

Some General Notes on Style

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 21 Aug 2001, 09:56

I don't know what to do with this. It will probably turn up in some form in a future book review. But I thought I'd toss it out for comment.

This is, basically, an early report on something that I've been pondering for some time and which I am beginning to formulate. I think I've come to the conclusion that there are at least two kinds of writing I call "good" -- or, rather, these two "kinds" probably represent points on a spectrum, probably the points which I find most attractive.

The first is the kind represented by Wolfe, Delany, and their ilk; the second by (most characteristically) Heinlein. There is going to be a tendency to turn my spectrum into a hierarchy, so let me state up front that I am not suggesting that the first kind is the better.

At any rate: it seems to have a lot to do with the amount and kind of energy required of the reader.

Type 1 writing requires that the reader stop, sometimes after each sentence, and ponder. Some sentences will be incomprehensible without this; some will have multiple levels of meaning which will reveal themselves only after such pondering; and some will be comprehensible, or yield their full levels of meaning, only if you've done such pondering about other sentences in the text. (A good, if unusually simple, example of this last is the final sentence of James Tiptree's novella "The Women Men Don't See.") As a result, the reader spends a fair amount of energy in, so to speak, starting and stopping.

Type 2 writing basically drives the reader forward. The amount of energy the reader spends is, thus, characteristically less -- the reader is allowed (encouraged) to build up momentum and plow on through the book.

You can do things in each "type" that are not easily done in the other -- type 1 seems to allow for a great deal of subtlety which type 2 would tend to undermine, while type 2 seems to allow for a kind of narrative energy which type 1 would tend to subvert. On the other hand, you can use the techniques of each type in the others: indeed, even a very "type 1" book would seem to demand that its more dramatic scenes be ratcheted a few notches toward type 2, lest their impact be totally dissipated, while a type 2 book allows the writer to plant little bombs of the sort Heinlein loved (frequently, a subtle reference to his protagonist's ethnic background, as in, at least, STARSHIP TROOPERS, FRIDAY, and THE CAT WHO WALKS THROUGH WALLS).

--Dan'l