

Finding Wisdom in Popular Fiction

By George Cunningham

People sometimes say, this book or that book changed their lives. He or she had read a book and were so inspired by the events related in the book or empowered by its message that the direction of his or her life was significantly altered. I don't doubt such claims, but that has not been my experience.

Although I have always loved books, all kinds of books, I cannot name one book that significantly changed my life. But the cumulative effect of all those books – some serious and profound, others silly and fun – has had a great affect on who I am and how I think about myself.

It's not just the great literature. It wasn't Moby Dick or The Red Badge of Courage or The Sun Also Rises. More often than not, it was murder mysteries and biographies and histories and moved me in one direction or another.

Even popular mysteries contain little nuggets of inspiration and wisdom.

One of the recent books I read was James Lee Burke's, The Glass Rainbow – probably the best of the Dave Robicheaux series. For those of you familiar with the character, he is a Vietnam veteran, who became a cop in Louisiana. As the series has progressed, he has gone through a series of wives, adopted a daughter, solved a multitude of crimes, and made a career of bucking the system. As he has gotten older, he has become more prone to philosophize about the state of the world.

I am not a huge fan of Burke. I think he slows down his stories with too much descriptive debris. He never met a sunrise he didn't have to describe in great detail or tell the way the sun sparkles off the bayou, or relate the various sounds of the swamp animals after dark.

Yet, he has an eloquence about him that is hard to resist. I loved this quote from the book:

I had to remind myself that neither our own passing nor the passing of an era is a tragedy, no matter how much we would like to think it is. If there is any human tragedy, there is only one, and it occurs when we forget who we are and remain silent while a stranger takes up residence inside our skin.

I read the passage three or four times. The story and the plot for the moment became secondary. I wanted to stop and think about what I had just read. I even shared it with

my wife, who was reading her own book and seemed less than thrilled by the interruption.

But I was moved by the passage.

Did the book change my life in any significant or profound way? Of course not. But it did make me think about the uncertain times that we live in. Circumstances change and people die, but that is the natural flow of life. The only real tragedy is if during the time we have, we don't remain true to ourselves.

“We let a stranger take up residence inside our skin.”

It's harder now than it used to be because things change so fast. The world did not always change so radically in just one lifetime. The world of an old man was much as it had been when he was young. People traveled on horseback or they walked. If they had to cross the ocean, they took a sailing ship. As it was for the father, so it was for the son.

That's different now. When I visit the places of my youth, I can barely recognize them. Buildings have been torn down and new ones built. Two lane highways have been turned into six-lane interstates and intersections into interchanges. Hardly anybody sends letters anymore. They send emails, or they text.

Newspaper reporters and bank tellers find themselves replaced by bloggers and ATM machines. The corner hardware store is replaced by Home Depot and Lowes, the department store by Target and Walmart, and the independent book store by Amazon and Barnes and Nobel.

But Burke is right. It's not a tragedy. It's just a change and although change may sometimes be hard for us all, it's just one way or life ending and another taking its place.

But basic values remain. Loyalty to friends and family, kindness to strangers, courage in the face of challenge, and a basic concept of right and wrong that goes beyond whatever social convulsions surround us. As long as we remain true to who we are, whatever we may do for a living or however the world may change around us, we should be fine.

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