Cultural Daily

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Artistic LicenseThe Art of Creating Your Own Culture

David Mack · Wednesday, March 5th, 2014

“We are an active participant in creating our own culture.”

David Mack’s stunning artwork of Scarab, one of his many rich characters from the Kabuki series

[dropcap size=dropcap]S[/dropcap]ometimes I am asked about the integration of a specific culture and subcultures in my stories. In terms of my graphic novel series ***KABUKI***, I was creating it twenty years ago when I was in college as my senior thesis in Literature.

I had a friend in my painting and drawing classes who was Japanese, so when I had to choose a foreign language to study, I chose Japanese, which I studied for a couple years. I was learning the language, history, mythology, philosophy and world religions, in addition to my travels to Japan – so I had this rich world of mythology and information that was pouring into my own. The archetypes of that mythology served as a structure for my story for certain reasons.

One of those reasons is this: I was a big admirer of autobiographical comics. Robert Crumb, Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*. I love Ivan Brunetti’s Schizo. But, I was so young in college that I did not feel unselfconscious enough to write an autobiographical story at that age. I didn’t even feel fully formed enough as a human or to have the objectivity to be able to do that. And I did not want to fall into the trap of making the main character an idealized version of myself. So I thought that I could write more unselfconsciously about very personal things in my life if I could write through a veil. Through a mask in a way.

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I also thought at that age that I could write something that would be more universal and relatable to readers if they could look at the characters and see themselves, rather than seeing me. I thought that I could tell a personal story, but make many of the details very different from myself. I began with the choice to make the main character a different gender. And then to set it in a different part of the world, with a different culture, and even in the ambiguous near future. That time setting would give me a liberty to turn up the volume and to discuss the present through the metaphors of the past and future. And also to make social-political commentary about our own culture, and many cultures, but through the lens of another. That way, readers can make the connections themselves about their own culture when viewing values through the lens of another.

David's cover for *Kabuki: The Alchemy*

Another aspect of the story structure is that it is told through the structures of both Western and Eastern fairytales and children's stories. The first *Kabuki* volume is a retelling of *Alice in Wonderland*. The journey from pawn to queen. The classic hero's journey from childhood to adult consciousness. From low birth and servitude to the most powerful piece on the chessboard that can change direction. The story is also told through the structure of the classic Japanese Ghost Story. These are the main stories of the Japanese Kabuki dramas. Usually, it is a wronged woman, who returns from the next world to set things right in the material world, and exact unfinished business of Earthly designs before her spirit can move on peaceably. So, though the story is firmly set in a crime narrative or

speculative fiction story, it can also be viewed as the Japanese Ghost Story from a certain angle.

While the creation of the Kabuki story and character was very much a reflection of my own experiences at that time, it was also benefited from my exposure to an outside culture, its history, mythology, literature, and to a variety of subcultures. And the fascinating thing is, as the story progressed, the latest KABUKI volume, ***KABUKI: THE ALCHEMY*** became largely motivated by a new point of view about culture… the idea that culture is not something that we are just born into or something that is fixed and unchanging. **We are an active participant in creating our own culture.** Everything we do has a ripple effect in creating the current and future culture. And upon realizing that, we have a responsibility to shape the culture.

Much of the theme of *KABUKI: The Alchemy* is that if we are the creators of our own culture…. If we are unhappy with the current narrative of our own culture, or our world culture, it is not enough to dislike the current narrative. Rather, we have the responsibility of improving and shaping the cultural narrative.

David's letter from Chuck Palahniuk

At the time I was making this series, I was also discussing similar ideas with *Fight Club* author Chuck Palahniuk (he ended up writing the introduction to *KABUKI: THE ALCHEMY*). He sent me a letter including the idea of a "Ken Kesey-like tour bus of different creative professionals" in different fields proving "that human beings create their own culture – they don't just buy it".

He also said that his teacher preached that "99% of what any class or workshop does is give the students the license they need to create."

That line inspired me to have one of my characters (a character with a sort of "art & literature as activism" agenda) in *KABUKI: THE ALCHEMY* create an actual "ARTISTIC LICENSE" that is given to another character to catalyze their potential. Since then, I include that actual ARTISTIC LICENSE in the back of each of my publications, and readers fill it out as a reminder to themselves and share it with others.

I share it here with you now.

David Mack's Creative License

Enjoy David's 2012 TEDx talk on discovering your purpose and making it a reality:

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