and tales which have to be fictional, but their mind is that since the fable or imagined story is in the Bible therefore it is sanctified and not to be regarded just as fiction. I turn my eyes up to heaven and shake my head at such thinking. Jesus told many stories to illustrate many points. Even my anti-fiction friends have to accept the fact that some of Jesus stories may be fictional whilst they may have come from true life, and are therefore valid.

In my own case I would say that all my stories come from true life although they have not always happened in the form I have written. Biographies which stick strictly to the facts do not always turn out to be the best accounts of persons and their lives. They can be as lacking in reality as an idealised biography is lacking in reality because of the perceptions of the biographer. Perceptions are not to be trusted or even leaned upon, for perceivers are notoriously influenced by their own psyches, genes and whatever of experience that has gone to fashion them as they are. It is difficult for anyone to write without prejudices or enthusiasm.

Some years ago a certain kind of novel emerged what was in fact biographical or autobiographical, but was so obviously fictional in some areas that it could not merit the title of biography. Even so it had so much of the biographical that it could not be called fiction. After a time the literary critics came up with the word 'faction' and this is a useful word. When it comes to what some would call 'pure fiction' then most writers would claim that most of what they had written was simply true elements of life put together in that readable form we call 'fiction'. Whilst biographies and autobiographies may in certain cases be called 'faction' yet almost all of fiction is faction.

I think that the rejection of my fiction writing was made by my listeners because they felt uneasy lest what I was aiming at in a story was not biblical, that I was presenting facts in a way which was not biblical. Their misgivings would not allow them to link fiction with the Bible. Now it is a fact that many of my books which treat the Bible as a story, and therefore sound like fiction but are not, are the books which sell best. I believe the Bible is one story from beginning to end, and herein lies its attraction—that it begins

somewhere and comes to a good conclusion. Of course within it are all kinds of writing, including illustrative fables, allegories, dreams, visions and apocalyptic descriptions which are symbolic. Even my friends have to come to terms with these matters.

We have somehow come to see that the term 'story' is not quite parallel with the term 'fiction'. Yet they have one thing in common, namely narrative. If we have come this far in our thinking then I am now able to press my point. If the Bible uses stories which are fiction in the form of fables, tales and allegories in order to communicate truth, then why cannot fiction be put to the same use? Most fiction writers would agree that they do try to get truth to readers through this medium. The only possible objection a person could make would be that the content or substance fiction writers use is not in keeping the truth of the Bible. Such fiction is therefore not the truth. Whilst the same folk may enjoy written novels, stories and other fiction as found in books, films, plays, operas and so on, because the fiction entertain, is it then not reasonable to ask them whether story writing by authors soaked in the Scriptures and who have 'the mind' of the Scriptures should not be accepted as valid biblical teachers who are using a particular medium which is called fiction, ie. story telling?

I am really saying, in effect, that the author who as a Christian is a good theologian and at the same time an artist, is a person competent to write good fiction. It is the most authentic because he has the mind of the Scriptures. He has wisdom, the knowledge of the truth, the derived attributes of God Himself, such as love, goodness, truth, righteousness and holiness. Is he not competent then to understand the great realities of human behaviour and so to depict Man in all his greatness of being the image of God, and in all his depravity as being the most depraved creature in the universe. In particular he touches on themes of human behaviour and the knows in depths what it is to be human before God and in the context of His creation. His writing can be of a very high calibre and if he is truly competent both in his art, can he not reach heights which we would call profound literature? Does he not then hold the key to the nature of creation as a whole? Can one have a full theology when he lacks a theology of the great matters—of creation, of Man and of God? Such a person as this is surely to be trusted most as an author, musician, painter and sculptor to say nothing of all who have unnamed creative gifts.

It is a matter of gratification to me that over the years I have had many readers write to me and tell of the illuminations and revelations of God, creation and Man which have brought relief from cramped and constricted knowledge of the world in which they live, the God who both created and redeemed it, and the brilliance and beauty of creation of which Man is an integral part. A few have said that they get more of my theology from my fiction books than even my theological writings. They often ask me whether a story is true or not. What they mean to ask is, 'Did these events really happened. Did that person—or persons—really exist?' I do not answer their questions except to say, 'What difference would it make if you were given the correct answer?' It is a strange thing about a story that once it is told it sticks in human memory. It influences so much of what they think for good or otherwise.

The writer knows that when he writes all of his being is called into action. It is the same with poets, artists and sculptors. Most creative people sense they have a calling and that it does not originate within themselves. They are called to carry out a mandate to be conveyers of truth. That is their part in a functional universe. They always feel the compulsion of their calling. The way they fashion is unique to each one, but what they are

required to convey is the truth. Here we enter into a realm too vast to include in this paper.

I do not imagine my article will convince a person to read my fiction. In fact getting people to read what I write is not my business. An artist is a living, human medium for the living truth, but he cannot be his own critic, nor has he to make sure his works are received by many. As a writer I am wonderfully moved by what I am able to write and that I am called to write. This is not self adulation or laudation. Behind the true and creative writer is the blessing needed to fulfil the task given to him or her. In other literary and artistic times they spoke of the Muses. One's Muse could be gracious and the creative flow would come, or the Muses, for certain reasons, would frown on the one it patronised. The writer who is a Christian discards the word Muse for Creator. He has a personal relationship with God as Creator and Redeemer so that works with the mind of the Triune God. It is as though truth pours into him from every angle and direction and he knows the thrill of the characters created of characters known or the whole substance of life which is the truth. Something happens which is beyond his immediate control or imagination. The rhetoric of composition is not a contrived matter but one of inspiration and is therefore the truth which meets the reader on planes he had not imagined.

Armed with this gift of understanding truth in the affairs of God, Man and creation, the writer embarks on this thrill adventure of creative writing. Fiction it may be but it is not falsity, nor is it untrue. It is of the essence and substance of human living under the grace of the God who gives wisdom of the highest and yet most practical sort. Anguish and suffering there may well be in good writing—and indeed shall be—but the writing will be true and the fruits of reading will be rich.

If I could recall that listening class of many years ago, away in that inland setting and were able to retail this paper to them, then it is possible they could be led into this broad way of truth. I do not know. I only ask the reader of his article to contemplate it, chew the cud in regard to it, and then at least to paddle in the waters which are shallow at the shore, but may well have rewards in reaching where the same waters are as deep as the ocean of God.

Geoffrey Bingham, 27/12/00.