

Creativity in a Cruel World

Creativity thrives if you know where to look for it and where not to look for it

[How Dull are Your Children?](#)

[Science versus creativity](#)

[Wars of Ideas](#)

[Poetry by Trial, Error and Experiment](#)

[Twitter, Poetry and Bad Humor](#)

[Welcome to 2044](#)

[Another Giant Passes](#)

[Unreview: Somebody or Other Holmes](#)

[Unreview: Children of Earth](#)

[Escaping from The Prisoner](#)

How Dull are Your Children?

By: *irv* on July 11, 2010

Can an article - written by a professional journalist for a national news magazine - credibly claim that there's a creativity crisis in America? Isn't the act of writing the article itself creative? Doesn't that mean something?

Well, no.

By way of Slashdot ([here](#)) I found a Newsweek article ([here](#)) that made the highly controversial claim that American children (6th grade and under) are less creative than previous generations and advocated project-based learning in the classroom as the "scientific" solution.

I really wish that people who write about science would try learning a little first. Really I do.

Let's start with the setup: A longitudinal study by E. Paul Torrance ([Wikipedia bio](#); [obit](#); [Books by Torrance on amazon](#)) in which young children were tested for creativity, then followed for decades and their creative achievements recorded. The conclusion was that it was a good test, that people who scored high in creativity while very young, often went on to be highly creative adults. Longitudinal studies ([Wikipedia definition here](#)), by the way, are hard to do well but can lead to very rich data sets that can be useful for far more than originally intended.

So far we're in "duh!" territory. The big take-away is that psychologists were thrilled and amazed to find out they could measure creativity. They may also have been wrong but we'll get to that. Psychologists were also interested to find out that creativity and intelligence did not necessarily go together. Again, "Duh." Anyone who's ever seen an interview with Ozzy Osbourne (or any of a hundred others I could name - sorry Ozzy. You're still great!) could have told you that. Of course, they are not mutually exclusive either. Frank Zappa proved that!

This test has been given lots and lots of times to students all over the world. A researcher, Kyung-Hee Kim ([web page here](#)) analyzed the data and determined that the test scores for American children have declined since about 1990. That's kind of interesting but not, by

itself, a crisis. I was disappointed when my grandson refused to wear the TV remote for a hat, even after I modeled it for him, but he's still a good kid. He might even have some capacity for creativity. Just not in hats.

The Newsweek article, however, describes this decline in scores as a national crisis but, in fact, gives very short shrift to the question of how creative the kids are really or why their scores might be declining. It assumes without the slightest evidence that this is a permanent trend and that America has to do something right away. Then it goes on to describe the prescription: Project based learning in the classroom.

I'm not going to critique project-based learning. It sounds great when the advocates describe it. But the author's agenda comes out, for example, in the use of the term "drill and kill" to describe rote memorization. "Drill and kill" is a pejorative term used by people who don't like rote. The author accepts without question that it is bad. There is room for disagreement on this point.

Leaving aside issues of the relative merits of different teaching styles and the very contentious politics associated with them, I was struck by the implication that "science says" we have to start teaching American kids to be creative because they aren't learning it and if we don't change the schools to teach it to them, they'll never learn it and the rest of the world will pass us by! The evidence to back this up just isn't there.

One point that stood out to me was that the alleged decline in test scores (no reference is given to any validation of either the methodology or the conclusion, therefore I consider the point unproved) means there is also a decline in creativity among the very young. There is a vague mention of TV and video games as possibly suppressing creativity but no real explanation. But, if those things are really involved, how do we know that they aren't causing children to express their creativity in a way the test isn't very good at measuring? Would the test results change if the questions were given by bright cartoon characters on TV? What if the reason the kids are performing differently on the tests is because of increased education about "stranger danger?" Not trusting the tester will affect a lot of tests. Has anyone tested that?

What if creativity really is declining but TV and video games are not the cause? Ask any doctor how easy it is to cure a disease without a diagnosis. Treating the symptoms can buy you time but if you don't have a good idea of the underlying cause, you may be completely helpless to keep the patient alive (Watch a couple episodes of House for a nice, if exaggerated, illustration of this. Most episodes have at least two attempts to cure the wrong problem, followed by the patient getting even worse, then House comes up with a miracle cure. Yes, it's just TV. Take it with a grain or 12 of salt. I'm trying to make a point here, not prove a case in court!).

In this case, without any clear idea of a cause, we can't even be sure there **is** a problem to cure. Psychological tests can be sensitive to cultural and, well, psychological factors that are not necessarily obvious to the researchers involved with them. And creativity, for all the research that's been done, is still imperfectly understood. What if the (alleged) decline in creativity is due to changes in diet that change the balance of important brain chemicals? Or what if it's just a passing thing, a statistical blip that will change in the next generation? This is why I get so annoyed with science "reporting" these days. Even a tiny bit of critical thinking would be better than what you get from most science related stories these days, especially **any** science related article with the word "crisis" in the headline!

I have nothing against project-based learning (though building an entire curriculum around it

seems a bit much) and I'm certainly willing to believe that it's a good thing to teach children to be creative. If nothing else, it makes for a fun childhood. But I don't see a crisis and absolutely don't see a basis in this for educational policy. I see opportunities for more research and for developing our understanding of creativity in childhood and even beyond. Let's try that.

Science versus creativity

By: *irv* on June 10, 2010

Continuing the subject of bad science (previous installment posted as [Who writes this stuff anyway?](#)), we have a study (described [here](#)) that explains that people with jobs requiring a lot of creativity often feel overworked and may find themselves sucked in outside work hours.

Sounds like an ordinary IT job to me!

Anyway, Like most science these days (or maybe it's just science reporting, though I suspect it's both) they seem to be unaware that correlation is not causation. What that means in this case is that it may NOT be that it's the creativity required by the job that causes the result. It may be that people who demonstrate the capacity for creativity may get loaded up with work because, well, because that's what it takes to get it done. Anyone who has ever supervised others knows that for a tough problem, you need someone who works hard, thinks sideways (I was going to say "outside the box" but that would be the opposite of creative, wouldn't it?) and doesn't let go of a problem just because the work day is over. You want someone who will solve it for the pleasure of solving it, not just for the money or because someone who told them to.

When you find those (few) people, you treasure them. You also work them just as hard as you can get away with because there are more problems to be solved than good creative problem solvers to throw at them.

Again: Sounds like a basic (good) IT worker and an average IT job. I suppose other jobs may have similar characteristics. I just haven't had one of those.

Interestingly, the study seemed to find that these creative people don't mind having their work impinge on their lives outside the job. The hypothesis offered is that it feels good to them so what's the problem? The thing to remember here is that, before starting the study, the scientists (and I use the term loosely since we're dealing with sociology) probably didn't know that the results would be so trivial. It would have been more dramatic if they had found a high rate of near-suicidal burnout among these creative workers but that doesn't seem to have happened. But they couldn't have known that before doing the study, so cut them some slack. I mean, how would social science types know that creativity is its own reward?

A more interesting question to study (take notes for future grant proposals) would relate stress to creative fatigue. If creativity is its own reward, does there still come a point where you've been so creative for so long (or so much in one particular area) that you just can't think of new ideas anymore? How much stress do you feel then? How does it affect behavior both at work and outside it?

Insert joke about your favorite has-been author, producer, composer, programmer or scientist here. I'm going to take the better part of valor and not offer any jokes of my own.

Wars of Ideas

By: *irv* on February 6, 2009

I work for someone who often talks about "disruptive technology" and how hard it is to keep it alive. He believes that not only is the project we are building disruptive in the context of the technology world but also in the company itself. One definition of disruptive technology is found at the old standby, [Wikipedia](#) "A disruptive technology or disruptive innovation is a technological innovation that improves a product or service in ways that the market does not expect, typically by being lower priced or designed for a different set of consumers."

The term came to my mind in a completely different context, though, when I was reading an article [at [DefenseTech](#)] about the U.S. Army and the developing - and struggling - doctrine of hybrid war. I was already familiar with the somewhat different concept of asymmetric warfare, in which a very weak opponent (such as Al Qaeda in Iraq) uses guerrilla or terrorist tactics to go after a much more powerful foe (such as the United States) [See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asynchronous_warfare for more on asymmetric warfare]. But the term **hybrid war** was new to me.

According to the article, hybrid war is fought against (surprise!) hybrid enemies who "come equipped with high-end, precision guided weapons, yet fight in distributed networks of small units and cells more akin to guerrillas." This put me in mind of the Afghani Mujahideen of the 1980s, who used U.S. supplied stinger missiles against the invading Soviets. This kind of warfare is not fought with the traditional tank columns and carrier groups but can still do terrible damage. It is made possible both by modern weaponry and by the cleverness and determination of small group leaders.

There are thoughtful leaders in the military who understand that this change in the nature of the enemy is not just a serious threat to people those enemies target. It requires deep changes in military procurement, tactics and training. Hopefully, it is starting to sound like maybe I wasn't completely off base relating the concepts of hybrid war to the market-oriented definition of disruptive innovation (another term for disruptive technology and a little closer to where I think I'm going with this).

The article mentions the disillusion of an Army officer who went through extensive training that seemed geared more toward World War 2 weapons and tactics than anything currently likely in the 21st century. The old saying goes that armies train to fight the last war, but WW2 came before Korea and Vietnam, not to mention Iraq (1 and 2) and Afghanistan. To be fair, battles of vast amounts of technology (tanks, planes, artillery) were considered a serious issue during the Cold War because that was also the way Soviet forces were organized. But the Soviet Union doesn't even exist anymore, so what's the point?

Now, zigging (rather than zagging) back to the business world, one of the characteristics of disruptive technology is that it serves a need other than that of the traditional dominant customers. It includes not just new products like the iPhone but new methods of dealing with customers such as, when it was new, was exemplified by FedEx. And, as my boss has pointed out, this kind of change can be fragile. The old guard came up through the ranks serving the dominant customers and thinks that, in so doing, it has learned what is needed for success.

Buggy whip makers didn't abandon their product because they saw it had become obsolete. It's a fair bet that not one switched to making carburetors. They hung on until bankruptcy or until they were too old to do business anymore and there were no successors in sight. They

did what had always worked. That's what people do, in businesses or armies.

This is not a small problem. Think about the civilizations that have come and gone, enduring for centuries or even millenia, with only very small technological or social change. Egypt and China, for example, remained more or less stable (barring the occasional civil war) for thousands of years before finally being brought down by external forces. Without those external forces they might have lasted indefinitely.

We think of our time as being one of enormous, high speed change but is it really? How many companies are out there doing as the Army does, fighting battles of the past with outdated tools, while better disruptive alternatives fight to be heard? How many outdated assumptions (wars are fought with tanks because that's what the other side uses) are holding us back?

Or to put another twist on things, how many hybrid enemies have our institutions failed to recognize? When put that way, the problem seems even more urgent, doesn't it?

Sorry. I don't have any answers just now. It's going to take some thinking.

Poetry by Trial, Error and Experiment

By: *irv* on January 17, 2010

If there is meaning in life, then there must also be poetry. Whether you like it or not.

Some of us like it more than others. Many of us were brought up to think of poetry as an inaccessible creature, something belonging to smug self-involved intellectuals who dressed badly and had even poorer social skills than the average computer geek. (Completely unrelated question: Do computer security geeks - like me - count as being more or less geeky than regular computer geeks?)

High school has a way of making people think that way. It turns out that a large part of this may be the result of the way poetry is taught, rather than the poetry itself. It's just a fact of life that many of us, particularly males (and, according to a survey I read once, political conservatives) are more likely to enjoy Rudyard Kipling than Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Yet English teachers are far more likely to use the second as examples of great poetry than the first. Such is life.

So we learn that poetry is for the elite. Those of us who don't belong to the elite probably won't understand the stuff anyway, so why bother?

That sort of disconnect from literary poetry was the subject of a terrific blog post I found the other day at the Poetry and Culture blog about Dashiell Hammett and poetry ([here](#)). Since I'm a poet (these days) and Hammett is one of my favorite authors, I had to read it. The post gave several examples of Hammett's main character expressing less than positive feelings about not just written poetry but the entire idea that there is anything poetic in life.

Well, a hard boiled detective might find life's poetry to be a bit rough around the edges, wouldn't he?

By complete coincidence, I began experimenting recently with noir poetry - poetry from the point of view of a hard boiled detective in the midst of a murder investigation. I found this

hard to write and so far impossible to sell, though it's too soon to declare a verdict on that. A search of Google turned up a couple of instances of it in the past, though always referring to the movies, not the books or stories. Noir does not yet seem to be an established genre like science fiction poetry, or even cowboy poetry. Maybe it's too narrow a field to be worth it. I've had fun trying so far.

Incidentally, I found the Poetry and Popular Culture blog because someone posted a link to a nice article there about science fiction poetry ([here](#)). When I discovered a few years ago that science fiction poetry was an established (albeit small) genre and that people might even pay me for it, my attitude towards all poetry changed, almost instantly. You mean there's poetry even for someone like me? Why didn't my English professors ever mention? I might have started writing the stuff decades earlier if those esteemed experts hadn't worked so hard (admittedly unintentionally) to discourage me from liking poetry.

Oh well. Let that be a lesson to me: There's poetry out there for everybody, even people who don't think much of poetry and who don't like the stuff that wins awards. (not including the Science Fiction Poetry Association's [Rhysling award](#). I often like the winner of that one).

Meanwhile, I tried an experiment last week. I made a [Google Wave](#) and put a couple of stanzas from an unfinished fantasy poem in it. Wave is an interesting technology, part email, part instant messenger, part something that runs applications (but not really an operating system). It is decidedly cutting edge on the web today. Like anything brand new, it has not yet found its place. It is still by invitation only (I think). A lot of people still haven't heard of it and, even among those who have accounts, most people are unsure what to do with it.

I thought it would be interesting to find out if it would be useful for poetry collaborations. It seems like it should be but who knows? So I sent an email to a poetry mailing list inviting all members to collaborate with me on the poem I started in the wave. I told them that I would share the wave with anyone who had an account and some interest in collaborating. And anyone who wanted to collaborate but didn't have a wave account, I would send them an invitation (note: Anyone reading this post is invited to take advantage of the same offer).

No takers, so far. This might mean that even science fiction poets are, in general, not very up on technology. It could also mean they've read my poetry and would rather not get involved. Wave sounds to me like a fine platform for exactly this kind of collaboration. But what do I know about poetry?

Twitter, Poetry and Bad Humor

By: *irv* on March 23, 2009

I ran across an interesting internet hoax yesterday. Apparently, a number of people believed the announcement that Twitter was going to start offering special accounts - for a fee - that would allow both more than the usual 140 character limit on posts and would, apparently, randomly force people to follow these special pay accounts. (For the record, no, I'm not one of the people who fell for it. Really. You believe me don't you?). See [Twitterville Falls For Premium Accounts Hoax](#) for more information.

Poor Twitter. People are making fun of their business model just because they don't have one!

Let's just take it as stipulated that Twitter is cool. That's one of the reasons it gets targeted

for silly jokes like that. If you don't even know what Twitter is, you're not cool. Sorry. That's life. Look at [The Infection Meme](#) and [Twitter](#) to broaden your education. More importantly, it sometimes has value, though not always where you think. And I don't just mean this: [Ohio Cops Use Twitter to Talk to Residents](#).

One feature of Twitter (apparently not entirely planned by the creators) is the ability to tag posts for subject matter and search on those tags, so that you see what the whole world is saying about a subject, not just the people you personally follow. During the final episode of Battlestar Galactica I posted several items with the tag #BSG, to show that I was talking about BSG. See how it works?

There are services out there that allow you to leverage these tags. One such service, [WeFollow](#), lets people register their user names in conjunction with up to 3 tags and then when other people search WeFollow for those tags, they will see posts from the users who associated themselves with the tags (Maybe it makes more sense if you just go look at the WeFollow website.).

I'm undecided about registering with WeFollow myself. The biggest reason is that it requires you to validate your membership on Twitter by allowing WeFollow "to access and update your data on Twitter" (That's from the authorization page. Emphasis theirs), and I'm not sure I want to do that. Funny. I let applications access my profile on Facebook frequently - but ask for the same thing in a different context and it seems ominous. Paranoid much?

See [WeFollow Twitter directory: Kevin Rose's latest](#) for more about WeFollow.

Anyway, having found that mildly amusing, I tried something I thought would be more interesting. I searched Twitter for the tag #haiku. Twitter is well suited for haiku because of the 140 character limit on posts. More accurately, the 140 character limit makes Twitter better suited for haiku than for sonnets, or almost any other kind of poetry (though one of these days I'm planning on doing a series of tweets modeled after the old Burma Shave stuff. This Social Web / Is kind of fun / but I'm bored with Tweet Spam / You're following is done. Twitter Shave.")

The search brought up a lot of haiku. I won't reproduce any of them here. If you're interested, try it by clicking <http://search.twitter.com/search?q=%23haiku>

For full disclosure, sometimes I post things that will come up in that search. It seems to me that the ephemeral nature of 140 character posts streaming by is well suited to the moment-of-surprise aspect of haiku. Either that, or I have too short an attention span for anything else. My blog posts certainly seem to wander, don't they?

Or maybe not. After reading several hundred Twitter haiku I learned two things:

There are some amazingly good poets putting stuff on Twitter.
But the overwhelming majority of them are TERRIBLE.

It was a surprise to see the high proportion of Twitter haiku that concerned fecal matter (not usually as politely described as that). I'm pretty sure this is not what the great Japanese masters of old intended when they invented the form. That "moment of surprise" was not intended for shock, disgust and even sadness at the empty heads of so many people. Well done haiku can be truly beautiful. It can evoke profound thoughts (not that I know much about those) and make you feel a wide range of emotions.

I'm particularly fond of a modern variant of haiku, scifaiku, which is (basically) haiku with a science fiction (or other genre) twist (see Scifaiku.com for more on this fascinating art form). I've written and even published some of it. Scifaiku (and the wider range of science fiction poetry) is some of the most creative work you'll ever see. I would even be willing to go out on a limb and say that poetry should have more creativity and less excrement.

I subscribed to an RSS feed of Twitter haiku but if the feces-to-poetry ratio doesn't improve I probably won't keep it. But it was an interesting experiment.

Welcome to 2044

By: *irv* on June 13, 2009

I read a few articles this week about the 60th anniversary of the George Orwell novel 1984 (including this interesting one at [National Review Online](http://NationalReviewOnline)) and one thing that struck me is that very few literary works get reviewed 60 years after their publication. Even fewer **good** ones get reviewed/taught/discussed 60 years later. Everybody knows at least a little about 1984, even those of us who have not yet read it (In school, I was in the class that was assigned **Animal Farm** instead. Interesting book. Hated the pigs).

But this is not a review of 1984. That would be silly since I just admitted I haven't read it! But it seems I should. Traditionally, reading has been seen as a way of passing on culture - not the kind of culture that causes people to donate money to the opera or spend time at museums but the kind that shapes the way people think. That's why an old fashioned Classical Education valued Socrates and Thomas Aquinas among others. Agree with them or not, these were smart people and excellent teachers.

Well, that's the official story, anyway.

It's interesting that the list of important books for a Classical-like education now includes 1984, a book that has infiltrated popular culture with phrases and ideas about the awfulness of a huge, all-controlling government, without actually doing much to discourage the growth of such governments. Don't believe me? Use Google or whatever resource you want and try to develop a comprehensive database of government operated databases. Don't forget to include notes about laws allowing or even requiring these to exist as well as the sources of information (such as intercepted emails, credit reports and public records such as court filings) that go into them.

Maybe, instead of discouraging those things, 1984 provided the inspiration. It has certainly inspired plenty of books and movies along similar themes. Arguably, the entire sub-genre of dystopian science fiction started with 1984. Personally, I always found that good science fiction taught more about people and society than the majority of the so-called classics I read in school. I preferred Asimov to Hemingway, Heinlein to Homer. (ANYONE to Homer, really, though a couple of the movie adaptations were somewhat enjoyable). Few English teachers sympathized with this view.

Maybe it's different today. That's something that would be interesting to hear: Are there more science fiction books infiltrating the things considered classics? Probably **Fahrenheit 451**. That's the only one I can think of but I'm a student of computers and security, not literature (though I've also had some short stories and poems published - mostly fantasy stories and science fiction poems, believe it or not). In a world where Twitter is the new literature (see below) and cars and TV sets contain computer chips, there may one day soon be practical

value as well as intellectual in science fiction classics about a robot uprising, or first contact.

Now if someone could feed 1984, or even some of the more traditional classics, into the 140 character chunks of a Twitter stream, maybe I would get around to reading it sooner.

Random sources of Twitter Literature (some of it surprisingly good, though no classics yet):

[Thaumatrope](#) -- I should mention this one has bought 2 of my pieces, one of which appeared on Christmas Eve last year.

[VeryShortStory](#)
[Outshine](#)
[nanoism](#)

Another Giant Passes

By: *irv* on January 27, 2009

A friend of mine and I have developed something of a tradition of drinking a shot in honor of famous people when they pass on. Not just any famous person will do. It has to be someone we, personally, consider interesting or significant. We did a shot for George Burns and one (or was it 2?) for Ronald Reagan.

On the other hand, we did not have a shot for Heath Ledger, despite his fantastic turn as the Joker because, a) We had not yet seen Dark Knight when he died and b) neither of us was very familiar with his previous work and so had no very strong reaction to his death. I'm not claiming it's fair. There has to be some kind of system since the idea is just to show a token of esteem for someone, not to get massively drunk. If you want to get drunk, you can come up with much more frequent excuses to drink shots!

Anyway, after some consideration I think it's unlikely we'll do a shot for John Updike, despite his status as one of the most highly regarded American writers of all time. Or possibly, because of that status. I don't remember for sure if I ever read anything by John Updike. I may have been forced to read one of his short stories in an English class at some time but I can't be sure. I'm reasonably sure I never read any of his novels. There are several reasons for this. Here are some:

I don't read things just because critics or English professors think I should.

There isn't enough time in the world to read everything and I still haven't even read all of Isaac Asimov's **Foundation** series. (Don't worry. They're over there, on the shelf. I'll get through them eventually)

Yes, as the above item implies, I prefer science fiction and sometimes fantasy. Mostly, Updike was not known for those.

When English professors (or, worse, critics) say a writer is important or merely very talented, I tend to think it likely that that writer's work is unreadable and probably devoid of meaning. Years of harsh experience taught me that.

The last few years (10?) I read mostly textbooks. I'm working on a master's degree currently. There's a lot of reading.

And so on. Notice, however, that not one thing on this list has anything to do with Mr. Updike himself, or his actual writing. I have nothing against the man and am completely willing to

believe that the world is diminished by his passing. My sympathies to his family.

Now I have to get back to reading about [Malware](#).

Unreview: Somebody or Other Holmes

By: *irv* on December 29, 2009

My boss and I have an ongoing disagreement that sometimes flares up (loudly), about who was the better detective: Hercule Poirot, or Sherlock Holmes? The boss takes the point of view that Holmes relied on "parlor tricks" while Poirot used pure intelligence to reason out the solutions.

I contend (very reasonably and with only enough shrillness in my voice to convince people to listen) that this shows a lack of understanding of Holmes's true skills as a detective. The famous parlor tricks - where he figured out people's life stories by observing tiny clues he noticed in a glance at them - are NOT how he solved cases at all. Unlike the indolent Poirot who seemed to get most of his information by eavesdropping, Holmes **investigated** cases. He used disguises to infiltrate locations and spy on suspects. He had a network of informants (The Baker Street Irregulars). He studied shipping and train schedules and knew the map of London intimately, in order to understand the movements of people and things related to his cases. He did experiments in order to improve his understanding of potential evidence. He **worked** at the business of investigating.

To be honest, it's been decades since I absorbed the complete Sherlock Holmes novels and stories and I never did get into the Poirot stuff because I find Agatha Christie's writing style to be dull. Really really really dull. Maybe it's a British thing. Odd, really, since my mother has everything Christie ever wrote. Most of what I know about the brilliant Belgian detective I got from watching the series with David Suchet on TV. I enjoyed them and often found the solutions to be quite clever. But to compare Poirot's skill at thinking to the monomaniacal investigative prowess of the great Sherlock Holmes is silly.

This argument and a related thought about a currently popular TV series came to mind yesterday when I saw a new movie inexplicably titled "Sherlock Holmes." The movie was very entertaining, with humor, explosions, suspense and period (like) costumes and settings related to Victorian England. It even had characters with names confusingly like some of the ones in the Holmes stories. This is confusing because anyone expecting (possibly fooled by the title) a Sherlock Holmes story will not find it. Maybe this movie should have been named "Greg House, Consulting Detective, but in a Past Life."

Ever seen [House](#)?

It's a funny show about a more or less psychopathic doctor who is miles smarter than everyone else around him but who is so dishonest, manipulative, childish and insulting that almost no one can stand him. I've believed for years that the character House was probably inspired by [Dr. Joseph Bell](#), who was, according to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the inspiration for Sherlock Holmes.

Like Holmes and House, Dr. Bell was uncommonly good at noticing seemingly small details about people and figuring out from them huge amounts about their lives, personalities, circumstances. This skill is what my boss referred to (not necessarily unfairly) as a parlor trick. It amazes people and often annoys them or even frightens them. The kind of person

who can practice this sort of skill must be very confident to the point of arrogance and willing to be disliked for discovering things that people may have (mistakenly) considered private. A big mouth seems to be part of the package too.

The similarities between these different characters is significant because the relationship between Holmes and Dr. Watson in yesterday's movie reminded me of the relationship between Dr. House and his best (possibly only) friend Dr. Wilson. In particular, Holmes's clumsy attempts to meddle in Watson's romance with Mary had much of the petty selfishness and childish humor of House, with none of the stuffiness or personal obliviousness that Holmes showed in Conan Doyle's stories. Wilson and House often play pranks on each other and it is normal for Wilson to lie about his relationships for fear his friend will sabotage them.

Why would anyone re-write the Holmes-Watson relationship to make it less Victorian and more like House-Wilson's adversarial version of friendship? There are three possible explanations:

Didn't know any better. Just too ignorant of the Holmes stories to know what would work and what didn't. This would certainly explain much about the movie, not just about Watson punching Holmes in the nose, or Holmes intentionally offending Mary.

Thought it would be funnier. No arguing with that. There was very little humor in the Holmes stories and Watson was one of the most unfunny characters ever written. The movie had a small amount of humor.

Not a good enough writer to get it right. The simplicity of the "mystery" in the movie and the reliance on explosions and stunts (like Holmes jumping out a high window and diving into the water) would tend to bear this explanation out.

Two of our three possible explanations boil down to incompetence. Doesn't sound good when you look at it that way, does it? Most of the reviews I've seen went with that explanation, too. To be fair, whenever trying to work with well known material like Holmes, there will always be people like me to nitpick over historical accuracy (so to speak). Remember the debacle of the so-called "Bram Stoker's Dracula?" It turned out to have very little resemblance to the Stoker version of the story. The use of the name was, to be kind, a miscalculation.

By contrast, House is a show that is (or was, in the first couple seasons) inspired by Holmes in a way, while being unique in its execution. It's a bit of a mystery why the movie Sherlock Holmes was named for Sherlock Holmes when so little of Holmes made it into the story. Sometimes it seems that the culture of Hollywood is determined to avoid creativity at all costs.

So we have two lessons we can learn from this little farce:

Be observant. It won't make you liked but it will make you seem very smart. You could maybe even be a great doctor or great detective if you can learn not just to observe but to reason about what you observe.

At least try to be creative! Change the names, for God's sake! How hard would it have been to make the main character a brilliant detective who's NOT Sherlock Holmes? Then instead of annoying fans, you could be lauded for doing something different.

Never mind. Who wants that anyway?

Unreview: Children of Earth

By: *irv* on July 25, 2009

One of my simple yardsticks for whether or not I like a TV show is the question, "Do I like the main character(s)?" This is not a hard and fast rule. I hated most of the characters in *Battlestar Galactica* - and most of the stories, especially that ridiculous lame ending! - yet kept watching the show. It's an important factor, though. If I'm rooting for the characters to get killed or maimed, I'm probably not enjoying the action, either. Especially when they win.

This at least partially explains why *Torchwood* has never been one of my favorite shows. I just don't much like the main character, Captain Jack Harkness. He's too full of himself, too smarmy, and the way every story has to relate to his personal narrative strikes me as hackneyed and unnecessarily limiting.

How many shows have you seen where a mysterious female (not a given in *Torchwood* but never mind that) appears who turns out to be the hero's long lost love **and** she has a child who may or may not be the hero's? This sort of fake character development is a TV staple that gets exercised far too much in shows that take themselves too seriously (like *Torchwood*, or the execrable *Sanctuary*). Rather than revealing anything about the character it just provides contrived and manipulative melodrama that got old back when *Gunsmoke* still had smoking guns and Little Joe was still alive (I know he was on a different show. That's how staples work. They bind multiple things).

Still, it's science fiction and I'll usually give science fiction a try, even after all the times I've been disappointed (such as EVERY *Star Trek* series made after the original). Besides. It's summer and there's even less on worth watching than usual.

So I was looking forward to the 5-part miniseries *Torchwood: Children of Earth* with mixed feelings. Five nights of an epic story told in the context of an intensely mediocre show. Hmmmm. Maybe, for the sake of the epic, they would pull out all the stops and make an effort to surpass their usual limitations. Why not? Weirder things have happened.

Unfortunately, in this instance that wasn't what happened. By the fifth night I was bored with the story and the people, except for 2 bright spots (Gwen and Lois) who exceeded my low expectations for supporting characters on this show (and everyone who's not Cap'n Jack is a minor supporting player. *Torchwood* was never a true ensemble show). There was even one point where Lois (a new character) stood up to the Prime Minister, in spite of her obvious fear, and I felt truly proud of her. She was kicked out of the story shortly after that, though, leaving behind a sea of less interesting and much less admirable people.

Interestingly, one of the least admirable people in the show was also among the most interesting. I forget the character's name (apparently "interesting" and "memorable" are not synonyms!) but "Dr. Strangelove" conveys enough of the description to make him fairly recognizable. He was a brilliant and very nasty old man, right up to the end. Come to think of it, it wasn't so much the character as the actor's brilliant portrayal that attracted my attention. The cast of this piece was much better than the material they had to work with, by the way.

One of the things that writers have historically found makes science fiction stories interesting to tell is that people can be shown reacting to situations and stressors that simply don't exist in the real world. Alien contact. Annihilation of the entire race. Children acting really weird.

Okay, that last one is a bit of a red herring. In *Torchwood*, it was children acting weird

simultaneously all over the world. On the last night of the show, a sort of kind of half way explanation was offered for this. Actually, it wasn't so much an explanation as a hint that they had tried to think of one ... and failed miserably. Science fiction often deviates from actual science, of course, but this deviated to the point of not making the slightest sense. I wonder - do aspiring TV writers learn about logic or cause and effect? That's a red herring too. Obviously, the answer is no, which explains a lot of what happens on TV.

This leads to my biggest complaint about the mini-series. It violated the same basic rule many times throughout: Important events (children all talking simulataneously, important characters being killed, etc), happened solely so there could be a dramatic scene, not because they had anything whatever to do with the story. The logic (there's that nasty word again) of the story was bent, twisted and mangled in order to fit these scenes. Consequently, rather than being truly dramatic, they were just too much.

Crude melodrama at its "finest."

It is probably true that science fiction needs a coherent, logical narrative even more than other types of stories. They all need it but science fiction is making a greater demand on the "suspension of disbelief" than other types, so it needs to compensate by not abusing that any farther than necessary. Plus, it attracts people like me, with some science education and a mind that is always trying to fit the pieces together into some kind of reasonable order. It can be annoying when that order just isn't there.

None of this means that Children of Earth wasn't worth watching. It was still way better than the soap opera about monsters (I mean, vampires and werewolves and stuff) that started on the same network tonight. Sometimes you wonder how the people who develop TV shows manage to stay employed. Then you wonder if it's their very inability to tell a coherent story that does it. Maybe **that's** what I'm doing wrong. At least I hope so.

Escaping from The Prisoner

By: *irv* on November 17, 2009

So someone thought it would be a good idea to remake Patrick McGoohan's 1960s classic **The Prisoner**. Why? My current favorite candidate for a reason is that Hollywood hates creativity. They also remade V, after all and that was a show that was crying out to be forgotten (while the remake - which I've stopped watching - performed the amazing and unforgivable feat of making Morena Baccarin boring).

I could criticize the casting of **The Prisoner** but what would be the point? Jim Caviezel seems to be a competent enough actor but no where near Patrick McGoohan's caliber. But then, who is there alive today who **is** of that caliber? But my problem with the show isn't with the acting. It's with the entire show.

Did I mention they've also canceled **Dollhouse**? (See [here](#) and [here](#)) This was a somewhat creative show that had all the interesting stuff leached out of most of the first season and all of the second season that had aired before its cancellation. The rumor is that the creator of the show, the brilliant and always interesting Joss Whedon, was not allowed by the network to do the show the way he wanted except for a few (brilliant) episodes in the first season. Whether this is true or not, the resulting show was dull. It's a shame to lose a show with such an interesting premise (programmable people) but the execution was so poor, I guess it's no great loss.

The Prisoner didn't have the advantages of a brilliantly creative creator or an interesting new premise. It's had a lot of hype, though, and of course Ian McKellen. And it has lots of feelings.

As I'm writing this, Jim Caviezel's character just willed his evil twin to go away, giving Ian McKellen an excuse to smile an evil smug little smile. The evil twin plot is an old old science fiction type plot that almost every such show tries at one time or another. Or one time AND another. It's a classic head game and these days head games are what Hollywood likes best.

This is getting to the heart of my problem with this and lots of other shows. **Science fiction is about ideas.** Remember that rule. It's so important, I think I'll repeat it: **Science fiction is about ideas.**

How people respond to those ideas, how they order their lives around them and within them, are things that can make great stories. But in today's Hollywood, there are few ideas. There are people talking about their feelings. There is Number 6 of **The Prisoner**, standing at the gate of Number 2's house, shouting, "I'll make you feel!" As if this is somehow a dramatic moment, rather than a merely self-important and pointless one. Anyone can see that 2 feels. He feels contempt. He feels amusement. He feels like screwing with 6's head.

Is there an idea behind all this? The Village seems to be some sort of matrix (as in **The Matrix**) and Number 6 is Neo (though, thankfully, played by a better actor than Keanu Reeves, a man who has made a career swimming against the Hollywood grain by putting absolutely no feeling into the majority of what he does).

The new show **Stargate: Universe** has taken a similar tack. The original **Stargate** series was basically action adventure. The idea was that other worlds were opened up for humans before we were ready and survival was going to take a lot of new discoveries and desperate fighting for a long time to come. The premise allowed a lot of other ideas to be tossed in at will (sometimes without much sense, but at least with a sense of fun), like time travel, alternate worlds, and unstoppable killer robots. Well, at least it was fun.

The next **Stargate** show, **Stargate Atlantis**, was mostly based on the same ideas as the original only with less fun. And now the newest show has almost completely abandoned the ideas except as a backdrop for pseudo poignant pretend recorded discussions of the character's feelings. "I worry about my mom." "I never meant to hurt you." "I always wanted to act in a soap opera." Even by TV standards, this show is boring.

There are many successful soap operas. Hey, I even used to watch one, long ago (**Dark Shadows**). So I guess I can't say that they aren't entertaining or that they have no place in the world.

But that ain't science fiction. I'm not going to watch the rest of **The Prisoner**. Or **Stargate: Universe**. In fact, there's so little on that's worth watching, I may have to start reading again. Now if I can just find some new science fiction books that don't have a TV or movie tie-in ...

Update

I seem to have accidentally watched the rest of **The Prisoner** while finishing this post. I wish I hadn't. I enjoyed making fun of the show more than the show itself. I wonder if I could get funding to start a parody channel?