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Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter

Learn to work the saxophone

Streets, crossroads, and pathways have served as imagery for so long that they predate the wheel, but so help me Kerouac, I can't get off the road.

I'm here at the intersection of King, Kingsolver, Becker, and Fagen, a place that snags those whose reading habits follow no pattern. I read these things recently: books by Stephen King and Barbara Kingsolver and a *New York Times* [newsletter by John McWhorter](#) about Walter Becker and Donald Fagen. When I finished them—and in the cases of King and Kingsolver, that took a while—I had more evidence of an inescapable truth: All the zillions of novels, poems, and popular songs we know are based on only a handful of themes, so style is pushed to the fore. Offer a new way to think about something and we readers and listeners offer generous rewards. Restate the obvious, and we will drop-kick you into oblivion. Show, don't tell.

Unless you are Stephen King.

His latest novel, *Fairy Tale*, was on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list for several months. I can't figure out why. Perhaps readers have been conditioned by his enormous (seventy books), usually well-received output and his vast collection of writing awards. I have mostly avoided Stephen King books throughout my reading life because I find the horror genre idiotic, but I read and enjoyed *Billy Summers* and *11/22/63*, which are not horror stories and not idiotic. Now I think they may be anomalies, if an unknown bloggiero like me can

be permitted to judge the life's work of a book-writing supernova. (It's okay, he'll never see this.) *Fairy Tale* reads like a cross between a sappy mid-twentieth-century adventure novel for eighth graders and a poorly executed *Lord of the Rings* knockoff. Dialogue is said to be a King strength, but the words coming out of the seventeen-year-old main character's mouth do not sound like they could have been spoken by any modern-day teenager or any teenager ever. Maybe because Stephen King is seventy-five? Some will disagree, of course, but they will be wrong. The book is a master's class illustration of suspension of disbelief, but in a bad way. My disbelief remained firmly in place throughout the six-hundred-page slog.

An excerpt from *Fairy Tale* that appeared for a while on [Stephen King's website](#), which makes you think he or his publisher is proud of it:

I reached the opening and saw the ceiling overhead was now earth, with fine tendrils of root dangling down. I ducked under some overhanging vines and stepped out onto a sloping hillside. The sky was gray but the field was bright red. Poppies spread in a gorgeous blanket stretching left and right as far as I could see. A path led through the flowers toward a road. On the far side of the road more poppies ran maybe a mile to thick woods, making me think of the forests that had once grown in my suburban town. The path was faint but the road wasn't. It was dirt but wide, not a track but a thoroughfare. Where the path joined the road there was a tidy little cottage with smoke rising from the stone chimney. There were clotheslines with things strung on them that weren't clothes. I couldn't make out what they were.

I looked to the far horizon and saw the skyline of a great city. Daylight reflected hazily from its highest towers, as if they were made of glass. Green glass. I had read *The Wizard of Oz* and seen the movie, and I knew an Emerald City when I saw one.

See anything there you would tell a friend about? Do I have the right to tell a bazillionaire best-seller author that his book is dull and graceless? Of course, but I may be alone. From the *New York Times* website on Sept. 15, 2022, in a feature headlined "9 New Books We Recommend This Week" that included *Fairy Tale*:

In King's latest novel, a teenage boy discovers another world beneath a backyard shed. A multiverse-traversing, genre-hopping intertextual mash-up, the book is also a page-turner driven by memorably strange encounters and well-rendered, often thrilling action.

Even if I could figure out what a “multiverse-traversing, genre-hopping intertextual mash-up” is, I wouldn’t agree that the book is memorable or thrilling.

But I’m at an intersection, and after recovering from the smack of King’s lumbering bus of a novel, I read Barbara Kingsolver’s *Demon Copperhead*. It, too, has spent months on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list and still resides there. Like *Fairy Tale*, it is lengthy, which is not surprising for authors whose career success tends to make publishers submissive.

That’s where the similarity ends.

Demon Copperhead is a master’s class illustration of show, don’t tell. I’ve read few other books in which hopelessness was portrayed so relentlessly, but never once did Kingsolver tell me that the main character was a poor, possibly unsalvageable wreck. No writer needs to tell readers that Appalachia suffers from the disintegration of families, economic failure, and opioid and fentanyl carpet bombing. We know. We’ve been told. So show us. Let us see and feel it. Kingsolver obliges.

Which brings us to Fagen and Becker streets. Sometimes artists can offer words in a way that obscures meaning, but the presentation is so captivating that we keep trying to understand the magic, sometimes for decades. ~~Any major dude will tell you.~~ Any major dude will show you.

Donald Fagen and the late Walter Becker, as I need not tell you, are better known as Steely Dan. Their inscrutable lyrics and intricate music have long left listeners mystified and fascinated. John McWhorter recently explored the pretzel logic of fandom in a review of *Quantum Criminals: Ramblers, Wild Gamblers and Other Sole Survivors from the Songs of Steely Dan*, an upcoming book by [Alex Pappademas](#). McWhorter’s lede in his newsletter says it all: “A new book has taught me that I don’t mind a lack of clarity as much as I often suppose.”

I don’t need a complete understanding of where I’m going? I can just enjoy going there? This guy might be on to something. By reading McWhorter’s explanation of Pappademas’s work, I understood the lyrics of “Kid Charlemagne.” But I enjoyed the song for decades without knowing what it meant. I didn’t need any telling because I enjoyed the showing: the horns, the harmonies, the guitars, the rhythm, the pop, the jazz, the voices, the mix.

Do have to disagree, however, with McWhorter’s aside that some of Shakespeare’s work is too hard to understand on stage. He writes that certain passages of the Elizabethan English should be adjusted so we groundlings can

follow a performance more easily, although he claims to have no comprehension problem while reading the original text. The opposite is closer to the truth for me—even someone in a theater’s cheap seats can arrive at understanding faster than a reader who stops every few iambs to check another footnote that explains a centuries-old usage. “I will away anon” is clear when a character says it on stage because it fits the dramatic action. Change it to “I’ll get out of here immediately” and we’ve demolished all the rhythmic power.

I also oppose making small adjustments to the *Mona Lisa*, even though her smile seems a little off.



A photo of the UCSD library that I add for no reason other than all the works mentioned here are available at libraries. And this is National Library Week.

Kind regards
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