

The Interview

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Lawrence Miles on Language, Literature and Lying to the Audience

This Town Will Never Let Us Go is the first time Faction Paradox has come into its own in a full-length novel. How does that change things? How does it change the way you write for the series? What I've come to realise, I think, is that- nobody really writes novels any more. What they write are films in novel form, everything's staged as if it were happening through the lens of a camera, and obviously it's a trend that's been getting worse ever since the invention of the feature film but- I think we've reached the point now where there's no pretence about it, I certainly don't think there's anybody fighting the tendency anywhere in popular literature. There's no interest in using language as a medium, basically. If you read a modern novel it's virtually all about sight and sound, every scene's described in terms of visuals and dialogue and very little else. Every so often characters will smell or taste or feel something, but only when it's an important plot-point. You know. Someone's going to smell gas just before there's a big cinematic explosion, or the hero's going to eat something and be able to taste poison in it, and sometimes there'll be a crap one-line attempt at doing emotion" but it'll usually come down to stock phrases. It'll be "he felt a sharp pang of fear as the lion bore down on him", and then the "fear" thing will end up being pushed to one side and the writer will just start describing what the lion looks like. Sometimes you'll even see these desperate attempts to fit film cliché into book form, so a character will- oh, I don't know- he'll fall over, and then lift up his head and see a pair of legs in front of him, and you just know that in the author's head he's thinking about that shot you get in movies where the bad guy stands over the good guy and you see the good guy framed between the bad guy's feet. And then there's a dramatic chord, and- you get the idea." So recently I think I've started to realise how bad that tendency is, and it's done a lot to change the way I write for Faction Paradox. Actually it's done a lot to change the way I see the whole series working. This isn't tie-in material any more, really, it's not a franchise". The new books are meant to be novels rather than novelisations. Or at least that's the way I'm hoping it'll turn out." **Does all this suggest that the lines are blurring between film and literature? Especially in the digital era, where there might not be such a solid line between the two.** It'd be nice to think that, because I tend to like blurry lines. But I think it's closer to the truth to say that film's over-writing literature entirely. It's a ridiculous, stupid waste of the novel form, to treat it as if it's just a second-rate version of cinema. And the novel isn't even my favourite medium, but it's at least a medium where you can genuinely explore human experience, where you can directly transcribe human experience. If a real event" happens to you- if, say, you're in a car crash or somebody comes at you with a gun- then it's not staged like a Hollywood tableaux and it's stupid to condition people to think in those terms. You don't see this neat little scenario of character A standing there with the gun in his hand, character B ducking for cover. What you're really more likely to go through is that moment of actually being- there, there's going to be panic and there's going to be terror and God-knows-what-else. You're going to be in touch with all your nerves at once, there's going to be a sense of your own body existing in that particular place. You're going to feel the force of gravity more than you're going to worry about what your eyes and ears are telling you. And I'm using a "crisis" example here, but I think the same thing goes for any event that's got any kind of meaning. If you think about the first time you had sex- it's an obvious example, I know, but bear with me- then I'm guessing you don't remember it in terms of what it looked like, but if you're describing it to someone then you're meant to turn it into a Hollywood love scene or apparently it doesn't have any validity." But really that's the kind of thing which makes literature potentially interesting, the fact that you can deal with those moments directly.

There are experiences you might never have, actual experiences rather than set-pieces, which you can access through literature in a way that's impossible in any other form. Someone I know told me recently that I didn't write particularly good action sequences", and I thought- no, of course I sodding don't, because I'm not making an action movie. If you're writing a novel and you find yourself describing a battle between two groups of ninjas, and you're explaining it blow-by-blow, then I think you've got to acknowledge that you've fucked up somewhere. Or at the very least you've got to acknowledge that you're feeling inadequate because you want to work in the movies." **But even before the feature-film, did books really do things that way? Were there ever that many novels which dealt in moments" instead of visuals?"** I think virtually all of them did, up to a certain point in time. I think you only start to realise just how much damage Hollywood has done when you go back and look at pre-twentieth-century writing, when you see the way authors used to work before they started looking at everything in terms of the camera. If you're reading an eighteenth century novel, and a female character gets raped- and it happens quite a lot in eighteenth century novels- then it's not described as a scene, it's described as an event. There's no the bedspread was pink, and as he forced her down onto it-" or "she lay there, staring up at the ceiling, horror frozen onto every inch of her face-". The focus is on what the event actually means. It's about the way it affects the characters, how everybody's going to react to it, what the consequences are going to be. It's certainly not about stage directions." Books aren't visual. They just aren't. If you treat them as if they are then you might as well go and watch a DVD, it's quicker. I'm amazed by the number of people I've met who seriously believe they're literary", but actually just want a better class of movie. I thought it was funny, by the way, that so many people objected to the style of *Adventuress* [of *Henrietta Street*, a novel written in the style of a history] because they thought it was supposed to be "experimental". And of course it's not experimental at all, it's just pre-Hollywood. Two-hundred years ago there wasn't a solid dividing line between histories and works of fiction, the real give-away is that so many of the early English-language novels from the 1700s are described as "the history of such-and-such a person". And that's the period *Adventuress* is set in, obviously." **Is it an advantage working in a field like SF? Which has a tradition of being more tolerant towards different styles of writing.** I don't think that's true, though. It could just be my own sense of bitterness talking, but if anything SF readers seem to be even more insular than mainstream readers. I did a story called *Grass*" for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction*, which- well, I liked it. I was very happy with the way it turned out. I managed to pull off a kind of style which I thought suited the story perfectly, it was quite unusual but you could maybe see a Damon Runyan influence there. Editors liked it, it got reprinted twice, the few- all right, the very few mainstream readers who read it seemed to like it. And the SF readers loathed it, it got uniformly bad reviews in the SF press, they thought it was - I'm quoting directly here - "experimental nonsense". And I thought to myself "how can you call this experimental, people have been writing like this since the 1940s-?", but of course the truth is that SF readers, by and large, haven't even heard of Damon Runyan. They've only heard of people who write stories about big cinema-friendly spaceships. Sorry, I'm going all bitter again now." I do think there's a kind of snottiness in the SF readership, in that the readers generally won't accept anything which is- ahhhhh- written, rather than script-written. These days if you talk to them about, I don't know- Kurt Vonnegut or William Burroughs or even someone like James Joyce, they tend to have that attitude of ohhh, no, they were just being pretentious and it's not real fiction". And the truth is, authors like that were just trying to find ways of writing books in the twentieth century when everyone else was doing movies with words. Many people can't accept that because they can't accept the idea of literature at all, they grew up with film and TV - the way we all do - and that's still their main reference-point. To them SF means *2001* or *Star Wars* or *Blade Runner*, and they want books that remind them of those films as much as possible." **Isn't there some overlap there, between SF cinema and SF literature? 2001, for example, is what you might call a literate SF film- I don't think it is, though. It's just a great work of cinema, literate" doesn't come into it. Everything that's great about 2001 is Kubrick's rather than Clarke's." So you wouldn't be interested in writing for film?** Actually I would, but I just think it's important to remember that- the different

media are discrete things, there's very little common ground between them. I wouldn't try to tell the same kind of story in cinema that I would in a book, and I wouldn't try to tell the same kind of story in a book that I would in a comic. I'm very happy, for example, that with *This Town* I've written a novel that's completely unfilmable. But even then, there's that Hollywood thing in people's minds.

Whenever I tell someone it's unfilmable they immediately assume that I mean unfilmable because you'd need a huge budget" or "unfilmable because it involves horrors from the dawn of time WHICH CAN NEVER BE SEEN!!!". And actually it's just- written in a style that can't really be translated into a visual medium. It's also supposed to work on all the human senses, which I think is important. Like I said, fiction's too preoccupied with sight and sound, it's important to try to break that lock whenever you can."

But can you really expect every book to deal with things like taste and smell, as well as sight and sound? Not every book needs a scene where somebody goes into a restaurant- It's not worth forcing every book to cover things like taste and smell, no. But I'd say it's good to remember that they exist. **Going back to what you said earlier, that mixed in with all the visual details there'll sometimes be a crap attempt at doing emotion" -** I just meant, I get annoyed by standards". I get annoyed by stock phrases, especially when they're jammed into the text as an easy way of explaining what the character's feeling. I've talked about this before, I know.

The most obvious stock phrases are things like- you know, "the laser-beam cut through the door like a knife through butter", and you just imagine the author sitting there writing that, and you think, "I see, and you've been particularly struck by the way a knife cuts through butter, have you?". And of course they haven't, they've just heard the phrase and transcribed it word-for-word. They do the same thing when they're trying to describe characters' emotions, it never has anything to do with real feeling or real experience, it all comes fitted-as-standard. Oh, you know my all-time least favourite? It's when a character's put into some kind of jeopardy, and the text says: "the world slid into slow-motion around him-". That really is a sure sign of a shite author. The world doesn't slide into slow-motion when you're in a crisis situation, not ever, ever, ever. It's just what happens in the movies, but the clich+»+-+-'s so well-known that if you really are in a crisis situation then afterwards you can find yourself describing it like that anyway." And I don't think it's just nit-picking, I think it's part of a very big problem. I quoted this once before, at the start of *Interference*, but- J. G. Ballard once suggested that eventually, television will have conditioned people with so many stock responses to real-life situations that original thought will simply be impossible. And it's potentially true, and it's not just television. We get conditioned to accept these standardised ideas and standardised set-pieces as if they're definitive parts of human experience, until everything's generic and everything's equally pointless. Creativity just becomes unfashionable, and in the end you can only make books, or films, or anything else out of ready-made sections of other books or films, which is more or less what's happening to popular cinema right now. Even audiences who think they're intelligent are ready to sit through any old recycled cack that the American film industry gives them, on the grounds that it's just movies". But if you're working in any kind of creative medium then you've got a duty to try to expand language, whether it's written language or visual language, because it's the only way you can expand thought."

Surely some emotional experiences are universal, though? I'm not convinced that's really true. It's always the small detail that's interesting, it's the small detail that's actually human. I can't believe there's an all-purpose experience of fear, or love, or anything else that intense, because even if some responses are common to everybody, those responses only actually mean something in the context of one particular moment in one particular lifetime. And every context creates a different kind of experience, if that weren't true then we would've got bored with fiction centuries ago. Besides, I don't like the idea of universal experience" being used as an excuse for lazy writing." **The crap attempt at emotion" comment might be telling, because it's sometimes been said that your work isn't very emotional. That it's more about interesting things happening or interesting uses of language than about feelings.**" I'm just not sure that it's ever a good idea to force emotional responses out of the reader, or- even out of yourself, to be honest. Actual emotion's so complex and so deep-rooted that I seriously don't believe you can describe more than one particular sensation in a whole book, at least not if you're doing it properly. If you try to run the complete circuit of emotion in

a novel then you'll just end up using approximations, which don't interest me at all. Basically you end up faking it. I'd rather wait until there's something I want to express completely, and focus on that. I think it's true that *The Book of the War* concentrates on interesting stuff" rather than humanity, but it's a very specific kind of format and it doesn't work the way a normal novel or a normal short story collection does. You can't say the same thing about something like *This Town*." But it's a piece of cake to generate emotion, or pretend-emotion. It's just meat-cleaver psychology. You can get an easy audience reaction, you can make them feel like they're reading or watching the most passionate story ever told, just by pushing a few basic buttons. Which is a great way of becoming a popular writer, but as far as I'm concerned it's also a kind of emotional rape. You know *E.T.*? I still can't help thinking of that film as a kind of violation, I've been furious about it ever since I was ten. It goes out of its way to hit all the primal triggers that make you empathise with this big-eyed baby-faced alien, so that it can get an instant gut-level reaction out of you when it kills him. Not because there's any purpose behind it but just because it wants absolute control over the audience. I could name dozens of books and films and comics that do the same thing, but it's not really about writing, it's more like a branch of marketing. Advertising agencies use the same tricks all the time. **You really think it's that easy to write successfully? You make it sound like you just have to stick to a formula.** I think it's that easy, yeah. Especially considering the shape of the modern media, the way things are marketed now. If you want a big hit then the best way to do it is to take an idea that's already been shown to work, then strip it of anything too complex for your target audience and if possible add a new pop-culture spin on it. It's almost too obvious to say, but it's like *The Matrix* and it's like *Harry Potter*. Don't you hate it when writers start talking about *Harry Potter*? I'll stop that now. Actually, if I'm going to be entirely honest here- I say it's easy", but I know I couldn't do it because I don't have that level of discipline and I get depressed too easily. I know I'd get bored and start making things complicated just to cheer myself up. Which I suppose turns successful writing into a "work ethic" thing, it's not about thought or language, it's about how much long, pointless toll you put in." **You're not tempted to try-?** No, I really don't think so. Well- yes, but not for long, that's probably closer to the truth. At the end of the day I do want to be popular, at the end of the day I'd like people to like what I've written and I'd like them to like me for writing it. At the end of the day I just want a big hug, like everyone else. But I think it's- I don't know, I think I'd rather be hated for writing things that are true than liked for lying my arse off. And that's what most really popular fiction is, it's lying to the target audience, it's coming up with whatever they need to hear to make them feel good about themselves. It's about reassuring them that they're the centre of the universe. I know I'm well-known for ranting, but I think that's the thing which unites everything I've ever ranted against. *Sandman* and *The Matrix* and *Harry Potter* all have it in common, they're all incredibly cynical that way, they're all about the self-satisfaction of the audience. They're about making people in the target demographic group feel as if they're the chosen ones, or potential chosen ones. I've been critical of some of the *New Adventures* authors for exactly the same reason. **There does seem to be an obsession with the truth" here-** Every story should be true. Even the ones that aren't even slightly real should be true. **But why shouldn't a book make you feel good?** That misses the point of what I'm saying, though, doesn't it? Any great story should make you feel good on some level, even if it's a tragedy. But reassurance" fiction is like paying someone to flatter you, it's about making sure the customers feel generally comfortable about their own lifestyle. You only score points with an audience by playing up to their prejudices, not by saying "no, sorry, you haven't thought this through properly". At the moment authors and film-makers don't seem to have any desire to challenge anybody, which is a shame, because challenging is what literature and cinema do best. Otherwise you might as well just watch soap opera." **And do your books say sorry, you haven't thought this through properly"?** Actually, no, I tend to end up saying come to think of it I haven't thought this through either". *Interference*, *Dead Romance* and *This Town* all have that in common, they all changed me just by being written, because I had to face up to what I really thought and that has a way of uncovering things. I'm not necessarily any more comfortable about it than the readers are." I take these things quite seriously. You probably got that. **You said that film was over-writing"**

literature. Does this suggest that the novel is doomed altogether? I- think it's true there won't be any more great novelists. We tend to think that there's a definite pantheon of great novelists", and that they all have a specific part to play in the history of writing, but that's not the way things work any more. If there were a writer today who did something as groundbreaking as any of the "great" eighteenth or nineteenth century writers, then he - I'm saying "he" for quickness here, please don't pick me up on that - then he wouldn't be remembered for more than a decade or so. Not unless someone made a big-budget feature-film version, anyway. His books would get good reviews, they'd find a small, dedicated audience, but in the modern world there are thousands of books published every year that get good reviews and find small, dedicated audiences. There's no "central authority" that labels them as classics. That's what I was trying to get at in the Brookhaven sections of *The Book of the War*, from the 1990s onwards we're living in a world without any consensus- no, that's not true. There never was really any consensus, but now we're living in a world that doesn't even have the illusion of consensus. Partly because there's so much information and potential information, partly because we're trained to analyse things on so many levels that we can make a near-infinite number of arguments and counter-arguments about anything produced" in any medium. Which isn't a bad thing, in itself, but literature suffers more than anything else just because of the nature of the market. There aren't any legends any more, and there won't be ever again. There probably will be writers as good as the greats", they just won't be remembered that way, which is why there'll always be the sense that the ancients were better and wiser than us. They weren't, but they all agreed with each other and that makes the past seem a lot more self-assured than the present. From this point on the only books which are going to be widely-remembered are the ones that sell well, and that's bound to be a problem." **So is the novel doomed?** Possibly. **Finishing with This Town, then. What can we expect from it? How are regular readers and listeners of the other Faction Paradox material likely to react to it?** It's- the last thing I'm planning on writing before I move on to something completely different, really. It's supposed to be a re-boot of everything I've done before now, it's meant to start the novel series with me saying well, this is what I've figured out so far, here's a summary". On the title page there's the subtitle "War - Culture - Ritual", because those are the three points which kept repeating themselves throughout the pre-history of Faction Paradox. It ties up all the themes so far, there are bits of Christmas [on a Rational Planet] and Alien Bodies and Interference and maybe the odd bit of Adventuress, but outside the context of an adventure-based TV tie-in and hopefully- you know- presented as a proper book." **Is it designed more for new readers than old hands, maybe new readers who've come to the Faction from the comic-book?** That depends how the old hands" feel about things being re-defined and re-invented, I suppose. From my point of view there's a sense of "goodbye to all this and hello to the twenty-first century" here, and I think that comes across quite strongly. It is the first novel I've started writing this century. Right now I'm inclined to think it's going to be the last full-length novel I'll ever do, which gives me that feeling of "nyah-hah-hah, the novel is dead, let this be its tombstone!", although obviously I keep saying things like that and then changing my mind later on." **And finally: what's it actually about?** It's just... about the world. Generally. *(Editorial note: this interview was compiled using material from several sessions", including e-mail discussions. Although it's presented here in an order which makes some kind of logical sense, every effort's been made to ensure that nothing significant has been cut and nothing's been taken out of context.)"*

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