

**1---Blindness by José Saramago (Page 548)**

(The girl with the dark glasses talking to the doctor's wife.)

1) "Meanwhile, we're still alive, Listen, you know much more than I do, compared with you I'm simply an ignorant girl, but in my opinion we're already dead, we're blind because we're dead, or if you would prefer me to put it another way, we're dead because we're blind

*Symbolic statement. "The blind are not dead, the dead are not blind". This outbreak of blindness is a death sentence in that there is no food or water; there is chaos in society. The real victims of this plague can "see" what is happening even an uneducated prostitute can figure it out.*

**2---The Plague by Albert Camus (Page 120)**

1 "For they would have wished to add to it all that they regretted having left undone, while they might yet have done it, with the man or woman whose return they now awaited;"

*The loved ones they are separated from and are now longing for. The sentence is very, very long. It is almost a stream of consciousness as one pining thought leads to another.*

2 "just as in all the activities, even the relatively happy ones, of their life as prisoners they kept vainly trying to include the absent one."

*Camus continues with his duality of sentiment. In the first sentence it is almost romantic. In this sentence he mentions the "relatively" happy ones- almost as a dig at their reaction to their predicament. He also refers to their life as prisoners instead of saying how noble the citizens of Oran are behaving- as they are saving the rest of the country (world) from getting this plague.*

**3---The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Bauby (Page 56)**

1) Had I been blind and deaf, or does it take the harsh light of disaster to show a person's true nature?

*Bauby chastises himself for not recognizing what others had to offer- but then he wonders if the letter writers themselves were changed by his predicament.*

#### **4---Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka (Page 27)**

1) "It's got to go", shouted his sister, "that's the only way, Father. You've got to get rid of the idea that that's Gregor. "

*Dramatic hysteria. The afflicted Gregor is a repulsive sight. No sympathy for the ugly.*

2) "We've only harmed ourselves by believing it for so long. How can that be Gregor?"

*Rationalization. They do not know what to do. Frustrated at their impotence it is much easier to get rid of Gregor.*

3) "If it were Gregor he would have seen long ago that it's not possible for human beings to live with an animal like that and he would have gone of his own free will. "

*They have convinced themselves that this repulsive creature is not their loved one because if it was Gregor, he would have realized how repulsive he is and left them in peace.*

4) "We wouldn't have a brother any more, then, but we could carry on with our lives and remember him with respect."

*More defensive rationalization. This is the easier path for the family. There is no concern for what is best for Gregor. To assuage their guilt, they convince themselves that this grotesque figure is not Gregor.*

5) As it is this animal is persecuting us, it's driven out our tenants, it obviously wants to take over the whole flat and force us to sleep on the streets.

*Selfishness. It is all about the family and what is best (and easiest) for the family. It is easier to get rid of an "animal" because it is a misbehaving and unpredictable threat. Not one of them presents options to help Gregor, they only want to get rid of him.*

6) Father, look, just look", she suddenly screamed, "he's starting again!"

*More dramatic hysteria. This is f her brother. He loved her so much and she is issuing, as Shakespeare would say, "unkindest cut of all."*

#### **5---Memoirs of a Woman Doctor by Nawal El Saadawi(Page6)**

1) "I felt sorry for myself and locked myself in my room and cried. "

*Helplessness/hopelessness*

2) "The first real tears I shed in my life weren't because I'd done badly at school or broken something valuable but because I was a girl. "

*She cannot deny who or what she is, it is her conflict with nature.*

3) "I wept over my femininity even before I knew what it was.

*She was really crying about equality with her brother.*

4) The moment I opened my eyes on life, a state of enmity already existed between me and my nature.”

*She could not imagine ever embracing what nature had made her*

**6---A Palace in the Old Village by Tahar Ben Jelloun (Page 10)**

1) “Mohammed would have liked to reply but hadn’t the courage to tell the imam, for example, that it was imbeciles like him who praise jihad, babbling of paradise and martyrdom, “

*Jelloun is presenting Mohammed, who is a devout Muslim, as a follower of his faith and not some jihadist. Is this to make Mohammed more sympathetic to the non-Muslim reader? Mohammed clearly believes this is not how one should interpret the Quran.*

2) “yes, retards like him who send floundering young men who can’t find their own way in life off to die,”

*Lives wasted before they get started.*

3) “because liars and hypocrites like him push youngsters into the arms of death, saying: You’ll be real martyrs, as true and good as the ones in the days of the Prophet, “

*Islam has been hijacked by jihadists who lack compassion or understanding for life*

4) “and you’ll be buried in clothes soaked in the blood of sacrifice, not in the shroud of an ordinary death!”

*The only honor the young men get is an early death.*

**7)--- A Palace in the Old Village by Taher Ben Jelloun (again) (Page 22)**

1) He was possessed, haunted by an obsession, repeating words endlessly, talking to himself, scratching his head, stopping only to gaze at the sky and talk to the rare clouds drifting by.

*Long sentence. Mohammed’s life is out of his control. He has retreated deep into his own mind where he can once again be the man in charge. He has so much control now that he doesn’t need the outside world. He talks to himself, answers himself and uses his imagination for entertainment. He is going mad.*

**8)---A Country Doctor by Franz Kafka (Page 5 )**

1) Naked, abandoned to the frost of this unhappy age, with an earthly carriage and unearthly horses, I drive around by myself, an old man.

*The doctor is symbolically naked because he is impotent. He is old, his life is not going the way he wants it. He is near the end of his career and the end of his life and it is depressing.*

2) My fur coat hangs behind the wagon, but I cannot reach it, and no one from the nimble rabble of patients lifts a finger.

*Nightmare descriptions...being unable to reach something, unable to get others to do or see things. Very dreamlike sequence*

3) Betrayed! Betrayed! Once one responds to a false alarm on the night bell, there's no making it good again—not ever.

*His life is out of his control. He made a bad decision and there is no going back. This mistake has cost him everything.*

### **9—A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius by Dave Eggers (Page 232)**

“Hi Chris.”

*The student friends of Toph greet him at the open house*

And then they look at me and squint.

*Exaggeration. The kids weren't really squinting, just looking at Toph's "father" representative with curiosity*

They are scared. They are jealous.

*Exaggeration. Defensive mechanism, because the kids are probably neither, but Eggers is both. He is uncertain in his role.*

We are pathetic. We are stars.

*Exaggeration. Self-deprecation in that they are not "pathetic." And the "we are stars" is how Eggers copes with uncertainty...by role playing.*

We are either sad and sickly or we are glamorous and new.

*Exaggeration with an extreme and unrealistic selection of options. Again he is role playing with glamorous and new.*

We walk in and the choices race through my head.

*Nervous reaction. Anytime you read "racing through one's head", the character is panicking.*

Sad and sickly? Or glamour and new?

Sad/sickly or glamorous/new? Sad/sickly or glamorous/new?

*Exaggeration, brief, repetition.*

We are unusual and tragic and alive.

*Probably closer to the truth. Interesting he felt compelled to define his feelings.*

Michael Lardner  
Final CCCC

Modern literature tells us the ill, terminally ill, and communities beset by disease or affliction are feared, pitied and even despised by others. Losing control stymies us. Death, the great unknown, frightens us. Individuals and societies that face death and disease have few stalwarts to mitigate the suffering of others. Equally damaging, but more insidious than diseases of the flesh are issues that affect morality, freedom and fairness. These topics as well are addressed by authors of the modern day. From fact to fiction, the crisis of illness and oppression are as great as any crisis mankind can face. It is in a state of crisis, that true character is revealed. Inferior protagonists are treated as less than human by frightened individuals in authority, who are adept at rationalizing despicable behavior. Some protagonists rise above it, while others succumb to their perception of overwhelming odds. It is the author's responsibility to convince the reader that the characters are real and the circumstances they are experiencing are inescapable.

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is a fictitious story of a man who wakes up as a frightening giant bug. Some believe it is an allegorical tale of self-loathing. Others interpret it as shining a spotlight on a dysfunctional family. The protagonist, Gregor was able to provide a level of financial support for his family... but now, as a bug, he is useless. Gregor is reviled, burdensome and an embarrassment. Gregor is unable to control his new body, he cannot speak, and he cannot function as a human. He is trapped and it is through no fault of his own. His family is completely dependent on his income as he is the only member of the household with a job. Not exactly an equitable situation for Gregor as he shoulders the family's financial burden alone. Gregor's terrified family rationalizes their shunning of him, as a safety issue and out of concern for others in the

household. Completely discounted, in their rush to get rid of him, are the contributions Gregor made to the family before his metamorphosis.

Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, author Jean-Dominique Bauby found himself trapped, and like the fictitious Gregor, his entrapment is no fault of his own. Tragically, Bauby's story was *not* fiction. In his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, Bauby suffers a massive stroke, which leaves him unable to move, save for his left eyelid. However, his mind remained fully intact. It was 1995, and at the age of 43, Bauby suffered from "locked-in-syndrome." His withering physique is that of a grotesque, shell of a man -who previously was the powerful editor-in-chief for France's *Elle* magazine. Instead of a whining tome of self-pity and tragedy, Bauby pens a book about his imagination and how it takes flight, visiting great places in history and destinations from his past. "My diving bell becomes less oppressive, and my mind takes flight like a butterfly. There is so much to do. You can wander off in space or in time, set out for Tierra del Fuego or for King Midas's court." (The Diving Bell and the Butterfly Page 13) The title of the book is a metaphor for his body and his mind. The story was a stunning surprise of acceptance despite his tragic situation in life.

Similar to the fictitious Gregor, Bauby longs for the love of his family. He knows visiting him at the hospital is difficult for his young children and ex-wife. He never writes that he wants to give up on life because of his predicament. He fully comprehends his situation and tries to squeeze what pleasure he can from his imagination. Conversely, the fictitious Gregor wants to die. He finds his predicament intolerable, he can find no solution and he sees no reason to live. Ultimately, he gives up and perishes.

Gregor's morose outlook on life is similar to another fictitious protagonist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the irrational Mohammed, from *A Palace in the Village* by Tahar Ben Jelloun. Mohammed emigrates from his native Morocco to France after WWII, to help rebuild the country. He spends 40 years working at an auto factory and never planned emotionally or intellectually for his retirement. He never assimilated to the European culture, never learned how to write the language or how to read. Now he wants to go back to Morocco and build a giant house because he truly believes his adult children will find it irresistible. He expects his kids, who grew up in France, were educated in France and are married to Europeans, will drop everything and go to Africa. A devout Muslim, he desperately wants to regain his patriarchal control of his family and their faith. His children never visit this land, to which they have no affinity, and Mohammed plants himself in a chair in front of the mansion and sits there until he dies. He gives up, succumbs to the depression of his hopelessness.

Kafka's Gregor did the same. "He thought back of his family with emotion and love. If it was possible, he felt that he must go away even more strongly than his sister. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful rumination until he heard the clock tower strike three in the morning. He watched as it slowly began to get light everywhere outside the window too. Then, without his willing it, his head sank down completely, and his last breath flowed weakly from his nostrils. "(Metamorphosis Page 28) Gregor's family carried on in great relief that he was gone. They regained control of their lives and created an equitable distribution of financial responsibility. They became a functioning family.

The tragedy of “not belonging” is a psychological trauma that can result in physical deterioration. As humans, we are social creatures and must belong to a social sphere. The primary sphere is family and then it radiates out from there. When family is lost, the anchor of our existence is lost too. We can either recreate new relationships...in essence build a new family. Or we can become depressed over the loss and never overcome it. Not overcoming depression leads to the destruction of the human spirit. Unlike Gregor and Mohammed, there are literary examples of protagonists who rise above their isolation. In Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoir of a Woman Doctor*, her fictitious female doctor, lives in a culture where women are second-class citizens. As a young girl, she is defiant and wants to do more with her life than what society says she should do. Instead of succumbing to the oppression, she escapes it, gets an education, and thus refuses to allow limitations to be placed upon her.

Literature is replete with stories where it isn’t just one protagonist “under attack.” When Albert Camus penned *The Plague*, he depressingly and painstakingly, wrote of enduring life while waiting for it to return to normal after a crisis. *The Plague* focuses on the fictitious city of Oran and chronicles the spread of an incurable disease that overruns the city. Deaths, in great numbers, are chronicled. Individual suffering is horrifically detailed. Tragedy abounds, life is frightening and death excruciatingly takes its toll in greater and greater numbers. It was written on the heels of WWII and is an allegorical tale of isolation, deprivation, disease and death. The story begins with a city that faces away from the sea and that is symbolic of turning its back on nature. The plague forces the city to be quarantined, as more and more of its citizens succumb to this incurable disease. Mass graves, isolationism, dwindling supplies and depression turn Oran into a



city that is at war and there is no weapon to fight this enemy, except time. Eventually the disease runs its course and the city that turned its back on the sea, looks to its harbor as a source of life renewed. “It lay outside the walls of the stifled, strangled town, in the fragrant brushwood of the hills, in the waves of the sea, under free skies, and in the custody of love.” (Page 374 *The Plague* by Albert Camus)

Similarly, *Blindness*, by Jose Saramago, is the story of a city where blindness spreads rapidly, with no cure or treatment. Like *The Plague*, it is an allegorical tale of a bigger problem in society. The blindness that afflicts the city is a spotlight on ignorance of how people take things for granted- how people don't see the bounty that life provides. Ultimately, the protagonist's group learns that the most valuable gift life provides is the gift of having people who love and care for you. “You spoke of sincerity, tell me then if it's true that you really love me, I love you enough to want to be with you, and that is the first time I've ever said that to anyone, You would not have said it to me either if you had met me somewhere before, an elderly man, half bald with white hair, with a patch over one eye and a cataract in the other, The woman I was then wouldn't have said it, I agree, the person who said it was the woman I am today,” (Page 667 José Saramago *Blindness*)

The true understanding of love and caring is revealed in the crisis. Getting past physical beauty comes easily when eyesight is lost. It forces everyone in the story to find something much less superficial in a partner or friend.

The third person narrative of sick societies in the twentieth century is an effective literary perspective. The reader has the sense there is a detached accounting of the facts and the narrator is unbiased in his or her observation of the calamity. *The Plague*, by Camus, and *Blindness*, by Saramago, are fictional works that are presented in the

impartial third person narrative. The reader learns at the end of *The Plague*, that the narrator is actually the protagonist Dr. Rieux. The narrator of *Blindness* is never revealed. Impartiality allows the narrator to observe the experiences of each character as it occurs in the storyline, and not simply tell the story through eyes of one participant in the events that occur.

First person narratives, by individuals struggling with the accepted norms of the society to which they are born, are passionate about the injustices they suffer. Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoir of a Woman Doctor* begins with a fictitious young girl who absolutely loathes her gender and what is natural. "God must really hate girls to have tarnished them with this curse. I felt that God had favoured boys in everything.

I got up from the bed, dragged myself over to the mirror and looked at the two little mounds sprouting on my chest. If only I could die! I didn't recognize this body which sprang a new shame on me every day, adding to my weakness and my preoccupation "with myself. What would grow on my body next? What other new symptom would my tyrannical femininity break out in?" (Memoirs of a Woman Doctor Page 7)

Her self-loathing was due to the society she lives in. Her brother has every freedom and *his* future is unlimited. She, on the other hand, is told from the day she is born that learning to cook will make her a good wife someday. She has to make her bed, her brother does not, she has to eat with good manners, her brother does not, she couldn't go outside and play but her brother could do whatever he wanted. Fortunately, she excels academically and becomes a physician. Despite the cultural odds against her, she becomes a very successful doctor. "I sat on my lofty peak looking down on society at my feet. I smiled at it pityingly. Society — that mighty monster which seized women by the

scruff of the neck and flung them into kitchens, abbatoirs, graves or the filthy mire — was lying in my desk drawers, weak, subdued and hypocritically begging for mercy!” “How small mighty society looked now!” (Nawal El Saadawi. “Memoirs of a Woman Doctor Page 68)

First person accounts add an aura of authenticity to both fictitious and non-fictitious memoirs. The technique puts the reader in the shoes of the protagonist and thus gets to vicariously experience their lives. Dave Eggers wrote, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* with a first person point of view. The story is a non-fiction recollection of his life when both of his parents die and he, at age 21, becomes the custodial guardian of his 8-year old brother. Eggers manic technique of writing in short bursts and dialogue (with no quotes or attributions as to who the speaker is,) helps paint the frantic lifestyle he lives. He is paranoid that he is being judged at every turn because he such a young “parent.” Since Eggers *is* still so young, he has a sibling-style relationship with his brother as opposed to a parental one. Everything turns out okay at the end, but the painful journey chronicled how strong one has to be to survive in life - while delicately reminding the reader that life is fragile. His non sequitur style of writing is a technique that implies chaos. I have this thought now, and here it is. Now I will flashback for a few chapters and fill in some blanks. Here we are, back in present time. Even when he stays with one stream of thinking, it is still manic. “There is so much to do. I try not to think yet about everything coming soon, all the things we need to do when school starts and all this becomes real, but one thing—that Toph must see a doctor, must get a physical—breaks through and now my head floods, fuck— I have to get a résumé together, and we have to find a new place to live when the sublet ends, and how will

Toph get to school if I get an early job? Will Beth pull her weight, will she be too busy, will we kill each other? How often will Bill come up from L.A.? How much should I/can I/will I burden Kirsten?" (Dave Eggers. "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius Page 219) The story does some jumping around but in retrospect, it added authenticity to the panic he experienced having taken on such an important role... for which he was not qualified. It created an aura of instability -similar to the one that Mohammed displayed in *A Palace in the Old Village*. Non sequitur chapters and observations are how Tahar Ben Jelloun chose to share Mohammed's experiences. Mohammed was losing his mind -and by hopscotching around with events and story lines, it clearly displayed his instability. Interestingly it was a seamless combination of first and third person narratives.

Writing style, first or third person narrative, subtle allegorical references, topics-as-metaphor, all enhance the reading experience but they do not necessarily contribute to the believability of a story or argument. Obviously someone turning into a bug, or an entire city going blind, relies on the reader having a hefty dose of "willing suspension of disbelief." But to get the reader to embrace the message behind the metaphor relies on persuasive tools. For example, Alan Lightman's *Mr g*, is about the creation of the universe. Lightman's scrupulous attention to the laws of physics added credibility to this fictitious formation of the universe. "Matter burst into being with a vengeance, as if it had been languishing in a frustrated state of potentiality for eons of time and was finally given the opportunity to exist. Electrons and muons and taus, top quarks and bottom quarks, squarks, gravitons, photons, neutrinos and neutralinos, gluons, W and Z bosons, axions, photinos, winos, and zinos. And with matter, of course, came antimatter: positrons, antimuons, antiquarks, et cetera and anti et cetera." (Alan Lightman. "Mr g"

Page 38) I understood about half of those terms, but the use of this terminology was a strong appeal to logos.

*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean-Dominique Bauby, achieved credibility through pathos. Sympathy for the protagonist is immediately evoked in the prologue. “You survive, but you survive with what is so aptly known as “locked-in syndrome.” Paralyzed from head to toe, the patient, his mind intact, is imprisoned inside his own body, unable to speak or move. In my case, blinking my left eyelid is my only means of communication.” (Jean-Dominique Bauby. “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly.” Prologue) This book was one of the most profound books I have ever read. Perhaps it is because his story was the story of an everyman. It happened to him, it could happen to me. There is nothing more emotionally bonding than a real person who loses his independence, his freedom, and his health with one beat of his heart. His tragedy is so touching, yet despite these overwhelming circumstances, Bauby effectively persuades the reader to join him on his life’s journey, one blink at a time. “No one had yet given me an accurate picture of my situation, and I clung to the certainty, based on bits and pieces I had overheard, that I would very quickly recover movement and speech. Indeed, my roving mind was busy with a thousand projects: a novel, travel, a play, marketing a fruit cocktail of my own invention. (Don’t ask for the recipe; I have forgotten it.)” (Jean-Dominique Bauby. “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (Page 14)

Ethos contributes to the authenticity of a protagonist. For example, the language, phrasing, word selection and dialogue used by Ian McEwan’s protagonist in his book *Saturday*, sealed the credibility of his fictitious Dr. Perowne. McEwan utilized a perfect combination of layman’s terms and medical jargon so the reader felt as if Perowne, not

only knew his way around an operating room- but he also knew how to speak to the non-medical community. McEwan's understanding of the role Perowne played was vital to the credibility of the character. "The culmination of today's list was the removal of a pilocytic astrocytoma from a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl who lives in Brixton with her aunt and uncle, a Church of England vicar. The tumour was best reached through the back of the head, by an infratentorial supracerebellar route, with the anaesthetised patient in a sitting position. This in turn created special problems for Jay Strauss, for there was a possibility of air entering a vein and causing an embolism." (McEwan Saturday Page 18)

A "real" doctor would not have shared the possibility of air entering the vein. That was done for the reader's benefit so the reader understood why the doctor was doing what he was doing. It was a subtle, but effective technique by the author, Ian McEwan.

The fictitious doctor was not just an intellectual in an operating room. To make him well rounded, McEwan seamlessly introduced the intellectual passion of Perowne's, music. He namedrops composers and artists arrogantly -assuming the readers know who he is talking about. "Otherwise, he likes music in the theatre when he's working, mostly piano works by Bach—the "Goldberg" Variations, the Well-Tempered Klavier, the Partitas. He favours Angela Hewitt, Martha Argerich, sometimes Gustav Leonhardt. In a really good mood he'll go for the looser interpretations of Glenn Gould. In committee he likes precision, all items addressed and disposed of within the set time, and to this end he's an effective chairman. Exploratory musings and anecdotes by senior colleagues, tolerated by most as an occupational hazard, make him impatient; fantasising should be a solitary pursuit. Decisions are all." (Ian McEwan. "Saturday." Page 32)

His rationalization of his surgical musical choices added to Perowne's credibility because this is something you would expect from this highly intellectual protagonist. Interesting that McEwan selected music as a parallel interest of his protagonist. He could have chosen art, language, architecture, travel or literature- yet he chose music. I believe it is because Perowne can control the music. Dr. Perowne is a man in charge and his very specific musical selections for the surgical theater contributes to the perceived demeanor the reader thinks he portrays. While McEwan's storyline falls a little short, in my opinion, his character development made the book worth the read.

How different the fictitious Perowne's intelligence is unveiled compared to the very real Wilder Penfield in *his* autobiography, *No Man Alone*. Wilder Penfield, a prominent neurosurgeon and scientist, set academic goals that were never ending. After his Ivy League training and medical school, he studied in Europe, returned to New York to practice medicine and continually traveled the world in pursuit of doctors and researchers who had developed better techniques at creating slides of brain cells to be seen under a microscope. Penfield's self-description of achievement was more of a résumé of pursuits and facts blended with anecdotal encounters with others. "Richard Pearce was director of the Rockefeller medical philanthropy in all countries outside the boundaries of the United States. Pearce agreed to Martin's scheme, provided he could induce the young Canadian Jonathan Meakins to return from Edinburgh, where he had become the Christison Professor of Therapeutics following the First World War. Meakins had had his early training under Martin and, later, in the pathology laboratory of the Presbyterian Hospital in New York." (Page 144 *No Man Alone* Wilder Penfield)

Penfield is more of a scientific writer and historian, in that he records dates and facts and mentions so many names that it makes the readability sometimes tedious. There were some interesting stories about the human brain, including a (later dismissed) study of Lenin's brain that claimed he had superior intelligence to the average man based on the appearance of nerve cells on the microscopic slides of his brain tissue. Penfield's writing stumbled when he tried to share his love for his wife. In typical Penfield fashion, he put strategy ahead of emotion and in doing so, diluted the romantic passion he had for the woman he married. "On June 6, 1917, I was married to Helen Katherine Kermott in Hudson, Wisconsin. By then we had been engaged for three long years and had expected to wait longer. But now, the United States had entered the war and no one of our age knew what the future would hold for him or her." (Wilder Penfield *No Man Alone* Page 38)

Conversely, Dr. Perowne, the protagonist in *Saturday*, was much more of a romantic when he spoke of his wife. "She's lying on her left side, facing away from him, with her knees still drawn up. He settles himself around her familiar shape, puts his arm about her waist and draws closer to her. As he kisses the nape of her neck she speaks from the recesses of sleep—the tone is welcoming, gratified, but her single indistinct word, like a weight too heavy to lift, doesn't move from her tongue. He feels her body warmth through the silk of her pyjamas spread across his chest and groin. Walking up three flights of stairs has revived him, his eyes are wide open in the dark; the exertion, his minimally raised blood pressure, is causing local excitement on his retina," (Ian McEwan *Saturday* Page 57)



In stark contrast to these two accomplished, intellectual protagonists, is yet another physician from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Franz Kafka's *A Country Doctor*. This protagonist may have been a genius but he was embroiled in such an uncontrollable situation of "damned if you do, damned if you don't" that the reader never learned about this man's training or intellect. The frustrating scenario had the poor doctor in this no-win nightmare where his entire career was spiraling out of control because of one bad decision to go see a far away patient, in a snowstorm while leaving his housemaid alone with a sexual predator. "But I'll take the reins. You don't know the way," I say. "Of course," he says; "I'm not going with you. I'm staying with Rosa." "No," screams Rosa and runs into the house, with an accurate premonition of the inevitability of her fate. I hear the door chain rattling as she sets it in place. I hear the lock click. I see how in addition she chases down the corridor and through the rooms putting out all the lights in order to make herself impossible to find. "You're coming with me," I say to the groom, "or I'll give up the journey, no matter how urgent it is. It's not my intention to give you the girl as the price of the trip." "Giddy up," he says and claps his hands. The carriage is torn away, like a piece of wood in a current. (*A Country Doctor* NYU Reference Page 2)

The fact that Kafka made his protagonist a physician, was to provide the reader with an intelligent man as an example of academic prowess not translating into common sense.

Credibility and persuasion are important tools of getting a reader to "buy in" to the protagonist's journey. But it is probably writing *style* that captures, or loses the reader in the first chapter.

When oppression and subjugation keep one segment of the population beneath another, it is a sociopolitical plague. Interestingly, a strong individual from the oppressed

side of the equation makes for a protagonist a reader wants to root for. But what is the most effective style for the protagonist's voice? In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, Nawal El Saadawi utilizes an abrupt style of writing. The aphorisms of her protagonist's life and medical training demonstrate her anger and frustration. This is a woman, who is very intelligent, yet relegated to aspire to a life as a cook and housekeeper. "Who was this society anyway? Wasn't it men like my brother brought up from childhood to think of themselves as gods, and weak, ineffectual women like my mother? How could such people believe that there existed a woman who knew nothing about a man except that he was an assortment of muscles, arteries, nerves and bones?"

(Nawal El Saadawi. "*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* page 18)

Her protagonist became defensive and critical of those she felt who judged her. "Society impaled me with looks as sharp as daggers and lashed my face with stinging tongues like horse-whips. How can a woman live alone without a man?" (Page 57) This exaggeration of how people are looking at her is symbolic of how women are treated. The metaphorical "daggers from the eyes of others" is how women are sociologically cut, severed, wounded... so their spirit is crushed leaving them weak and helpless- creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: Women are weak.

El Saadawi's terse judgmental style is similar to Dave Eggers' writing style in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Like the protagonist El Saadawi created, Eggers expressed himself in a defiant manner. He was overly concerned with his perception of how others thought of him and more importantly, how he was doing as a parent. "...how dare they say anything, these people, these lotus-eating simpletons who have never known struggle, who would never question other parents, but feel the right to

question me, us, simply because we are new at it, are young, are siblings.” (Dave Eggers *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* Page 171) Eggers, like El Saadawi’s protagonist is an underdog, but not because of sociological implications or oppression. Eggers cannot escape from himself and his self-inflicted pressures. He felt the world was conspiring against him and from his perspective... it was. “The Enemies list is growing quickly, unabated. All these people impeding us, trifling with us, not knowing or caring who we are, what has happened.” (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Page 186)

Does it really matter if the world is really against you or if it is all in your head? In Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *A Palace in the Old Village*, the protagonist, Mohammed, is an oppressed victim of a cultural shift plus he has his own self-imposed demons that cloud his rationality. Forty years ago the French people needed immigrant help, now the political pendulum has swung the other way and immigrants are reviled. The storyline is a poignant tale of being displaced, irrelevant and ultimately left behind. A sad tale of the elderly in many western cultures.

Ultimately it is control, or the pursuit of it, that all protagonists have in common. It is the consummate story arc. A life disrupted, a society in disarray, an outlook or philosophy dashed by internal or external circumstance, all result in the same challenge: Regain control, return things to normal, or to a new normal.

*Mr g*, by Alan Lightman, had the ultimate control in that this is a story about the creation of the universe and “Mr g” is the creator. When life’s ultimate creator is the protagonist of the story, the “control” story arc is a challenge. Lightman could have stuck to a physics laden tome of quarks and other scientific data but instead he interjected

a “devil” in the form of a character named Belhor plus he gave the creator and aunt and an uncle to challenge the creator about his ideas. Control is added to the equation when the creator decides to allow mankind to have free will. By doing so, the creator had to be willing to accept evil (and Belhor) and chose to surrender complete control of his creations. On the other hand, McEwan’s Dr. Perowne had control of his surgical theater and he gained control of his nemesis, Baxter. In fact, he did that not once or twice, but three times. The first being when they had their fender-bender. The second was when Baxter broke into his house and third was when he had Baxter under his surgical knife. And this is the flaw with McEwan’s writing. I felt there was no story arc for his protagonist Perowne. The man was in complete control in the beginning, expounded his unchanging political views, and was in complete control of his life at the end. Absolutely nothing changed in this man.

Character arcs and story lines are what leaves the reader satisfied. Individuals must grow, society must change or evolve and the story line must move with a deliberate intention. Protagonists can succumb to the predicaments designed by their authors or they can be heroes of their own lives. Whichever outcome is chosen; it is satisfying to the reader to see the character(s) undergo some form of change. As mentioned, the doctor in *Saturday* did not change. He lived a very busy and eventful day, but nothing changed. The same is true with *The Country Doctor*. The protagonist was a weak and indecisive man in the beginning of the story and he pretty much was the same way at the end. The most satisfying, or rewarding protagonists to read about were the ones who learned the most about themselves or developed positive character traits they did not know they possessed.

Applying life lessons to what one has gleaned from these modern literature selections imposes a desired standard of compassion and intelligence. I would hope that in a plague, I would be a humanitarian who is both understanding and kind. In a politically oppressive situation, I would hope I would be reasonable, equitable and rational. But I suppose everyone *thinks* they would behave magnanimously. The authors who created these aforementioned protagonists tell us that it is more than likely we will not live up to our own expectations.

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Michael Beau Lardner comes from a literary family. His grandfather, Rex Lardner, was the head comedy writer for the Ernie Kovacs television show. Rex has written over a dozen books- mostly about sports. One of his books, *Out of the Bunker and into the Trees* was deemed, according to Sports Illustrated, one of the 100 greatest sports books ever written. Legendary screenwriter, Ring Lardner, Jr., is Rex's cousin (3<sup>rd</sup> cousin to Beau) who won Oscars for the screenplays, *Woman of the Year* and *M\*A\*S\*H*. He was also one of the Hollywood Blacklisted 10 during the McCarthy era. His father, Ring Lardner, Sr., is one of the most renowned humorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Lardner family of writers also includes 1993 Pulitzer Prize winner, George Lardner, Jr., who won for his reporting on the murder of his daughter in the Washington Post.