SESSION TWO—READINGS

Read these to think about the writing of information and disinformation:

https://www.sacred-texts.com/ufo/mars/wow.htm

https://slate.com/culture/2013/10/orson-welles-war-of-the-worlds-panic-myth-the-infamous-radio-broadcast-did-not-cause-a-nationwide-hysteria.html

https://stand.uow.edu.au/why-we-believe-what-we-believe/

INTRO:

What is the truth?

In real life, this question is the sort of solipsistic nonsense that drives decent people crazy. It is a question used by those that wish to deceive, obfuscate or deflect our inquiries into what really is happening. It is a question used by trolls and bots. It is framed in a nearly infinite variety of ways by dishonest people who wish to hide their actions and intentions.

But in our work as writers, this question is a doorway into techniques, strategies and contemplation that will make our work richer and more meaningful.

This course is about "understanding and recognizing information, misinformation and disinformation" as it relates to our fiction and nonfiction writing. Before we dive into a discussion of how these concepts and readings impact us as writers, let's get a bit of clarification regarding misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation is the broader category of information that is false. It can be accidentally spread and the intent behind it might be innocent. The smaller category of disinformation, on the other hand, is spread deliberately, and it is used to manipulate and deceive and there is almost always an agenda behind it. Most urban legends can be called misinformation, while smear campaigns are disinformation.

But both of these fall under the big category of Information and this top level is where things start for us as writers. The management of information through exposition and dialogue is one of the key tools that we must hone in order to create fiction and nonfiction that pulls readers into our stories and keeps them hooked through the end. The proper management of information gives us world-building that doesn't get overwhelming and it helps us develop tension and conflict in our story.

Broadly speaking, the way we organize information throughout a story gives us our structure. It forms the backbone of what we are writing and it works on multiple levels.

The first, and most obvious level is the span of vital information that we present to our readers throughout the story. This reader level is the who, what, when, why, where and how of our story and it is easiest to think of the release of this information in stories like mysteries, where we release some bits of info at a time and don't find out whether the butler did or didn't do it until the very end.

But make no mistake, the control of what we show and tell to our readers is vitally important in literary fiction, in romance, in journalism, in personal essays, in science fiction, in fantasy...it's something we must consider in every genre, be it fiction or nonfiction.

Another aspect in how we deal with information in our work (and this one applies mostly to fiction or to nonfiction that isn't as journalistic in nature) is deciding what the characters know and when they know it. This level of information control can be a formidable tool in creating drama, especially when we consider what the characters know vs. what the reader knows. Anyone who has shouted, "Don't open that door!" at a movie screen understands the power of anticipation in storytelling, and when the reader knows something that the character doesn't, like that there's a baddie with an ax on the other side of the door, then we've got a great recipe for bringing out readers to the edge of their seats.

And while our control and structuring of information in our work is generally unseen by the reader, there are also times when we can productively use misinformation and disinformation in our writing. One example is the red herring. With this technique, we provide information that directs the reader toward a false conclusion that is only clarified toward the end of the story. We are essentially giving disinformation to the reader, but in the end

it can provide more enjoyment for them It can be a useful tool, especially when we don't want to give the ending away too early.

That said, clarity in our writing is always an important goal. It is hard enough to carry a reader through an emotionally complex story without adding in false information that is designed to throw them off the scent of what is really happening. So, it's best to use techniques like this sparingly.

When we look at the radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds, we can see the flow of information to characters and to readers/listeners. For the characters, they are constantly operating with incomplete information and this provides conflict in a story with a generally passive protagonist. On the listener level, it's especially easy to see the whole thing as mis- or disinformation, especially since the first half is presented as a fake news broadcast.

When we listen to this broadcast online, it is nowadays easy to separate the performance from any semblance of reality. Because we have seen the novel, two feature films and even graphic novel versions of the story, it's hard to hear the radio broadcast as anything other than a dramatization. But, looking back on the listeners of 1938, it's easier to imagine that they had never heard of the book and would be taken in by the "fake news" broadcast.

Thinking of the original audience as gullible people who had never heard of H.G. Wells makes it easier to believe the stories about a great panic started by the broadcast. That has an air of Stephen Colbert's "truthiness" to it, the feeling that it should be true, even though it may not be.

But, when we read the Slate article about how the panic was a fabrication by newspapers, we realize that these people weren't fools and we come into another element of our analysis of information: the deliberate use of disinformation in nonfiction.

The fact was, there wasn't a great panic over the broadcast. Actually, not that many people even heard it. But, the newspapers had an agenda, and they spread disinformation to try to discredit radio. And later on, the PBS documentary, while not meaning to do any harm, spread misinformation by uncritically spreading the story of the great panic.

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

Looking at our course's goal of analyzing information, misinformation and disinformation in writing through the lens of War of the Worlds, we see an intersection of fiction and nonfiction that is ripe for more critical analysis, and a way to sharpen our own writing. Welles took a fictional story and presented it in a manner that could be perceived as nonfiction (though he did use disclaimers repeatedly to prevent that), while the newspapers took their nonfiction platform and created fiction.

Both of these events, the radio broadcast and the responding news stories, took fiction and presented it as nonfiction, but there was one crucial difference, what the audience believed. They didn't believe the broadcast was real, but they did end up believing that there was a great panic over it.

And why did they believe one and not the other? Again, we have the aspect of truthiness. It's believable to think that people would panic, but an alien invasion doesn't sound quiet as plausible. Also, we have the intuition and rational intelligence systems of processing that are discussed in our final reading of the week, "Why We Believe What We Believe". The larger number of people who read negative reports about the radio broadcast let their intuition decide for them that it must have caused a panic, even though they had no evidence of that.

An awareness of these cognitive functions can be of great benefit when we are writing. We can use it to experiment with how we create our characters and stretch our worlds so that they stay in an intuitively understandable range, so they have that feeling of truthiness, even if they are entirely fictional.

Understanding how these reasons work, being able to use them as tools will help us make readers believe in our nonfiction so they will accept the information we offer them. And it can make readers willingly suspend their disbelief in our fiction so they have a greater emotional experience. Knowing the reasons why readers choose to believe one thing over another helps us create better stories.

In our discussions this week we will dig into some of the ways we can use these tools in our work by managing the information, misinformation and disinformation that we present to our readers, and in the assignment prompts we will explore ways to put these tools into action.