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Ordinary and Extraordinary

Why is it that Henry James and Joseph Conrad are, most likely, on English literature degree courses whereas Barbara Cartland and Jackie Collins are not? At first sight this is a facile question, but I am always evaluating writing, wondering which is good enough to publish, which is ordinary and which is extraordinary. What is it that sets great writing apart, and if the rules are logical, why can't we all follow them and write classics?

For those who recognise quality, it probably seems a rather futile task to break the process down into steps. There is writing that digs deeper, reaches further and conjures more vivid, original worlds. It tells truths about life that factual explanations never can. It translates our perceptions to a different, higher level of awareness. The imagined worlds revealed can be more potent than reality, and the fates of their inhabitants affect us deeply, sometimes more so than those of flesh and blood.

If there are truths to which good writing aspires, what is it, and how come it is so hard to reach? On the other hand, if there is no deep truth at the heart of life, are all our ideas about great writing misleading? How can we say that certain books touch fundamental truths if there are none. If literature is illusion, then we might as well study Mills and Boon as Shakespeare. Instinctively, I know this isn't so, just as I know that fire burns and jumping from a height hurts. Just because some truths are measurable doesn't make those which are not measurable less true, only harder to prove.

I'm reasoning this for myself as a publisher because I put a lot of words into the ether from people who want to write and to be read. I'm generally honest and never make unreasonable claims for the books on the Hawkwood list. Because the publishing world has expanded exponentially in the past decade or so, there are probably more books 'out there' today than have been published since the creation of the printing press. Not all of it is great. In fact, very little of it is. Most is ordinary – readable but ordinary. If only the extraordinary were published, the shelves would be empty and bookshops would become beauty salons.

I am constantly measuring what I put out into the world against the classics of fiction, and this can be a harsh measure. It feels at times as if I am adding to the infinite well of words, but not to the infinite well of understanding. If the market were the ultimate arbiter then I might as well pack up because the books invariably make no impact. But there is always the chance that something truly extraordinary is hidden amongst the titles of our growing list, and these can be slow burners as well as sudden incandescent stars.