

Eloquence – Where Good Writing Becomes Art

By George Cunningham

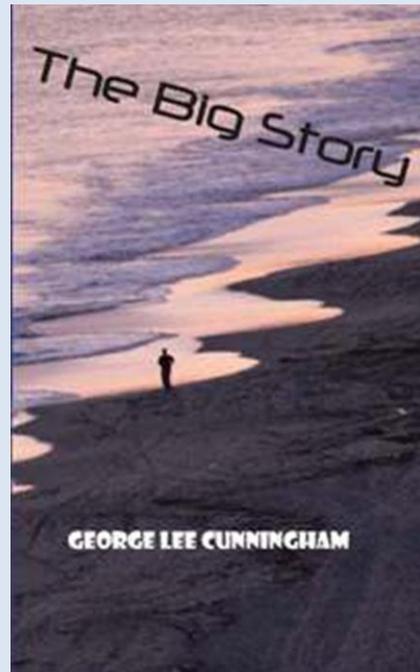
People can be taught to be better writers, to express their thoughts in a clear and concise manner, to better communicate with others what is on their minds. But can they be taught eloquence? I have my doubts.

Just as a student can be schooled in paints and techniques, but never produce anything other than run-of-the-mill seascapes and still lifes, a writer can be taught sentence structure and the use of words, but never attain eloquence. For one thing, you have to know what eloquence is and have the ability to appreciate it.

Not everybody has that. They're not bad people or even limited in their abilities. They may still read books and enjoy and learn from the stories and information contained within. But they will never appreciate the elegant beauty of the words. And if they can't enjoy the language and bask in the bright light of the words as readers, there is no amount of writing seminars or classes that is going to give them the ability to do so as writers.

The thing is that eloquence comes not only in how the words flow together, but how the thoughts expressed speak to the readers' sense of the world around him. It's where writing stops being just a craft

George Lee Cunningham's



A hard drinking reporter has to decide whether to keep chasing his big story or to make his bosses happy, rekindle the flame with his ex-wife, and be a responsible adult. Guess what he chooses. Mobsters, corrupt police, sissy editors, and the body of a naked girl on the beach. What more could you ask for?

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and becomes an art. Many writers strive for it, but only a few are ever able to achieve it to the level desired.

It comes in all forms. Fiction and non-fiction. Classic books and popular novels. Political and philosophical pronouncements.

You know it when you see it.

As when Hemingway writes about Robert Jordan in “For Whom the Bells Toll.” Jordan at the end of the book is mortally wounded, but stays behind with a machine gun to ambush approaching enemy troops and give his comrades time to escape. Although he has struggled with his feelings throughout the book, he is now at peace with the world.

“He was completely integrated now and he took a good long look at everything. Then he looked up at the sky. There were big white clouds in it. He touched the palm of his hand against the pine needles where he lay and he touched the bark of the pine trunk that he lay behind.”

Or how about Rhett explaining to Scarlett why he never admitted his deep feelings for her.

“You're so brutal to those who love you, Scarlett. You take their love and hold it over their heads like a whip.”

Or William Shakespeare in “As You Like It.”

*“And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
“And then from hour to hour, we rot and rot:
“And thereby hangs a tale.”*

Washington Irving speaking to the memory of a friend who is far away.

“Sweet is the memory of distant friends! Like the mellow rays of the departing sun, it falls tenderly, yet sadly, on the heart. ”

And George Washington, warning about the danger of governments – a line that many may find applicable today.

“Government is not reason; it is not eloquent; it is force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master.”

And nothing delights me more than to find eloquence in the everyday murder mystery – not great literature in the eyes of the critic, but with the right writer – a work of art. This from the beginning of Michael Connelly’s “The Brass Verdict.”

“Everyone lies.

“Cops lie. Lawyers lie. Witnesses lie. The victims lie.

“A trial is a contest of lies. And everybody in the courtroom knows this. The judge knows this. Even the jury knows this. They come into the building knowing they will be lied to. They take their seats in the box and agree to be lied to.

“The trick if you are sitting at the defense table is to be patient. To wait. Not for just any lie. But for the one you can grab on to and forge like hot iron into a sharpened blade. You then use that blade to rip the case open and spill its guts out on the floor.

“That’s my job, to forge the blade. To sharpen it. To use it without mercy or conscience. To be the truth in a place where everybody lies.”

To which I will add, the eloquence of defense attorney and former Los Angeles Airport Commissioner Johnny Cochrane, who said:

“If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit.”

Probably not the most eloquent sentence ever constructed, but it spoke to the jury, who later acquitted Cochrane’s client, O.J. Simpson. Nobody said eloquence was restricted to the good guys. Eloquence can be used by all kinds of folks from evangelists to terrorists, writers to politicians, community organizers to businessmen.

But it really can’t be taught.

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