

Fiction, Truth, and Training

Fiction is, by definition, nonfactual, but that does not mean it is untruthful. The very fantasy of fiction sometimes serves to reveal deeper truths if the reader is mindful during the story.

A very old and rather mundane example is the children's fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood". We know that wolves do not talk, eat grandmothers, nor nap wearing grandma's bonnet. Even children know that the story is completely nonfactual, that it never occurred, nor ever could occur. That does not stop readers and listeners from seeing within it levels of human experience that are undeniable truths. The story warns youngsters to be careful of strangers, and more specifically warns young girls about the dangers of coming into womanhood. In the French and Austrian versions, there are allusions to a female coming of age. How do you think we got the colloquial expression "He's a wolf" in the first place?

In a French version of the tale, the wolf asks the girl (not yet called Red Riding Hood) to race him to the cottage. He takes the path of needles while she takes the path of pins. The threading of needles has a sexual implication while the "path of the pins" suggests an old French custom of sending girls away to "learn to sew" which implied teaching them to be domestic in preparation for adulthood. For children, the story seems to have a whimsical weirdness resulting in their joyous attentiveness, but other meanings seem to reveal themselves to teenagers and adults resulting in a more mature response.

This is the great advantage of fiction: it is educative and can move the emotions, as well, all because we can relate to it as if it were fact and thereby glean from it truths about our own psyches, experiencing in the mind what our actions and reactions might be in reality.

Isn't that what kata is? Isn't that what kata does? Critics of kata miss the point when they say that no one fights like that. Right, agreed, true—and no wolf every donned a bonnet after ingesting grandma; but, in the nursery rhyme, we get the point. In fact, we get one point when we are 3 years old, another when we are 13, yet another when we are 30, and others when we are as old as grandma. If our kata were not "fictional", they could not be rich in meaning. And if our kata were not attached to actual human action, they would not be educative.

No need to think of your kata practice as a journey into Grimm's (or any culture's) fairy tales. The analogies work with much more mature fiction: novels, short stories, plays, and movies. Sure some of them are just a joyride appealing to the child-like emotions in you. Others add an element that challenges you to reflect mentally on its implications.

Fiction is the exercise, "the kata", if you will. Fact is the actual encounter. Between the two is training. Only the truths we draw from fiction can help us face facts.