DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

A Message About Messages
by Ursula Le Guin

I made a note to myself a while ago: “Whenever they tell me children want this sort of book and children need this sort of writing, I am going to smile politely and shut my earlids. I am a writer, not a caterer. There are plenty of caterers. But what children most want and need is what we and they don’t know they want and don’t think they need, and only writers can offer it to them.”

My fiction, especially for kids and young adults, is often reviewed as if it existed in order to deliver a useful little sermon (“Growing up is tough but you can make it,” that sort of thing). Does it ever occur to such reviewers that the meaning of the story might lie in the language itself, in the movement of the story as read, in an inexpressible sense of discovery, rather than a tidy bit of advice?

Readers — kids and adults — ask me about the message of one story or another. I want to say to them, “Your question isn’t in the right language.”

As a fiction writer, I don’t speak message. I speak story. Sure, my story means something, but if you want to know what it means, you have to ask the question in terms appropriate to storytelling. Terms such as message are appropriate to expository writing, didactic writing, and sermons — different languages from fiction.

The notion that a story has a message assumes that it can be reduced to a few abstract words, neatly summarized in a school or college examination paper or a brisk critical review.

If that were true, why would writers go to the trouble of making up characters and relationships and plots and scenery and all that? Why not just deliver the message? Is the story a box to hide an idea in, a fancy dress to make a naked idea look pretty, a candy coating to make a bitter idea easier to swallow? (Open your mouth, dear, it’s good for you.) Is fiction decorative wordage concealing a rational thought, a message, which is its ultimate reality and reason for being?

A lot of teachers teach fiction, a lot of reviewers (particularly of children’s books) review it, and so a lot of people read it, in that belief. The trouble is, it’s wrong.

I’m not saying fiction is meaningless or useless. Far from it. I believe storytelling is one of the most useful tools we have for achieving meaning: it serves to keep our communities together by asking and saying who we are, and it’s one of the best tools an individual has to find out who I am, what life may ask of me and how I can respond.

But that’s not the same as having a message. The complex meanings of a serious story or novel can be understood only by participation in the language of the story itself. To

translate them into a message or reduce them to a sermon distorts, betrays, and destroys them.

This is because a work of art is understood not by the mind only, but by the emotions and by the body itself.

It's easier to accept this about the other arts. A dance, a landscape painting — we're less likely to talk about its message than simply about the feelings it rouses in us. Or music: we know there's no way to say all a song may mean to us, because the meaning is not so much rational as deeply felt, felt by our emotions and our whole body, and the language of the intellect can't fully express those understandings.

In fact, art itself is our language for expressing the understandings of the heart, the body, and the spirit.

Any reduction of that language into intellectual messages is radically, destructively incomplete.

This is as true of literature as it is of dance or music or painting. But because fiction is an art made of words, we tend to think it can be translated into other words without losing anything. So people think a story is just a way of delivering a message.

And so kids ask me, in all good faith, "When you have your message, how do you make up a story to fit it?" All I can answer is, "It doesn't work that way! I'm not an answering machine — I don't have a message for you! What I have for you is a story."

What you get out of that story, in the way of understanding or perception or emotion, is partly up to me — because, of course, the story is passionately meaningful to me (even if I only find out what it's about after I've told it). But it's also up to you, the reader. Reading is a passionate act. If you read a story not just with your head, but also with your body and feelings and soul, the way you dance or listen to music, then it becomes your story. And it can mean infinitely more than any message. It can offer beauty. It can take you through pain. It can signify freedom. And it can mean something different every time you reread it.

I am grieved and affronted when reviewers treat my novels and other serious books for kids as candy-coated sermons. Of course there's a lot of moralistic and didactic stuff written for young people, which can be discussed as such without loss. But with genuine works of literature for children, with The Elephant's Child or The Hobbit, it is a grave error to teach or review them as mere vehicles for ideas, not seeing them as works of art. Art frees us; and the art of words can take us beyond anything we can say in words.

I wish our teaching, our reviews, our reading would celebrate that freedom, that liberation. I wish, instead of looking for a message when we read a story, we could think, "Here's a door opening on a new world: what will I find there?"