

You will find in the Golden Age of pulp

literature, spy and thriller novels and in 19th century fables a plot twist that is so common that it is considered cliché, even kind of stupid.

It involves the hero being saved from a deadly bullet by all sorts of things stored in a jacket's breast pocket.

For example: Ian Fleming's novel, *From Russia With Love*.

In this 007 adventure, an assassin attempts to kill James Bond with a copy of *War and Peace*. This version of Tolstoy's novel a .25 calibre pistol has been fitted into the book's spine.

Needless to say, there's no chance you could ever, ever find an edition of *War and Peace* like that in Canada. Not even in Chapters. But, if you go over the border to the States, who knows, you might find them, you know, maybe, at WAL-MART.

In any case, the low-calibre bullet fails to penetrate because it hits a silver cigarette case in his breast pocket. It stops the bullet. In stories, it's not always a cigarette case.

Bibles, pocket watches, even large coins have stopped bullets. In *A Fist Full of Dollars*, Clint Eastwood uses a sheet of cast iron from a stove to deflect rifle bullets. It seems, Hollywood scriptwriters, pulp fiction writers will use just about anything to stop a bullet.

But there is one thing, that has never stopped a killshot, in movies or in books, and that is a word.

Words are paper thin, thinner, thin as air. Thin as thought. Gossamer.

Yet with words and good punctuation we can form and share compelling ideas, to create clarity and inspiration, to pass on knowledge, for art and, for pleasure, for profit -- words can be a hammer, an axe, a sword, a spatula, maybe even a shovel.

Words are insubstantial things... But look at words can do.

Look at what you do with One on One.

When you help a child learn to read, you give them the keys of creation. Vast worlds. Secrets gardens. With words are reader can climb the most unforgiving peaks and

tumble down into the lushest, softest, greenest valleys.

Words can carve and uncover, and dredge from the deep---stories. We need them. Those stories. Not just the children you teach and mentor. We need them. I want you to remember that.

Three months ago, I started working at a video store: Joey's Video Stop in New Westminster. I'm not making this up. It's a tiny shop but he has one of the largest DVD collections in Metro Vancouver. And I love working there.

It's a busy shop. It attracts an interesting clientele. Some of them are Luddites. They just don't like downloading movies. Some of them might not have credit cards, or don't want to use them. And some are paranoid. And some just like porn. But the majority of our clientele, (I figured this out within my first two weeks), the majority of our customers come into the shop seeking stories.

Why else would we watch movies?

We're desperate for stories. Funny stories, scary stories, violent stories, sexy stories. We need stories as much as we need air, water, fire and love. Desperately so. I think we crave them especially at night because the night story taps into our childhood experience of having stories read to us before bedtime.

Our televisions, our computers, our tablets, become stand-in for your mother or father, a loved one, turning cream coloured pages of a picture book over. They made that sound where the edge of the page rubs against sleeve or a pillow case or the hem of your favourite blanket. It sounds like the crackle of a beautifully baked bread crust.

The night story brings us back to a time, a real or wished for time, of home, safety, and innocence. In many ways, we still take in stories like children. We want to believe.

There's a story I used to tell my twin sons, Jack and Emmet, when they were toddlers:

One morning, when the boys were very little, we packed a bag with grilled cheese sandwiches, apples, oranges and a bottle of water and walked up the hill. At the top of the hill was a castle that was built by an eccentric millionaire. We wanted to see it. So up through the forest we went. We saw racoons. We saw chipmunks. We saw a cat with a mouse in its mouth. Then we came upon the wall. I boosted them up and over the wall. On the other side, through a screen of trees was the castle.

We started to walk towards it. Before we knew it, three dobermans charged at us. We scrambled up trees. The dobermans barked and barked. The boys started to cry. Then one of the dogs said, “Don’t be afraid. We only wanted to say hello.”

So I climbed down the tree and closed my left hand and the dog sniffed it and started licking it. I told the boys to come down. And they copy me. They held their hands to the dogs, fingers closed, and let the dog sniff and then lick them. Then we played with the dobermans for the rest of the day. The End.

I told that story maybe one hundred times to the boys over and over again when they were three to five years old. They’re in grade five now and a few weeks ago Jack asked me, “Dad, why don’t we meet dogs that talk anymore?”

We may laugh. We may hold in wonder

the innocence and gullibility of children but I don’t think we grown-ups are very different. I want to trust people and I want people to trust me. I think we all want to.

And whether stories are fact or fiction, we tend to believe the stories are true. Not scientifically true. Not empirically true. But true in the sense of being meaningful and real and vivid to us. We want stories to make us larger, more open, more empathetic, more childlike. Why else would we cry in dark of a movie theater?

The real question to ask is what happens when we write and create stories that are NOT true? What happens when we create or tell narratives that TAKE more than they can GIVE to the reader, the listener, to us? What does an UNTRUE story do to its teller?

Two months ago, I had a conversation with Dr. Robin Stern. She’s associate director of the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence in New Haven.

She told me about the facial feedback hypothesis. It postulates that an expression can stimulate or evoke a feeling. In other words, emotions are contagious. When you put a couple of people in a room and one of them has a strong emotion, other people catch it. It can be entirely unintentional. A person might be thinking of buttercups and puppies but their face may have a neutral or pre-occupied scowl on their face. And eventually, that unrelated, non-demonstrative facial expression will become the emotional reality for the person who started the whole loop.

I think that’s what happens when we tell stories whether they are true or false.

As a writer, I spend a lot of time thinking about how my craft, my stories change others.

But the stories will also change me, the writer, the teller.

The stories we tell will sometimes be real or imaginary. They will arise out of a broad historical or social consensus. They will be formed out of personal experience. They can be based on fact or they can be built on a foundation of lies, a mountain of equivocation, and a whole slab of core messages massaged like a side of Kobe beef.

We can tell stories with love in our heart. Or we can tell stories with hate. Either way the story will become us. We will be transformed by our own stories. Not by living them but by simply TELLING them. It is a wonderful and dangerous thing. It not only reveals who we are. It makes us who we are.

The pen is not mightier than the sword. Words can't stop a bullet. Still, a story is a mighty, mighty thing.

A good story, true or false, fact or fiction, can make rivers flow and great ships sail across the sea, it can make bullets fly.

It is the bullet.

What then can stop a story from striking the heart?

-JJ Lee, April 9, 2014, Hycroft House