

## MAKING IT UP

When you read a novel or watch a play you have to pretend that it's real. You know that someone has made it up, but you have to forget that to be able to enjoy it.

Coleridge called this 'the willing suspension of disbelief' or 'poetic faith', as if believing in a literary fiction was the equivalent of believing in God, an act of faith being required to believe in either of them.

In the early days of soap operas, first on radio, then on television, it was not uncommon for actors to receive letters addressed to the characters they played, as if the character was a real person to be loved or hated, pitied or abused. Literary critics who write about works of fiction do so with more detachment, but they still treat the characters as real people.

As T.S.Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality". The wish to escape into a world of make-believe is strong in most of us. To deny the existence of God is one thing, not to believe in Hamlet or Little Nell or Dirty Den Watts is quite another. Only someone as cynical as Oscar Wilde could have said, "One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing."

Which begs the question, can it really be a good thing to allow oneself to be so completely taken in by a work of fiction as to mistake it for reality? Is every work of fiction, however unsentimental, however dystopian, by definition escapist?

For every new story there is an author who makes it up, an author who sounds plausible and persuades us, by various literary tricks, to suspend our disbelief in the way that scammers do. Old stories, on the other hand, myths and fairy tales, are told and re-told and everyone knows they are not true. The real world and the world of make-believe may be confused by children, but not by grown-ups, unless reality becomes too much for them.

Novels, as the name implies, are new. Each new novel is the start of another phone call from a scammer. The reader must choose whether to be taken in or not, whether the unreal world of the novel is better than the real world, whether the memory of things that never actually happened will compensate for the memory of things that did.

You might think that actors are no better than novelists in this regard, perhaps worse because they are impostors. Actors in films and television dramas are complicit in the deception, without them it couldn't be done, but on the stage, when they come to take a bow and the lights come up, we are reminded that it was, after all, just a play.

"These our actors," as Prospero says when real life interrupts his magic, "were all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air."

Fact and fiction, real life and make-believe, are all too easily taken one for the other on the screen, where nothing is real, all is illusion. The news, when producers and presenters get their hands on it, becomes a drama. Drama on film and television turns into melodrama. Unlike drama on stage, there is no end to it, there is always another episode or another series or every past episode and series available to be watched again, streamed, downloaded, binged on.

Unable to bear too much reality, humankind now has the means at its disposal to avoid it altogether.