

Kermode Cats Barnes Stories

By Walter Cummins

Life is a Fiction

Over a half century ago, shortly before the twentieth-century British literary critic Frank Kermode's seminal *The Sense of an Ending* was published, I found myself in a debate with the campus chaplain, a priest named Joe Casey, whom I barely knew at the time. The topic—Life is a Fiction—came from me, although I don't recall how Father Joe and I ended up on a stage in front of several hundred students.

My premise didn't deny the fact of life itself—flesh, blood, pleasure, and pain. Instead, I proposed that we imagine the lives we lead as if they were stories. We comprehend our experiences as replications of fictional strategies that select events to reach a significant culmination. In truth, we live amidst a plethora of details, most of which we don't even acknowledge. But, acculturated through engagement with stories from early childhood, we—like those who create those stories—chose what matters for the development of our own plots, just a fraction of the totality that envelops us. And like story creators, we create patterns that provide drama to the events of our lives. We turn ourselves into the protagonists—or, in some cases, antiheroes—of our existences.

The Middest

If only I had waited a few months until Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* was in print, with its publication in 1967, fifty-one years ago. I could have used his evidence and analysis to substantiate my inclinations.¹ But that's only part of it. Kermode makes a much larger point about fictions than I did in confining my notion of fictional lives to individuals. I considered people using story patterns to spice up the mundane. Kermode, however, says we want to believe that our lives have purpose and meaning, even that we fulfill integral roles in a much larger master plot.

For Kermode, humans exist in what he calls the “middest”—essentially, an ongoing present—but we possess a fundamental need to believe we are participating in a significant process, steps to achieving ends that matter, both collectively and individually. We are born *in medias res* [thrown into the middle of things] and die *in mediis rebus* [still in the middle of

¹ Most of the book's six sections are devoted to considerations of theorists and, especially, to specific authors, works, and literary movements as related to the central ideas of the human need for endings and to the relationship of fictions to the actual world.

things].² Thrown as we are, “to make sense of their span [we] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives.”

Thus, we seek stories that dramatize the happenings of our lives as consequential steps toward some significant climax. We want evidence that our individual lives mirror a bigger picture of getting somewhere. Otherwise, we would just fill time and space, enjoy a bit, suffer a bit, and then die, vanish into nothingness, leaving behind a gravestone or initials carved into a tree.

Stories work to some sort of conclusion, starting at point A and reaching a resolution at (say) point X, Y, or Z, even if the steps of getting there scramble chronological sequence. Such resolutions assume that people’s lives, ultimately, reveal a purposeful pattern. In short, that the events of character’s lives are pieces of a design rather than being just a series of unorganized happenings. However, as Kermode contends, stories are not replications of real life. They merely provide the illusion of meaning.

Julian Barnes on Endings

Julian Barnes consciously used *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode’s title, for his 2011 Man Booker prize-winning novella. Despite the borrowed title, the Barnes’ novel is not a dramatization of Kermode’s central point. His narrator, Tony Webster, illustrates my more modest contention that we need and use stories to figure out what our own lives are about, to give shape to the circumstances that envelope us.

The novella opens with a list of seemingly random memories, and the story after that tells how the narrator, Tony Webster, tries to make sense of these and his larger store of memories, even though he admits immediately after the list, “We live in time—it holds us and moulds us—but I’ve never felt I understood it very well.” The decades of Tony’s ordinary life—degree, career, marriage, daughter, divorce, retirement—are glossed over. What rivets him are his efforts to comprehend things that happened forty years earlier: why his brilliant friend Adrian committed suicide and why he, Tony, was dumped by a young woman named Veronica. (When they meet again decades later, she repeats, “You still don’t get it.”) Eventually, Tony thinks he finally knows at least part of the story. He has on the last page of the novella a conclusion that’s actually a better sense of his beginning.

Just better, not complete. He is aware of what some people important to him have done, but not why. The inner lives of others remain a mystery, including his own. Tony never transcends an existence in the midst, The novel never reaches a true ending in Kermode’s sense, not a purposeful culmination.

² Latin grammarians seem to argue that our use of *in medias res* is a grammatical error when it should be *in mediis rebus*. I think Kermode, who must have been aware of the distinction, is using the two terms to make the distinction of the bracketed translations.

Bewildered by the world around him, Tony—until he finally faces his past—just shuffled through his days, lacking enough grasp of his circumstances to even have a goal. He admits at the opening of the novella that what he’s never understood well is “ordinary, everyday, time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, clock-clock.” The tick-tock must be an allusion to Kermode’s consideration of those words.

Kermode writes, “Tick is a humble genesis, tock a feeble apocalypse; and tick-tock is in any case not much of a plot.” Even that simplicity is beyond Tony. For Kermode the plotting of fiction—and of lives modeled on fiction—is much more complex:

All such plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning. To put it another way, the interval must be purged of simple chronicity, of the emptiness of tock-tick, humanly uninteresting successiveness. It is required to be a significant season, *kairos* poised between beginning and end. It has to be, on a scale much greater than that which concerns the psychologists, an instance of what they call ‘temporal integration’—our way of bundling together perception of the present, memory of the past, and expectation of the future, in a common organization. Within this organization that which was conceived of as simply successive becomes charged with past and future: what was *chronos* becomes *kairos* [an Ancient Greek word meaning the right, critical, or opportune moment. While *chronos* is quantitative, *kairos* is qualitative].

At the end of his story, Tony Webster can be considered to have finally discovered the tock that followed a tick forty years before. His achievement is more a clarification than an illumination.

Co-opted by Father Joe

Many people would be far from satisfied by such a limited resolution. Tony has discovered the causes behind certain effects, why what happened to him and certain others happened. But the process of discovery gives him no greater understanding of what his life has been all about, how that life relates to anything larger than himself. He does not even seek greater meaning in his experience or even appear to consider an alternative to the middest.

Father Joe Casey, in our debate, based his presentation on commitment to a greater meaning. To my surprise, he co-opted my premise, agreeing that we live our lives as fictions, but he ultimately undermined that premise by placing it in the context of his religious beliefs. That is, he proposed we are part of a much larger story without realizing it, and that the deity is the real author. We lose ourselves in petty, constructed stories, ignorant of the one that really matters. From my future conversations with Father Joe in the years following our stage appearance, I’m convinced he wasn’t an eternal damnation kind of guy. But he did distinguish God’s plot from the feeble creations of humans.

I'll grant Joe that he had a case. If there's much going on around us that we're not fathoming and if, to gain meaning, we have to choose something, why not God? I for one am unable to make that leap of faith. Not that millions haven't made it.

Millennialism

Kermode has his own doubts about that leap. He dismisses notions of theological eschatology as mere historical patterns. For our time they can never again “be useful except as fictions patiently explained.” Still, “the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world,” even though “the artifice of eternity exists only for the dying generations.”

Kermode begins his explanations with a talk (the book was originally a series of lectures at Bryn Mawr College in 1965) that focuses on millennial concepts, particularly beliefs that the world would fulfill prophecies and reach the end of history at a predetermined time.³ “Apocalypse,” he writes, “depends on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us who remain ‘in the midst.’”

The year 1000 seemed for many who existed before it an appropriate target. Instead of worrying that computer systems would crash, as people did as we approached 2000—Y2K—our predecessors expected a crash of all creation.⁴ For millennialists—as for many throughout Western civilization—history is teleological, moving toward a purposeful goal, even if that goal were a kind of *Gotterdammerung*. For Christians, it meant the Second Coming of Christ, for Norse mythmakers total destruction before the rebirth of a new creation, for optimistic Marxists an ideal classless society. The Enlightenment's belief in ongoing progress was a watered-down secular version. Today pessimists see imminent doom in climate change, optimists pending glories in advanced technologies. Either way, both predictions assume that we're on the path to something, not just wallowing *in mediis rebus*.

Living in the Middest—Cats

The notion of *in mediis rebus* makes me think of my wife and my cats, three unrelated males we refer to as brothers. For them, each day is pretty much the same. Mornings they crowd around our bedroom door and make hunger noises; then, when one of us is awake, they weave in and out of our legs while food bowls are filled, escalating their noises. Finally, faces in their bowls, they gobble the meal in minutes. It's time for a nap or visit to a litter box. Occasionally, the younger ones chase each other or knock about a toy mouse or very rarely

³ The most literal meaning of the term millennial proposes that Christ, after the Second Coming, would reign over a paradise on Earth for one thousand years leading up to the final judgment and eternity.

⁴ In an Epilogue written more in 1999, on the cusp of Y2K, Kermode reflects on this latest iteration of the human inclination to grant great meaning to thousand-year turning points.

catch a real one. They sit on windowsills to watch birds and squirrels or even scattering leaves. Later on, it's hunger again, more looking, more naps. Day after day. In fact, breaking the routine with, say, a visit to the vet causes much unhappiness. They're content in familiar spaces doing the same things again and again.

Our oldest cat, Toby, just turned nineteen. His appetite is the same as it's always been, though he spends more time in deep sleep than his younger brothers. He can't race down the stairs or through rooms in a game of chase. His day is a slower, probably more achy, a minor variation of the days of his younger years. Does he know he's aging, that he can't jump and run as he once could? Does he know that his days are numbered as he is close to the limit of his feline lifespan? Does he contemplate his mortality? Does he wonder what he's accomplished in his life?

As a house pet, he has no function beyond unconsciously pleasing us with his presence. He's not a barn cat who rids the premises of rodents, nor is he one the member of his species guilty of the massacre of songbirds by the millions. Yet, from the extent of his purring when not distressed by hunger, I judge that he's content, pleased to have his head scratched or one of his brothers bundle with him as they nap. Although I can't get a testimonial, I'd say he's happy to be alive.

Living in the Middest—Humans

As humans, we're quite different, much more aware of the stages of our lives, parents cheering us on as we learn to walk and talk and loose our baby teeth, involved in our schooling and our need for new shoes, making decisions for us. At a certain age, we take over the decision process for ourselves, apparently choosing careers, occupations, lovers, living places. Many of these decisions are designated as publicly celebrated rituals—from preschool graduation through marriage and up to funerals.

No wonder we have a tendency to see our lives as stories. Unlike cats, we're on the move—anticipating, planning for, trying to control, enjoying, enduring, suffering, celebrating the many changes human beings are heir to. And we're aware of many changes ahead, especially the most ritualized, usually interpreting them as achievements. Now I have my diploma; now I have my first job; now I'm married; now I'm a parent; now I'm retired. Others, friends and relations, reinforce those interpretations with gifts and congratulations.

Looking back on our lives, we're aware of having done so much, unlike the house cat who after a brief period of adorable kittenhood, spends its years in the redundancy of eating, sleeping, watching, playing, and eliminating.

But what have we humans really done in a teleological sense? We certainly—unlike Toby—may brood over what we've accomplished during our time on earth, what legacy we've left for the future. Other than the infinitesimal fraction of a percent whose names go down in history, the rest of us are ultimately forgotten.

And it doesn't take long to reach that state. My wife and I have in our attic memorabilia of our parents, a large framed photograph taken of my long-dead father when he was twenty-nine, my never-met father-in-law's high school yearbook. We ponder the fate of these objects. No one else knows enough about these people to find meaningful memories in this memorabilia. Eventually, not far into the future, our own yearbooks and photographs will be just as pointless.

I don't mean to sound bleak. In fact, like Toby, I believe, except for those who have endured the most miserable of existences, people are happy to be alive, all things considered, balancing the good and the bad, even when contemplating oblivion in the dark nights of their souls.

Of course, we experience times of tension and drama—an application denied, a romance failed, a marriage ended, a job lost, an illness extreme. We endure unknowns and uncertainties. But do the outcomes matter to anyone but ourselves and, perhaps, those close to us? So, our love is returned, we get the job, we survive the illness. But then we die, just like everyone else, humans and cats.

Of course, for centuries people in the West considered this life a way station, a period of testing to see if one deserved an eternity of salvation or an eternity of damnation. I'm sure many in the world still believe this, but no one I know personally does, though perhaps there are those who just have not confided in me.

Given the eschatological stakes—joy or pain till the end of time—what people accomplished during their lives in the Middle Ages certainly took on great significance. Man on Earth—existing between the angels above and beasts below—possessed a unique and special place in the scheme of things, unlike cats and other creatures that were temporary, given only one life with outcomes that didn't matter.

Those of us who do not accept the potential of eternity are left contemplating the question of what matters about our singular lives. The old Pabst beer commercial announced; “You only go around once, so grab all the gusto you can.” OK. Once you've indulged in all that hedonistic gusto, then what?

Myths and Fiction

Concepts of apocalypse are for Kermode in the realm of myth, which he considers almost the opposite of fiction. Myths “presuppose total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were. . . . Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making changes. . . . Myths call for the absolute, fictions for conditional assent.”

Fiction doesn't pretend to the explanatory authority of myth. It is an admitted construction, a fabrication: “any novel. However ‘realistic,’ involves some degree of alienation from ‘reality.’” Readers understand that they are reading stories about events that never happened. Instead, they give credence to the patterns of fiction as a way to find

coherence and meaning in their own lives. Of course, many find myths forms of make-believe, especially after they have become obsolete. But Kermode is referring to the purpose and myths and their truth value for those who believed in them. Myths are meant to be permanent.

Fictions, as attempts to find things out, are temporary from their origins, suited to the needs of the time, changing as the circumstances of people in the midst call for new stories to help find “what will suffice” in a changing world. “It is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos,” Kermode writes, “but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for coexistence with it only by our fictive powers.”⁵

Living in the Middest

I suppose we have two basic choices during our spans in the midst. We could exist like our cats—eat, sleep, play, eliminate, and luxuriate in the sun. For *L'Étranger* (The Stranger), Albert Camus created a character, Meursault, whose only true pleasure was bathing in Mediterranean warmth. Kermode cites “the careful meaninglessness of his life.” Most people, however, are driven to indulge their fictive power in order to deny such meaninglessness.

Much of our leisure is devoted to the consumption of fictions on screen and in print. We relish stories that achieve a point with endings. And we apply the strategies and patterns of these fictions to our own lives in our quests to accomplish goals and believe we’re done something important. Goals like getting into Yale, building a vacation home on the Cape, winning a golf trophy, devoting hours to the betterment of humanity, adding an M15 to our gun collection, writing an essay. Such illusions—transitory achievements—substitute for real endings.

In the midst it’s just one thing after another, an abundance of busyness, raw material for highlighting and shaping by our fictional imaginations. We are eager to give our stories and ourselves significance, much to be proud of between the tick and the tock.

Sources

Julian Barnes. *The Sense of an Ending*, Random House, 2011

Frank Kermode. *The Sense of an Ending Studies in the Theory of Fiction (with a New Epilogue)*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵ Here, Kermode suggests an answer to the oft-asked question of why works of fiction considered major when first published are forgotten by later generations; conversely, why some ignored at their release assume greater significance in later years. Those forgotten no longer speak to the issues that concern readers.