

# REFLECTIONS

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## "DARN," HE SMILED

When I was learning my craft as a science fiction writer, more than sixty years ago, there were two particularly ferocious critics to whom I paid very close attention: Damon Knight and James Blish. They were both skilled writers themselves, with a special area of excellence in the short story form. But they also wrote formidable reviews in which they shredded the work of their peers with uninhibited gusto and keen, cold insight.

Since I was only a beginner, and thus unlikely to become the subject of a Blish or Knight attack, I could read their critical essays with a certain detachment. Knight's reviews appeared mainly in the professional science fiction magazines of the day, that day being the period from 1952 to 1960, mostly. (They have since been collected in book form by Advent: Publishers under the title of *In Search of Wonder*.) Blish's pieces, also dating from the 1950s and 1960s, were written primarily for several amateur science fiction publications, "amateur" in this sense meaning only that they were privately published magazines containing material *about* science fiction, rather than science fiction itself. The Blish reviews were also collected by Advent: Publishers under the title, *The Issue at Hand*, and also in a later volume, *More Issues At Hand*. Neither Blish nor Knight specialized entirely in demolition. Many writers came in for high praise from both critics—Henry Kuttner, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Vance—but anyone whose work fell short of the Blish/Knight standards for effective prose and logical thinking was treated with murderous brutality.

Having your work reviewed by Blish or Knight must have been a terrible ordeal for the hapless writer under scrutiny. (Typical Knight essays were entitled "Chuckleheads," "Half-Bad Writers," and "Pitfalls and Dead Ends." Characteristic Blish pieces were headed "One Completely Lousy Story, with Footnote" and "The Monstrosities of Merritt.") But since I knew they would not be writing about me—not yet, not then—I could regard their eviscerations of other writers as a spectator sport. I studied their harsh strictures as though they were gospel, since their reviews amounted to a series of elegant lectures on how to write good science fiction, cast in the form of discussions of what not to do.

I treated the work of these two critics as gospel because for me it *was* gospel, setting forth the technical theories of two writers who had proved by their own work that they knew how to produce superb science fiction. Everything they said made sense to me. I read their essays over and over; I pondered the lessons they contained, and I shaped my own work in accordance with their teachings—and, more than sixty years later, I still live by their precepts; I have never lost my belief that James Blish and Damon Knight were the true gurus of science fiction writing.

One of Blish's pieces that I gave special notice to was the one called "One Completely Lousy Story, with Footnote," published in 1954. This offered a detailed analysis of what was indeed a terrible story, though it was published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, one of the leading magazines of the time. (Its author, who had three other stories published a few years later, is long forgotten and will go unnamed here, though Blish was not so merciful himself.)

The story, Blish says, "is one of the worst stinkers ever printed in the field." He flays not only the author's plotting and his storytelling technique and his dialogue but also his grammar and punctuation, and devotes considerable space to his "said-bookism," a

term of literary opprobrium that I think was one of Blish's coinages. This is what he says: "About half of the fifteen thousand words of this story are dialogue, at a minimum estimate, and in the seventy-five hundred words of miscellaneous yatter, the characters actually *say* something only twenty-seven times. For the rest of the yarn, they shout (six times), repeat, snap (twice), order (four times), stammer, observe (five times), ask (sixteen times), lecture, argue, 'half-whisper,' muse, call, sigh (four times), nod, agree (four times), report (three times), cry, yell, command, bark, scream (twice), guess, state (twice, both times 'flatly'), add, suggest, chide, propose, announce, explain, admit, growl, chuckle (twice). . . ."

You get the idea. Blish tallies eighty-nine more or less legitimate substitutes for "said," along with a number of illegitimate ones like "he pointed" and "he understated," and—the ultimate sin—the insertion of an entire statement that in no way carries the meaning of "said" between two halves of a piece of dialogue ("Have to, Halwit blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling, 'no telling what they can find out.'") Blish makes the point that all this is over-emphatic—the dialogue itself ought to be able to make the reader aware that the speaker is angry, or amused, or terrified, or whatever. It's distracting, too: readers alert to niceties of style find themselves looking out for the next flatfooted verbal redundancy that substitutes for the simple "he said" instead of paying attention to the events of the story.

Blish called this mannerism "said-bookism," suggesting that the author "has in his possession a table or book of such substitutes, either compiled by himself or bought with good money, and he is using it to give his dialogue 'variety.'" The evils of said-bookism were immediately apparent to me, and you can look down the length and breadth of the vast Silverbergian output of fiction without ever once having me use "he flustered" or "he sneered" instead of "he said." I did sometimes use what I considered to be a harmless substitute—"he asked in alarm," "he admitted cautiously," even, once, "he whispered." (All examples from 1958.) But mostly I have stuck to "said" when I want to indicate that a character is saying something, or I have used no said-verb at all, simply quotation marks, when it is clear enough from context that someone is speaking.

Imagine my horror, then, to read in *The Wall Street Journal* not long ago that some of today's English teachers are telling their students that words like "said" are "dead" words that make their compositions vague or dull. "There are so many more sophisticated, rich words to use," argued a California middle-school teacher whose handbook of said-bookisms, *Banish Boring Words*, has sold eighty thousand copies in the last seven years. "Said," she insists, "doesn't have any emotion. You might use barked. Maybe howled. Demanded. Cackled. I have a list."

*She has a list.* She's not the only one. The Powell River Board of Education in British Columbia has 397 substitutes for "said" posted on its web site—"emitted," "beseeched," "continued," "sniveled," and "spewed." And there are others. A different Internet list offers "Two Hundred Ways to Say Went," including "wormed" and "peregrinated." Students everywhere are being urged to enliven their prose by avoiding dreary, humdrum words like "said" and "went."

"Say it's not so," emitted James Blish from his grave, where he has squirmed uneasily for more than forty years. "You must not be teaching said-bookisms," he beseeched.

Fat chance, I contradict. The damage has been done. Once the schoolteachers begin advocating "livelier" prose and start rewriting the classics—where Hemingway was content to say that cars were "going very fast," today's students are urged toward the more vivid "with lightning speeds" or even "going at a superior speed"—the authority of Authority is behind the said-book. What's worse, these guides to bad writing are all over the Internet, put there by bad writers eager to help you become just as bad. And,

as everyone knows, something virally emitted on the Internet will eternally circulate, inculcating erroneous wisdom in all who click thereon.

And is it really erroneous? Maybe Blish, savaging that poor said-book writer back there in 1954, was expending his indignation on a pointless campaign. I have before me Anne McCaffrey's novel *Dragonflight*, the first of her many Dragonriders of Pern novels, and in it I find "‘Oh, that's not hard to do,' she interjected," "‘I don't know why you insisted that F'nor unearth these ridiculous things from Ista Weyr,' Lessa exclaimed in a tone of exasperation," and a plethora of similar constructions: "F'nor grunted," "F'lar replied serenely," "Lessa demanded harshly," and "Lessa spoke up," these last four all on the same page. A much later McCaffrey novel, *The White Dragon*, gives us "‘As you wish, Master Robinton,' D'fio sounded pleased," along with "she cried," "he offered," "he announced in a booming voice," and much, much more.

Why single out the late Anne McCaffrey, one of my dearest friends, as a said-book sinner? Because she admitted it herself, in a statement that can be found all over the Internet: "James Blish told me I had the worst case of 'said-bookism' (that is, using every word except said to indicate dialogue). He told me to limit the verbs to said, replied, asked, and answered and only when necessary." But I have another reason for citing her. A section of *Dragonflight* won a Hugo back in 1968. *The White Dragon* was a huge best seller ten years later. To the end of her life, Anne McCaffrey's many books were eagerly sought, read, loved, and imitated by a vast and enthusiastic public. It doesn't seem as though all those said-synonyms did a bit of damage to her career. I can cite examples from many other writers who out-McCaffrey McCaffrey here—"‘That's a depressing story,' he mourned," and "‘What do you want me to do?' she burned into his face," and ever so many just as awful, but what's the use? The authors of those gems will only come back at me with evidence of their stupendous sales figures, and I will have no answer for that.

And now the teachers are teaching said-bookism as though it is one of the capital virtues of writing. The students who learn that lesson will grow up to write ham-fisted trilogies about zombies or vampires or both, and their books will outsell anything James Blish ever wrote, or, probably, Robert Silverberg, as well. Those who don't become writers will become teachers and create new said-bookers by the bushel.

So was Blish wrong when he made fun of a novice writer for using eighty-nine substitutes for "said" in one fifteen-thousand-word story? Is that really bad writing, injurious to the reader's experience of the story, something for writers to avoid? "I don't know," I conclude penultimately. And then I shrug despairingly. "Everything is peregrinating to hell, anyway," I resign. "Why shouldn't prose style go there too?"