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Acceptable or Unacceptable?

Here are some thoughts on the use of questionable language in contemporary writing. I recently had a discussion with an author about this. He'd submitted a manuscript for consideration which had a violent setting and violent characters who, in real life, would no doubt have turned the air blue with uncensored vocabulary. Characters should sound real, he said, and therefore be free within the world they inhabit to turn the air the deepest blue. I understood, but could not accept this. Instinctively, I doubt the place of foul language in storytelling.

It's difficult to support this belief in the face of such successful television shows as *Breaking Bad* and *Orange Is The New Black*. I've watched both, loved both, but would toning down the language have softened the impact? It seems to me an admission of defeat, just like the excessive use of 'amazing' in less violent settings. It's giving out a message that this is the only way to express emotion, anger or the human spirit at its most rebellious. It's threatening, base and contemptuous, all rolled into one four letter word, more if you include extensions and phrasal verbs (look it up). It's become part of our working vocabulary, so who am I to deny it? Actually, I don't. When I hit rock bottom and no one blinks an eye, when the maze of life ends in yet another dead end, when yet another hope comes crashing down, I am pretty free with toe-curling language, at least when I'm alone. But this doesn't make it right. Besides, the written word is different to the spoken word. It should show style, thought, rhythm, pace, imagination, originality and discipline, much more than the loose language we're exposed to every day, in life and in the media.

Four hundred years ago, Shakespeare had a more extensive vocabulary than most contemporary working writers, and never resorted to banal cursing. Cursing yes, but banal, no. When characters wanted to offend, they did so with astonishing originality. I won't list them here, but all you need to do is Google 'Shakespearean curses' to see the fantastic array of insults and put-downs he had at his disposal, or that he created. As language evolves, of course it changes dramatically, and I wouldn't expect 'you whoresome lily-livered cur' to appear in any manuscripts, but the endlessly lazy use of base words to convey contempt becomes tiresome, dulls the senses and impoverishes language.

This applies to modern fiction as well as classics. In the latest Jack Reacher novel, and as far as I can remember in all previous Reacher stories, the author rarely, if ever, resorts to foul language. He conveys violence, and the threat of violence, through character and situation and the most terse, riveting style. There would be nothing to gain for him, or especially the central character, to hurl obscenities left, right and centre.

Language is an extraordinary blessing, and the English language arguably one of the greatest blessings of all. It evolves, it draws in new words and new ideas, it lends itself to experiment and shape-shifting so that the universe can be described in minute detail and great beauty. Swearing does nothing to extend this gift. In fact, it coarsens it, detracts from what language offers, and if we are not careful, it will trip us up and blunt our thinking along with our world, for the world is built on the ideas expressed through language.

Whenever I see obscenities used in writing, something inside me dies. Maybe a single neuron, maybe a blocked synapse, I don't know, but my soul sickens. It feels like an insult to all the writers who have ever struggled to convey the infinite wonder of humanity.