

The Power of Words

Words have power.

I find it amazing that the 26 letters of the English alphabet, when combined in various ways and laid out one after the other, can create such magic.

Poetry and stories are brought to life by combining these little shapes and squiggles. And whole worlds are created.

You can take ideas and pictures, imaginations and emotions and you can rearrange these letters so that someone else can receive what's in your mind, see what you see, think what you think and imagine what you imagine. They can also disagree of course, but they have words for that, too!

If you can find just the right words in a given situation, it's as though there is perfect communication. There are specialists at this of course - many of them. The very best of the writing craft (think: Philip Pullman, Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, George Mpanga, David Nicholls, Margaret Atwood, Matt Haig, John Twelve Hawks, Stephen Chbosky, Kathryn Stockett - of course there many and I've included only a handful.)

They have a skill that I, and many like me, aspire to have. To perfect the craft. To write just the right words to convey just the right meaning.

An example from Matt Haig:

“If you aim to be something you are not, you will always fail. Aim to be you. Aim to look and act and think like you. Aim to be the truest version of you. Embrace that you-ness. Endorse it. Love it. Work hard at it. And don't give a second thought when people mock it or ridicule it. Most gossip is envy in disguise.” - Matt Haig, *The Midnight Library*

Another example from Neil Gaiman:

“A voice came over the loudspeaker, that formal, disembodied male voice that warned ‘Mind the Gap’. It was intended to keep unwary passengers from stepping

into the space between the train and the platform. Richard, like most Londoners, barely heard it anymore – it was like aural wallpaper.” - Neil Gaiman, Neverwhere

Last example, this one from John Scalzi:

"Fear is a scavenger who feeds on the future; on what may be and what is possible, extending down the line of our lives." - John Scalzi, The Sagan Diary

Don't you think that these paragraphs flow straight from the page into your imagination, into your mind? Don't you think that they convey with just the right words exactly what they want to say?

And there are many such paragraphs and sentences scattered throughout literature and poetry, films and plays. Just awaiting the eager eyes of the readers.

In his magnificent book, *On Writing*, Stephen King writes:

"I'm convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing. If one is writing for one's own pleasure, that fear may be mild — timidity is the word I've used here. If, however, one is working under deadline — a school paper, a newspaper article, the SAT writing sample — that fear may be intense. Dumbo got airborne with the help of a magic feather; you may feel the urge to grasp a passive verb or one of those nasty adverbs for the same reason. Just remember before you do that Dumbo didn't need the feather; the magic was in him..."

"Good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation."

When you think about it, it's remarkable. Can you imagine a world without the written word? What would it be like? A world without novels and poetry, scripts and letters. Without menus and google. Perhaps someone will write about that.

But there's a downside. The written word has the power to inspire, but also has the power to sting, the power to wound.

From the safety of a computer or phone, it is very easy to type something one would not dream of saying in real life. It's easy to forget that behind a twitter profile or online persona there is a real person, watching, reading, feeling.

And while it takes seconds to type and send an insult, a criticism or something one may consider 'funny', remember that the consequences could stretch far beyond anything intended. Remember also that what you mean may not come across as you think it, it may arrive with an entirely different meaning. You don't have the use of voice tones to indicate sarcasm, no facial expressions to show humour, only the plain shapes and squiggles of the written word. Only the meaning that someone will take from them. You have no way of seeing or knowing what the person receiving your words is experiencing, no way to judge the ramifications of your message, no way to tell the inner struggles that may exist.

Freedom of speech or expression is real, and I am not suggesting otherwise. I only mention it as, what I consider, something important to think about in dealing with people - especially online. What you say can, like an innocent seed planted, grow into something unexpected – beautiful or toxic.

Words have power. They have magic. As many a story will tell us, power can be used for good and for evil, for growth or destruction.

Used for good, I believe words have the power to change the world.

And so I have a little poem:

WORDS

**Words have power. Words have magic
To convey ideas and make them stick**

**A book can be written, a story told
Or education to shape and mould**

**When someone discovers something new
They can write it down and share it with you**

**And when someone feels a certain way
Words are the means for them to say**

**What runs through their mind, and what they feel
And for someone to help, words can reveal**

**A truth, a path, a way to improve
But words can bite, and words can soothe**

It's all a matter of how they're used.

M. J. Fraser