

CLASSICS TO GO

WHY AUTHORS  
GO WRONG  
AND OTHER EXPLANATIONS



GRANT M. OVERTON

# **Why Authors Go Wrong**

## **And Other Explanations**

**Grant M. Overton**

# CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

- I. WHY AUTHORS GO WRONG [1](#)
- II. A BARBARIC YAWP [25](#)
- III. IN THE CRITICAL COURT [39](#)
- IV. BOOK “REVIEWING” [51](#)
- V. LITERARY EDITORS, BY ONE OF THEM [103](#)
- VI. WHAT EVERY PUBLISHER KNOWS [119](#)
- VII. THE SECRET OF THE BEST SELLER [145](#)
- VIII. WRITING A NOVEL [173](#)

# I

## WHY AUTHORS GO WRONG

THE subject of *Why Authors Go Wrong* is one to answering which a book might adequately be devoted and perhaps we shall write a book about it one of these days, but not now. When, as and if written the book dealing with the question will necessarily show the misleading nature of Mr. Arnold Bennett's title, *The Truth About an Author*—a readable little volume which does not tell the truth about an author in general, but only what we are politely requested to accept as the truth about Arnold Bennett. Mr. Bennett may or may not be telling the truth about himself in that book; his regard for the truth in respect of the characters of his fiction has been variable. Perhaps he is more scrupulous when it comes to himself, but we are at liberty to doubt it. For a man who will occasionally paint other persons—even fictionary persons—as worse than they really are may not unnaturally be expected to depict himself as somewhat better than he is.

We must not stay with Mr. Bennett any longer just now. It is enough that he has not been content to wait for the curtain to rise and has insisted on thrusting himself into our prologue. Exit; and let us get back where we were.

We were indicating that *Why Authors Go Wrong* is an extensive subject. It is so extensive because there are many authors and many, many more readers. It is extensive because it is a moral and not a literary question, a human and not an artistic problem. It is extensive because it is really unanswerable and anything that is essentially unanswerable necessitates prolonged efforts to answer it,

this on the well-known theory that it is better that many be bored than that a few remain dissatisfied.

## 2

Let us take up these considerations one by one.

It seems unlikely that any one will misunderstand the precise subject itself. What, exactly, is meant by an author “going wrong”? The familiar euphemism, as perhaps most frequently used, is anything but ambiguous. Ambiguous-sounding words are generally fraught with a deadly and specific meaning—another illustration of the eternal paradox of sound and sense.

But as used in the instance of an author, “going wrong” has a great variety of meanings. An author has gone wrong, for example, when he has deliberately done work under his best; he has gone wrong when he has written for sentimental or æsthetic reasons and not, as he should, for money primarily; he has gone wrong when he tries to uplift or educate his readers; he has gone wrong when he has written too many books, or has not written enough books, or has written too fast or not fast enough, or has written what he saw and not what he felt, or what he felt and not what he saw, or posed in any fashion whatsoever.

Ezra Pound, for example, has gone atrociously wrong by becoming a French Decadent instead of remaining a son of Idaho and growing up to be an American. Of course as a French Decadent he will always be a failure; as Benjamin De Casseres puts it, “the reality underlying his exquisite art is bourgeois and American. He is a ghost materialized by cunning effects of lights and mirrors.”

## 3

Mr. Robert W. Chambers went wrong in an entirely different fashion. The usual charge brought against Mr. Chambers is that he consented to do less than his best because it profited him. This is entirely untrue. Mr. Chambers's one mistake was that he did not write to make money. Every writer should, because writing is a business and a business is something which can only be decently conducted with that end in view. Fancy a real estate business which should not be conducted to make money! We should have to stop it immediately. It would be a menace to the community, for there is no telling what wickedness of purpose might lie behind it. A business not conducted primarily to make money is not a business but a blind; and very likely a cover for operations of a criminal character. The safety of mankind lies in knowing motives and is imperilled by any enterprise that disguises them.

And so for Mr. Chambers to refrain deliberately from writing to make money was a very wrong thing for him to do. Far from having a wicked motive, he had a highly creditable motive, which does not excuse him in the least. His praiseworthy purpose was to write the best that was in him for the sake of giving pleasure to the widest possible number of his readers. There does not seem to be much doubt that he has done it; those who most disapprove of him will hardly deny that the vast sales of his half a hundred stories are incontestable evidence of his success in his aim. But what is the result? On every hand he is misjudged and condemned. He is accused of acting on the right motive, which is called wrong! He is not blamed, as he should be, for acting on a wrong motive, which would, if understood, have been called right! What he should have done, of course, was to write sanely and consistently to make money, as did Amelia Barr. Mrs. Barr was not a victim of widespread contemporary injustice and Mr. Chambers is and will remain so.

Take another illustration—Mr. Winston Churchill. One of the ablest living American novelists, he has gone so wrong that it cannot honestly be supposed he will ever go right again. His earlier novels were not only delightful but actually important. His later novels are intolerable. In such a novel as *The Inside of the Cup* Mr. Churchill is not writing with the honorable and matter-of-course object of selling a large number of copies and getting an income from them; he is writing with the dishonorable and unavowed object of setting certain ideas before you, the contemplation of which will, in his opinion, do you good. He wants you to think about the horror of a clergyman in leading strings to his wealthiest parishioner. As a fact, there is no horror in such a situation and Mr. Churchill cannot conjure up any. There is no horror, there are only two fools. Now if a man is a fool, he's a fool; he cannot become anything else, least of all a sensible man. A clergyman in thrall to a rich individual of his congregation is a fool; and to picture him as painfully emancipating himself and becoming not only sensible but, as it were, heroic is to ask us to accept a contradiction in terms. For a fool is not a man who lacks sense, but a man who cannot acquire sense. Not even a miracle can make him sensible; if it could there would be no trouble with *The Inside of the Cup*, for a miracle, being, as G. K. Chesterton says, merely an exceptional occurrence, will always be acquiesced in by the intelligent reader.

#### 4

It would be possible to continue at great length giving examples of authors who have gone wrong and specifying the fifty-seven varieties of ways they have erred. But the mere enumeration of fallen authors is terribly depressing and quite useless. If we are to accomplish any good end we must try to find out why they have allowed themselves to be deceived or betrayed and what can be done in the shape

of rescue work or preventive effort in the future. Perhaps we can reclaim some of them and guide others aright.

After a consideration of cases—we shall not clog the discussion with statistics and shall confine ourselves to general results—we have been led by all the evidence to the conclusion that the principal trouble is with the authors. Little or none of the blame for the unfortunate situation rests on their readers. Indeed, in the majority of cases the readers are the great and unyielding force making for sanity and virtue in the author. Without the persistent moral pressure exerted by their readers many, many more authors would certainly stray from the path of business rectitude—not literary rectitude, for there is no such thing. What is humanly right is right in letters and nothing is right in letters that is wrong in the world.

The commonest way in which authors go wrong is one already stated: By ceasing to write primarily for money, for a living and as much more as may come the writer's way. The commonest reason why authors go wrong in this way is comical—or would be if it were not so common. They feel ashamed to write for money first and last; they are seized with an absurd idea that there is something implicitly disgraceful in acting upon such a motive. And so to avoid something that they falsely imagine to be disgraceful they do something that they know is disgraceful; they write from some other motive and let the reader innocently think they are writing with the old and normal and honorable motive.

So widespread is this delusion that it is absolutely necessary to digress for a moment and explain why writing to make money is respectable! Why is anything respectable? Because it meets a human necessity and meets it in an open and aboveboard fashion without detriment to society in general or the individual in particular. All lawful business conforms to this definition and writing for money certainly



does. Writing—or painting or sculpturing or anything else—not done to make money is not respectable because (1) it meets no human necessity, (2) it is not done openly and aboveboard, (3) it is invariably detrimental to society, and (4) it is nearly always harmful to individuals, and most harmful to the individual engaged upon it.

It is useless to say that a man who writes or paints or carves for something other than money meets a human necessity—a spiritual thirst for beauty, perhaps. There is no spiritual thirst for beauty which cannot be satisfied completely by work done for an adequate and monetary reward. And to satisfy the human longing for the beautiful without requiring a proper price is to demoralize society by showing men that they can have something for nothing.

## 5

Now it is just here that the moral pressure of the great body of readers is felt, a pressure that is constantly misunderstood by the author. So surely as the writer has turned from writing to make money and has taken up writing for art's sake (whatever that means) or writing for some ethical purpose or writing in the interest of some propaganda, though it be merely the propaganda of his own poor, single intellect—just so surely as he has done this his readers find him out. Whether they then continue to read him or not depends entirely on what they think of his new and unavowed (but patent) motive. Of course readers ought to be stern; having caught their author in a wrong motive they ought to punish him by deserting him instantly. But readers are human; they are even surprisingly selfish at times; they are capable of considering their own enjoyment, and, dreadful to say, they are capable of considering it first. So if, as in the case of Mr. Chambers, they find his new motive friendly and flattering they read him more than ever;

on the other hand, if they find the changed purpose disagreeable or tiresome, aiming to uplift them or to shock them unpleasantly or (sometimes) to make fun of them, they quit that author cold. And they hardly ever come back. Usually the author is not perspicacious enough to grasp the cause of the defection; it is amazing how seldom authors think there can be anything wrong with themselves. Usually the abandoned author goes right over and joins a small sect of highbrows and proclaims the deplorable state of his national literature. "The public be damned!" he says in effect, but the public is not damned, it is he that is damned, and the public has done its utmost to save him.

Sometimes an author deliberately does work that is less than his best, but he never does this with the idea of making money, or, if he entertains that idea, he fools no one but himself. There are known and even (we believe) recorded instances of an author ridiculing his own output and avowing with what he probably thought audacious candor: "Of course, this latest story of mine is junk—but it'll sell 100,000 copies!"

It never does. The author is perfectly truthful in describing the book as worthless. If he implies as he always will in such a case that he deliberately did less than his best he is an unconscious liar. It was his best and its worthlessness was solely the result of his total insincerity. For a man or woman may write a very bad book and write it with an utter sincerity that will sell hundreds of thousands of copies; but no one can write a very fine book insincerely and have it sell.

The author who thinks that he has written a rather inferior novel for the sake of huge royalties has actually written the best he has in him, namely, a piece of cheese. The author who has actually written beneath his best has not done it for money, but to avoid making money. He thinks it is his best;

he thinks it is something utterly artistic, aesthetically wonderful, highbrowedly pure, lofty and serene; he scorns money; to make money by it would be to soil it. What he cannot see is that it is not his best; that it is very likely quite his worst; that when he has done his best he will unavoidably make money unless, like the misguided mortal we have just mentioned, deep insincerity vitiates his work.

We are therefore ready, before going further, to formulate certain paradoxical principles governing all literary work.

## 6

To understand why authors go wrong we must first understand how authors may go right. The paradoxical rules which if observed will hold the author to the path of virtue and rectitude may be formulated briefly as follows:

1. An author must write to make money first of all, and every other purpose must be secondary to this purpose of money making.

The paradoxy inherent in this principle is that while writing the author must never for a single moment think of the money he may make.

2. Every writer must have a stern and insistent moral purpose in his writing, and especially must he be animated by this purpose if he is writing fiction.

The paradoxy here is that never, under any circumstances, may the writer exhibit his moral purpose in his work.

3. A writer must not write too much nor must he write too little. He is writing too much if his successive books sell better and better; he is writing too little if each book shows declining sales.

This may appear paradoxical, but consider: If the writer's work is selling with accelerated speed the market for his

wares will very quickly be over-supplied. This happened to Mr. Kipling one day. He had the wisdom to stop writing almost entirely, to let his production fall to an attenuated trickle; with the result that saturation was avoided, and there is now and will long continue to be a good, brisk, steady demand for his product.

On the other hand, consider the case of Mrs. Blank (the reader will not expect us to be either so ungallant or so professionally unethical or so commercially unfair as to give her name). Mrs. Blank wrote a book every two or three years, and each was more of a plug than its predecessor. She began writing a book a year, and the third volume under her altered schedule was a best seller. It was also her best novel.

## 7

Then why? why? why? do the authors go wrong? Because, if we must say it in plain English, they disregard every principle of successful authorship. When they have written a book or two and have made money they get it into their heads that it is ignoble to write for money and they try to write for something else—for Art, usually. But it is impossible to write for Art, for Art is not an end but a means. When they do not try to write for Art they try to write for an Ethical Purpose, but they exhibit it as inescapably as if the book were a pulpit and the reader were sitting in a pew. Indeed, some modern fiction cannot be read unless you are sitting in a pew, and a very stiff and straight backed pew at that; not one of these old fashioned, roomy, high walled family pews such as Dickens let us sit in, pews in which one could be comfortable and easy and which held the whole family, pews in which you could box the children's ears lightly without doing it publicly; no! the pews the novelists make us sit in these days are these confounded modern pews which

stop with a jab in the small of your back and which are no better than public benches, but are intensely more uncomfortable—pews in which, to ease your misery, you can do nothing but look for the mote in your neighbor's eye and the wrong color in your neighbor's cravat.

Because—to get back to the whys of the authors—because when they are popular they overpopularize themselves, and when they are unpopular they lack the gumption to write more steadily and fight more gamely for recognition. We don't mean critical recognition, but popular recognition. How can an author expect the public, his public, any public to go on swallowing him in increased amounts at meals placed ever closer together—for any length of time? And how, equally, can an author expect a public, his public, or any public, to acquire a taste for his work when he serves them a sample once a week, then once a month, then once a year? Why, a person could not acquire a taste for olives that way.

## 8

We have no desire to be personal for the sake of being personal, but we have every desire to be personal in this discussion for the sake of being impersonal, pointed, helpful and clear. It is time to take a perfectly fresh and perfectly illustrative example of how not to write fiction. We shall take the case of Mr. Owen Johnson and his new novel, *Virtuous Wives*.

Mr. Johnson will be suspected by the dense and conventional censors of American literature of having written *Virtuous Wives* to make money. Alackaday, no! If he had a much better book might have come from his typewriter. Mr. Johnson was not thinking primarily of money, as he should have been (prior to the actual writing of the story). He was filled with a moral and uplifting aim. He had been shocked

to the marrow by the spectacle of the lives led by some New York women—the kind Alice Duer Miller writes discreetly about. The participation of America in the war had not begun. The performances of an inconsiderable few were unduly conspicuous. Mr. Johnson decided to write a novel that would hold up these disgusting triflers (and worse) to the scorn of sane and decent Americans. He set to work. He finished his book. It was serialized in one of the several magazines which have displaced forever the old Sunday school library in the field of Awful Warning literature. In these forums Mr. Galsworthy and Gouverneur Morris inscribe our present-day chronicles of the Schoenberg-Cotta family, and writ large over their instalments, as part of the editorial blurb, we read the expression of a fervent belief that Vice has never been so Powerfully, Brilliantly and Convincingly Depicted in All Its Horror by Any Pen. But we divagate.

Mr. Johnson's novel was printed serially and appeared then as a book with a solemn preface—the final indecent exhibition, outside of the story itself, of his serious moral purpose. And as a book it is failing utterly of its purpose. It has sold and is selling and Mr. Johnson is making and will make money out of it—which is what he did not want. What he did want he made impossible when he unmasked his great aim.

The world may be perverse, but you have to take it as it is. The world may be childish, but none of us will live to see it grow up. If the world thinks you write with the honest and understandable object of making a living it attributes no ulterior motive to you. The world says: "John Smith, the butcher, sells me beefsteak in order to buy Mrs. Smith a new hat and the little Smiths shoes." The world buys the steaks and relishes them. But if John Smith tells the world and his wife every time they come to his shop: "I am selling you this large, juicy steak to give you good red blood and make you Fit," then the world and his wife are resentful and