

Speech, Humanitas Luncheon

There must be a reason why the Humanitas Event has grown from a modest meeting of a few dozen people to this impressive congregation...why recipients value this prize as much as they do other prestigious awards...maybe it's the money.

Or maybe writers appreciate the encouragement Humanitas gives them in the face of the enormous profit imperatives of our business that flatten even the most committed.

We are head-cuffed to a numbers game which says "win or die" and we're obliged to pull every trick within and without reason to stay alive. And, because we are desperate, we look for help in all the obvious places. We roll still another car, we send more gunzels spinning to the deck, we double up on the double-entendres. In the midst of all the pressure, Humanitas reminds us yearly that there are other values to express, other experiences to convey beyond the shocking and the sensational...that America's viewers can get something more from prime-time than a quickened pulse. Because we see the rightness of the cause, we gather each year to salute the nominees for the Humanitas prizes.

As a rule, if you enter the arts as a life's work, you cannot expect to make money. The painter, the poet, the playwright follow their professions out of love, compelled to express their talents. The odds against making big money are long, except in Hollywood—where rewards can come in gross lots, even to the semi-pro.

We take our salaries for granted and often let the money dictate what we do. Often, it's not how good is the material but how material is the deal. Humanitas encourages us to put a little back into the business that has treated us so generously, if not always kindly.

I don't believe writers sit down and say "This one's for Humanitas...How can I get a puppy into this show?...If it kills me, I'm going to write something soft."

We all need to make enough to look our business manager in the eye, but I don't think the nominees, who inspired today's attendance, did it for the money. Maybe it's because they just happened to be stuck with standards, fixated at a point in their development where they cling to substantial values and a premise they can live with. Some people, in defending "Give 'em what they want" TV programming say it's not been proven that violence on the tube affects the behavior of viewers. They say people are not necessarily moved to copy what they see on TV. If that's the case, someone should tell the big advertisers they're tossing away billions trying to get the audience to identify with the happy guy in the sports car, or with the beautiful woman moving swiftly up Fifth Avenue...If the sales job works between the acts why should it stop when the show resumes?

There is the mistaken belief, although it is not openly defended, that meaningful material doesn't sell. The tendency is, when the ratings get thin, out of cynicism and distrust of the viewer, to reach for lethal weapons. Unfortunately, it is not a truism that quality sells...but it can. It can garner numbers as well as give audiences something to chew on. Stories of substance are victims of discrimination when rejected for more obvious stuff. Granted, we are not in the business of delivering intellectual concepts. We deal

in emotional experiences. Our stories must be moving and we must touch the viewer not win an argument. What Humanitas advocates is not the abandonment of tension, confrontation, conflict, jeopardy, and rising crisis, elements that make a story cook but in addition, Humanitas looks for some insight into the complexity and wonder of the human personality...

I have always loved the movies of Jean Renoir. Like few other directors the character of the man is expressed on the screen. You can see his hand in the way his actors relate to one another, the small moments of observing, connecting, communicating. There was always time in his films for an experience, an experience that lasted in the heart of the viewer forever.

I think it's fitting that the directors of the nominated shows are present today because of their work in fulfilling the scripts and we can thank the actors for performances that have realized the values of these dramas.

The nominees today have found the moments. They have taken their chances and used them to express something unique and personal. It's the way they have dealt with behavior, the sensitivity they have applied to delicate issues that has moved us.

So much of our television literature denies emotion, disguises human need beneath cool indifference and exaggerated masculinity instead of peeling away, revealing uncertainty, vulnerability, giving us a chance to show mature courage...

We recognize we are in a field of popular programming. For the most part, the literature is not serious but its far-reaching impact is serious. So, we argue each point, negotiate every line with an eye to consistency and reality. And we are not alone. We have allies on the other side of the table interested in enriching the product. Our employers are obsessed with the numbers but they too are in attendance today, aware of the goals of Humanitas, seeking to find a way to accommodate commerce and art. We are all trying to live in the world of TV and at the same time rise above it.

The nominees have solved the puzzle. They have given us shows that gained immediate attention and also made a lasting impression. They have written stories that give us hope for a rational world...stories that not only show man in conflict with bad guys and bad fortune but reveal a faith in his dignity and his perfectability...

I am blessed with a son six and a half years old, who confided to me as I put him to bed that he was afraid of having bad dreams. I said, "Dreams are just stories you make up. They can't hurt you. They express your wishes and your fears." "But I don't like them," he said. "How can I not have them?" "You can't not have them," I said. "But you can try turning the stories around. See if you can make them happy. If there are monsters, try to make friends with them." He didn't quite buy it. Our conversation about dreams continued. One night I told him that I also dreamed...that I had a notepad by my bed and each morning I wrote down the dreams I remembered. "I want to do that, too," he said. So, I got a pad and pencil and he told me his dreams...Rockets go up in the air and explode. Instead of parachutes opening up, faces appear. They float around. The earth shakes, it opens up, and he falls in...Writing down his dreams helped turn the phobia into a creative experience...But then the inevitable happened, the other kid dropped. He said, "Let me see your dreams." Well, some of my dreams are not rated G, not even PG-13, but I gave him an abridged version which he enjoyed. In my son's dreams there are monsters and there is beauty...It is my hope that he will continue to record his dreams, the scary stuff and the lyrical. He will have a lifetime to confront them, to try to understand them, for they reflect his inner life and are the substance of his creativity. That repressed material

is extremely valuable, for along with the rage and the mayhem there is idealism, passion, the drive to excellence. We are all struggling to sublimate this material into conscious artistic expression but we must be watchful and make our notes.

The nominees have succeeded better than most in expressing not only the dark side of their nature, which makes for good cop shows, but also the sublime qualities of love, compassion, intimacy and joy. We are greatly indebted to them for the dreams they have recorded and shared with us...It's an honor to be with you today. Thank You.