

## Truth in Reading

What is truth? Pilate asked Jesus.

It is one of the ultimate questions with which philosophers and theologians grapple. It is also a question that we should consider any time that we reach for a book.

“Is the story true?” we should ask. “Did it truly happen?” “Is it based on fact, or did it totally spring from the author’s imagination?” “Does it provide us any insight into the nature of our world, or is it solely an attempt at escapism?”

On some occasions the answers come easier than they do on others. In any case, though, there are three types of “truth” for which we might search when reading a book.

First, there is what we might call “literal truth.” An event is literally true if it really happened just as it is described. It is what we hope to find when reading a newspaper, a biography, a memoir, or a history book.

Second, there is “embellished truth.” An event truly occurred, but not in exactly the way that it appears in the book. For example, in historical fiction, the events that are recounted truly occurred, but the specific characters are not historical, or perhaps, a character was historical, but the author supplies dialogue of which there is no record.

We find embellished truth when a real event is altered in part. The alteration might occur, to protect the participants, or perhaps the alteration helps the event to better fit into the story. Perhaps the event occurred in the author’s life, and it appears in the story, happening to one of the characters. We find embellished truth whenever the characters behave in ways that are consistent with a particular period in history. That is, the things they do are things that might well have happened in the circumstances that are described.

Finally, “philosophical truth” refers to the meaning that an event has. Does it tell us something true and important about a character? Does it convey some ultimate truth about humanity in general?

Consider the following excerpt from my new book, *The Handfasting*.

*He actually had proposed, once. It was when men were being drafted into the army to fight in Vietnam. The rules were changing, and he’d discovered that he couldn’t be drafted if he got married within the next four weeks. A friend of his had done just that, and Bill made the suggestion to Melissa, partially in jest, partially not. He was shocked when she’d agreed, but she gave him two conditions. First, she would not be married in name only. After pausing to let him consider the full meaning of her words, she said that Bill would have to explain things to her father. “I’m guessing you’ll be safer in the army than you would be talking to Daddy the morning after our wedding night,” she had told him.*

*She was probably right—Bill had no wish to tangle with Melissa’s father. He enrolled in college and generally managed a C average. When he came up short—three times in four years—his uncle sat on the county’s draft board, and he managed to keep Bill out of the army.*

We find all three types of truth in this passage.

It is literally true that in the nineteen-sixties, men who were married could not be conscripted into the United States Army. The policy was altered in the middle of that decade, but the new policy did not apply to men who married before the date of its implementation.

It is literally true, that conscription could be avoided while one was enrolled in college and making satisfactory grades. Finally, it is literally true that each county or parish in the country

had a board that selected those who actually would be called into service, and those boards had some discretion in who they called.

The passage is an example of embellished truth only because Bill and Melissa were not real people. Bill's behavior, however, was very real. Men did propose marriage in order to avoid having to serve in the army. (My older brother jokingly suggested that he might do exactly that!)

Since Bill was fictional, so, of course, was his uncle, but board members did prevent their sons, their nephews, and sons of their friends from being called into service.

In each case, the characters behaved as some people truly behaved when they found themselves in similar circumstances

The excerpt is an example of philosophical truth because it highlights certain aspects of Bill's character. It highlights characteristics that we see time and again throughout the book. He is self-centered. He is interested in his own good. He tries to get what he wants, even if someone else is hurt in the process. This set of characteristics is not unique to Bill. Many of us have known people like him.

We should always consider the truth in the books that we read, the literal truths as well as the other types. All three are important. We should learn to distinguish among them and to appreciate all of them.

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