

# MY PERSONAL BATTLE

(Trần Nghi Âu Cơ)

The greatest battle of my existence is between Writer Au-Co and Reader Au-Co.

I noticed this today when I was discussing a book with one of my students. One of the main characters died and, naturally, she was sad. One of the questions her teacher asked was if she could change the ending, how would she change it? And she didn't know where to start. So I asked her if the character had lived and stayed happily with his love, would it have made as good a story? Would the story have clung onto her thoughts for as long as it did? She said no. Then I asked her to imagine those characters as her friends, what would she have wanted to happen for them? She said she would've had wanted both of them to live and be happy.

And therein lies the issue.

More and more, I'm finding it harder to still the writer in me, the incessant editor who's always looking for a better way to describe the world. I tend to lay emphasis on the story side of things, the details that make a compelling tale. (For literature as well as real life stories.) However, I'm also finding it harder to not care about the people side of things. The happiness of the characters. This has only started happening recently. I've never thought to think about the characters' feelings; I only concentrated on what makes for a better story, and usually, for me, tragedy and sadness make a better story because those things cling to me. Happiness is a closed book, the characters don't live on after happy ever after. They simply stop existing. (That's why I consider marriage as much of a death as death is. I believe Maugham said something similar.)

I finished a book the other day that left me feeling really empty. One part of me wishes the main characters could've gotten the happy ending I so wanted them to have. But the other part is happy it ended the way it did, with everyone alone and isolated from each other because it made an impression on me. I felt the characters' emptiness as if it were my own. (And disturbingly, I've realized that most of the people I've felt this deep empathy for are fictional; it's this visceral welling of understanding that I rarely feel for most real people. When real people around me are sad, I don't know what to do except comfort them and maybe offer them a hot beverage.)

I have no idea where I'm going with this. (But when do I ever?) I was hoping I'd come to some kind of epiphany by the end if I keep typing but I haven't. At least it's nice to know that these last few days, I wasn't sad because of me but because my beloved characters can't have the happy ending I want their real-people to have, but maybe not their story-people because then the story wouldn't be as good.

Sigh. I have to go torture my own characters now. Dangle some true love in front of their eyes then yank it away cruelly. In a way, writers are pretty sadistic creatures.

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