

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Escapism — and Potatoes

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, April 4th, 2018

Recently I was having a conversation over coffee with a friend of mine who is an assistant professor of poetry and he revealed something I didn't expect. For some reason it was the last thing I expected.

We were talking about how he has to read and critique about 100 books of poetry for the [Ahsahta Press](#) Sawtooth Poetry Prize. My friend Michael's job is to help narrow down the submissions so this year's judge, Jennifer Moxley, can choose a winner. This is a time-consuming job to say the least, and even as he's critiquing submissions, Michael still has to teach undergraduate poetry classes and continue working on his own poetry whenever he has time.

"I'm a gamer," Michael told me. By that he means he plays a lot of video games, which puts him in the same company as countless other twenty-five-year-olds. Not many of those twenty-five-year-olds are assistant poetry professors, and few are tasked with critiquing 100 books of opaque and experimental poetry.

My first reaction was, "How do you have time?" Michael explained that having some sort of escape is absolutely essential to what he does with the rest of his time. While he plays video games, the director and editor of Ahsahta, Janet Holmes, does knitting. He equated the two. He talked about how some of his cohorts in the MFA program want to do nothing but art, and how, to him, that's "no way to live." He's one of the few with a book deal on his plate, which lends his opinion some weight. He feels that having an escapist pastime is important to his poetry.

What makes escapism so essential to the poet, the artist, the teacher, the entrepreneur — really, to anyone?

One of the best metaphors I've heard regarding escapism comes from NPR's Linda Holmes, who is the host of "Pop Culture Happy Hour." Emily Yahr of the Washington Post mercifully included Holmes' quote in her [article](#) about escapism. Holmes says,

"Did you see 'The Martian' with Matt Damon? He's got a big thing he's trying to solve, which is that he's stuck on Mars and he has to get back to Earth. And they spent a lot of time in the movie on the fact that he has to figure out how to grow potatoes on Mars. The potatoes on Mars do not actually get him back to Earth. He's not actually solving the problem. But if he doesn't have potatoes, he's not going to live long enough to solve the problem and get back to Earth. So, to me, my hope is,

the songs that you love, the books that you love, the TV that you love, the conversations that you have about people that are kind of nourishing to you, help you — those are your potatoes .??. and you have to have that stuff in order to make it long enough to get back to Earth.”

There’s a lot to this metaphor. By focusing on the immediate challenge of growing potatoes, Damon’s character is fueling himself so that he can make the ultimate escape — so that he can solve the big problem of escaping from Mars and getting back to Earth. Escapism — particularly the kinds of escapism that are, in themselves, challenging — provides fuel for you to solve the big problems you need to solve. Looking away from a puzzle enables you to look back at it with fresh eyes.

The Martian metaphor is particularly apt for artists. Damon’s character is working on fashioning an escape, and as an artist, your work can also be an escape from everyday reality.

Different Kinds of Escape

Ever heard of an escape room? An escape room is a trap you choose to get into with a group, which might seem absurd at first. However, EscapeWorks Denver points out that the [draw behind escape rooms](#) has to do with “performance-enhancing stress,” which “can even improve your brain’s neuroplasticity, or the ability to quickly retain and retrieve information and adapt to changes in circumstances.” This type of stress also helps people bond as they work together to solve a problem. Basically, this is the type of stress you don’t have to take too seriously.

You’ve probably heard stress is bad for you, but there’s evidence that it’s all [about how you perceive stress](#). In a study involving 30,000 U.S. adults, those who didn’t look at stress as a bad thing had the lowest risk of dying prematurely. Those who viewed stress negatively had a 43 percent increased risk of an early death.

In Finland, which has been [named the happiest nation on Earth](#), they have a philosophy called [sisu](#). Sisu is about strength, determination, and courage in the face of adversity, and to practice it, Finns purposely undergo physically stressful feats. Some of the activities include long distance running, or swimming in frigid waters, or mountaineering in incredibly harsh conditions. According to researcher Emilia Lahti, “It’s about not seeing a silver lining in the clouds, and yet jumping into the storm anyway.”

Sisu is about embracing hardship in order to escape from it. You take trouble and make it a game, trusting yourself to do things you didn’t know were possible.

For the writer, escapism really can be about escape, but it can also be about perseverance and grit, which are part of sisu. I’ve seen lists about how to overcome writer’s block everywhere, and one list that intrigues me has several tips that might seem contradictory to the rest. On [this list](#), the first strategy is “take a walk” and the last one is “do something that inspires you.” The others boil down just doing the writing. Just sit down, do it, change scenery if you need to, but when it comes down to it, don’t give into the idea of writer’s block. Do give into the that you need to escape sometimes in order to refresh yourself.

For my poet friend Michael, the best escape from a constant world of poetry is violent video games. Say what you like about it, but that works for him. What’s your escape? I have to confess I

need to find a good one. Any suggestions?

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