

THE ROLE OF FEAR

By Adam Dunn

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*Do not be afraid; our fate
cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.*
—Dante Alighieri, “The Inferno”

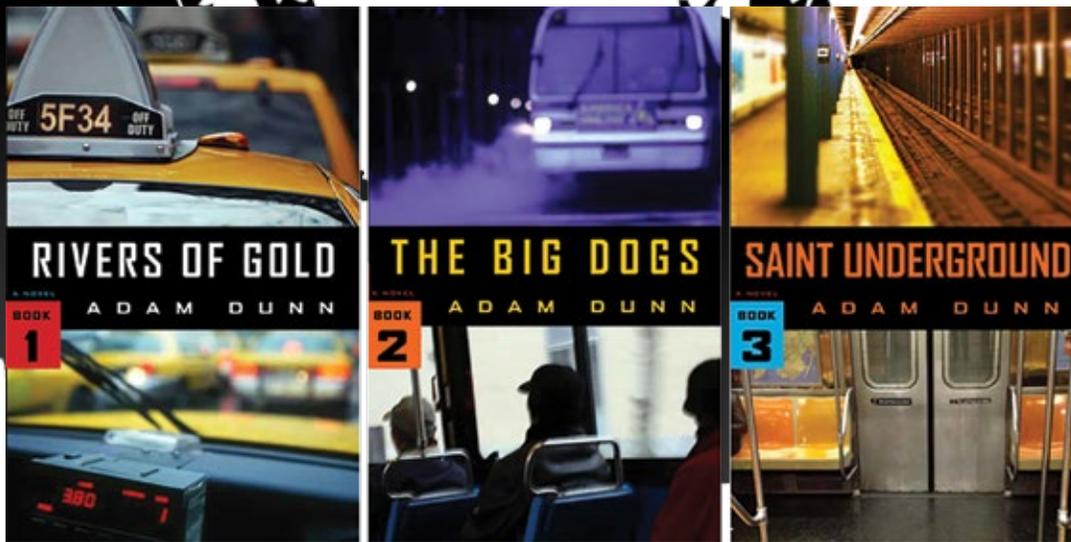
A somewhat paradoxical title for an article. For how can “fear” (from the proto-Germanic *feraz* or “danger”), understood as intrinsically unsettling, disruptive, or even paralyzing in both its chilling transitive and dark majestic noun senses, have a “role” in any constructive sense?

Two possibilities spring to mind. First, fear functions as nature’s own early-warning system, a simple and instantaneous threat indicator that is easily seen as the lowest common denominator between species. Simply put, fear is the sensory arm of the self-preservation instinct. This can be termed its experiential or *internal* role. (I refrain from using the term “subjective” for reasons outlined below). It exists in the simplest of animals, in the *in utero* fetus that reflexively shies away from the cold intrusion of the amniocentesis probe, and in the endless illusions, anxieties, and constructs men create for themselves to block out the hyperanxious awareness of their own mortality (poignantly described by Ernest Becker in “The Denial of Death”).

The second role is that which may be seen as having an *external* role, that is, fear put to use as an extension of the will. From the sustained malevolent glare to the suicide bomber, fear covers inestimable distance at incalculable speed—it *strikes*. It can be transmitted at the speed of primal emotion through an air-raid siren, a doctor’s silent email, or the terrible cacophony of a predatory pack’s movement as it closes in. This external role can not only be deployed by one individual against others; it can be learned, and thus passed on to others as chosen, dark drops in the pool of accrued human knowledge. In physical form, be it the most primitive handmade spear or a remote-controlled precision airstrike, this role acquired undeniable priority early on in human development, which it maintains to this day.

Yet there is another dimension to fear’s external role, which is what concerns the writer most. This is the abstract or symbolic aspect to fear, one which may precede its physical core manifestation—the effective deployment of which may suspend the need for that violent core entirely. Consider the death’s-head logo, whether on a pirate ship’s flag, an SS officer’s insignia, or toxicity warning labels on sundry household goods. Here it is fear’s role to deflect or head off confrontation, by telegraphing the core’s violent promise in a way sure to be recognized by the target audience. Thus is the war won without firing a shot, the plague center sealed in quarantine, the restive populace kept in check by the implied threat of government agency.

Herein lies the role of fear for the writer: as a projective abstract tool which plays upon the innate impulse of the target in order to illuminate and amplify the storyscape. Fear soundlessly breaches the gap between storyteller and audience at the



speed of recognition; it elicits a desired cognitive reaction (as opposed to triggering a frenzied physical one). Whatever emotional nuance intended by the writer to be conveyed in a scene is magnified and sharpened by the deployment of fear, which resonates louder and longer within the audience's mind, so that the efforts of one effect results in many—force multiplication in action.

It's difficult to say exactly when this literary device first came into being. Doubtless

the gross use of fear existed in myth and oral traditions beyond accurate dating. The expulsion from Eden detailed in the third chapter of Genesis relies on it (as does the flood narrative three chapters later). One can imagine the audience cringing on its stone benches in some Periclean amphitheater, listening to the dire implications of Creon's condemnation of Antigone murmured by the masked chorus. Juvenal's immortal refrain "who will guard the guards" likely put a chill up the spine of any witness to the violent sequence of succession to the Roman throne in the first century. Innumerable religious tracts (from all ages and faiths) depict damnation and eternal suffering for transgressors of whichever hegemon holds the pen.

But the use of fear as a mature, refined literary technique is evident in Shakespeare's use of the dramatic aside to foment tension in the audience, as the target is made to recognize (through the well-practiced delivery of long-reworked lines) the dark machinations unfolding behind the scenes. The realization of worse yet to come heightens tension through the stirring of muted dread, as per Iago's dark closing couplet in *Othello* (I,iii): "I have't! It is engend'ed! Hell and night/Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light!" Not for nothing did the bard counterweigh this emotional manipulation of the audience's fears with bouts of comic relief, a balanced equation employed to varying degrees by veteran crime novelists, such as Carl Hiaasen, John Sandford, and Joseph Wambaugh in our own time.

The furthest extrapolation of abstract fear's written trajectory is found in Poe, who joined the method of delivery with repeated themes (premature burial, vindictive reincarnation, incipient madness) to enshrine this dynamic within a distinct, measurable framework: story. Whether in a vignette of rising monomania (*The Imp of the Perverse*) or a lengthy parable on man's flawed nature leading to his inevitable, terrible fall (*Berenice*), Poe was able to deploy his sophisticated word/impulse trebuchet to strike targets at various distances, to various degrees, from the uncanny and off-putting to incalculable despair and hysteria. (Poe's own disastrous literary career, compared with more successful figures in later stages of media development, such as Vincent Price and Christopher Lee, both of whom are now lauded for their recorded readings of his work, is a lesson all aspiring writers ignore at their peril.)

Modern storytellers of what is classified in bland commercial terms as "genre fiction" have added little to the structure of fear's written deployment as mapped by the trailblazers. The one ingredient (often overused) today is detail, with the ceaseless input feed of global interconnectivity serving up a seemingly bottomless crock daily. The audience in one remote part of the interlashed world can sup heartily on yarns seasoned with the larder-pickings of another far distant. Thus John Burdett provides the *farang* he ceaselessly mocks in the west with rich narrative broths full of fear-spice from the east, while Mo Hayder digs deep into the fear-cesspool lurking beneath the surface of her green and pleasant land for the bedside scrutiny of all to enjoy.

But the dynamic is the same, and in the long run we're the richer for it. Write on. ■

Adam Dunn is the author of the novels "Rivers of Gold," "The Big Dogs," and "Saint Underground," the forthcoming novel "The Unfathomable Deep," and co-writer (with Eric Anderson) of the forthcoming novel "Osiris." He spent years as a freelance writer cultivating networks among the military, intelligence, law enforcement, and financial communities. His byline has appeared in 18 publications in 4 countries. Including: CNN and BBC News (online); Inc., Paper, SOMA, and Publishers Weekly magazines (glossy); and the San Francisco Chronicle and South China Morning Post (newsprint). He and his family have left New York City. For more information, visit: www.dunnbooks.com.