

Getting God out of the Machine: Making Religion and Spirituality Work in Your Writing

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If I could go back in time for a purely literary experience, I think I might try going to ancient Greece and watching Greek theatre, which is where the storytelling tradition that we got a lot of our writing theory from starts.

It's hard to describe adequately or imagine adequately what going to a play would have been like in ancient Athens. The whole city comes out to this play, right? Because it's a big audience, actors wear these these giant masks with really vivid features.

You have high intensity plots that are designed, Aristotle says, to get at the things that the community's most concerned about so that the goal of a Greek play is a feeling he calls catharsis, which means that you vicariously experience yeah, these anxieties these worries these fears through the characters and somehow that reaches some kind of boiling point, breaking point where you as a viewer get, get some release by going through a thing fictionally that speaks to you in the real world, right.

So imagine with me then, that we've come together to one of these plays in Athens and and we're watching like you would every year at the play festival, when one year something crazy happens.

Right at the moment when the protagonist is up to his eyeballs in trouble, getting chased by furies who want to tear him to pieces, An actress in a shining costume appears in the air as a goddess. It's a special effect like nothing we've seen before. As she's swooped in by crane they installed behind the back of the theater, rescues the character that we're following.

It's just an incredible moment. The first time anybody ever experienced a technique that would later come to be known as the *deus ex machina*, "The God out of the machine." Another example: *Medea*. I don't know if anyone else was required to read that play in high school. My senior year of high school that was required. In *Medea*, she's reached that moment of catharsis where all the terrible decisions have been made.

Her thirst for vengeance is totally exhausted. And if you were watching that play in ancient Greece, that's the moment where the stage itself opens up, and a dragon-pulled chariot appears out of what you swear used to be the floor and then flies away with her, right? This in live theater in a culture without special effects. This is the earliest special effect.

Would have been incredible. Absolutely incredible to watch some of these. Except, once you've installed a crane or once you've installed a trap door that comes up from beneath, it got very tempting for playwrights to use the *deus ex machina* again and again and again and with repetition, the one wears off.

And pretty soon it's not the unexpected appearance of a God that gets everyone's attention. Audience start waiting for the moment when the crane cranks up or when the trap door comes open. It's not the presence of the gods they're feeling anymore, it's the machine, the spectacle of the machine. It's a plot device.

Right? It's these these technical physical devices that give us the vocabulary of having a plot device; something that's obviously designed by the writer and draws attention to the fact that you're that you're seeing something made up. And when a plot device clearly is a brush with the divine, the spirituality of that moment disappears.

But hey, the machines are still cool the theater paid for them. It's still popular with some set of the audience to wave their favorite gods around like a flag and so people keep using the trick anyway. It gets less and less feeling.

And over time, this this theatrical technique that was originally impressive, the *deus ex machina*, becomes known as just the oldest trick in the book. It's the sure sign a writer is mailing it in and it's a criticism people will make of writing to this day when something feels too easy or too convenient. They'll call that a *deus ex machina*, right? So when you're writing specifically about God, right? About *deus*-What I'd like to talk about in this session is how we separate it from that mechanical feeling. The sense that that God isn't God but a plot device, which readers tend to be really resistant to.

I remember Aaron Sorkin said once that that having moments of great sentiment in a play is like swinging for a home run in baseball, right? If you make it, and if that strong emotional sentiment lands with an audience, it's an unforgettable experience for them. It's really wonderful. If you don't make it and it feels cheesy or strange or lame, right? I mean, you, you miss some.

I think anytime you try to do spirituality fiction it's like swinging for the fences, right? And if you make it, if you connect, people will remember that text. It will mean something deep to them. But there's-you know, if you missed, they'll be disappointed.

So what I've put together for you guys is a list of seven different techniques that we'll review quickly here for different ways you can work around this danger of a deus ex machina in your writing.

And you can see I named them after different scriptural figures: the Lehi method, the Jonah method, the Esther method, the Abish method, the Jacob method, the Mary method and Mark method. So we'll go ahead and go through those seven and then review. All right.

If we go first to the Lehi method. This one takes its name from the beginning of the Book of Mormon, which begins with Lehi seeing a vision. And that vision, excuse me, I'm trying to figure out how to stop sharing my screen. Okay, there we go. There's the controls. Okay, so the Book of Mormon begins with Lehi seeing a vision. Right. It's a great moment of spiritual divine presence. What's interesting to me about this moment is that it's structurally the opposite of the deus ex machina. The classical deus ex machina-characters go through all sorts of things, and then the divine presence comes at the end, right? We said in that original use of the deus ex machina, the protagonist is being chased by the furies and is rescued.

God gets the character out of his problems. The Book of Mormon tends to structure things exactly the opposite. Lehi has this encounter with God at the beginning and it's an inciting incident rather than a resolution. One one way, a friend of mine phrased it is revelation known and our problems, they launch our journeys.

And in fiction, when you treat a spiritual moment as the beginning of the journey as an inciting incident, it's easier for audiences to accept, especially if, like for Lehi and Nephi, the subsequent journey is very difficult, right? Part of the power of fiction is tension.

The unknown. The, the unexpected, that uncertainty about what will happen next. And so readers react poorly when, when spiritual elements reduce that tension or take that away.

Or they're happier to let anything happen. The total suspension of disbelief, as long as the character gets in trouble through it, right? As long as it increases the tension for them, they'll accept anything.

One Mormon Lit Blitz example from this is Laura Hilton Craner's short story *The Primary Temple Trip*. And I'm going to read you just the very beginning of this. The Mormon Lit Blitz is a contest my wife and I run where people can submit stories. There's a 1,000 word limit. So these very short stories, very economical. They can also do poems or other forms.

And this particular finalist begins "When they asked for a volunteer to drive the McCumber children on the Primary temple trip, Sister Miller didn't notice hers was the only hand to go up. She hadn't had a Primary calling or a Primary-aged child for years, but something had moved her, so she volunteered.

The Primary president sounded breathlessly surprised when she confirmed that yes, Sister Miller had actually volunteered and this wasn't a joke." And what we get over the course of the story is this contrast between Sister McCumber who is this very proper elderly women, and the McCumber children who are sort of extremely wild, known to be wild and unmanageable primary age kids whose families are not involved in church, but, but they come sometimes on their own.

Again, it's, it's a very subtle spiritual moment at the beginning here, but Laura is able to say something had moved her. And I don't think any reader has a problem with that because almost immediately, we see that she's in for more than she might have bargained for. Right? And then the bulk of the story will be that, that trouble. Right? That contrast where she's taking these kids on a trip to the temple-this place that she associates with reverence and being quiet and sacred, and they're going totally, totally nuts. So that's the Lehi method. Give us a spiritual experience but don't as in the classical *deus ex machina*-inserted in a moment of resolution. Use the spirituality as an inciting incident, as a thing that gets the protagonist into some tension and trouble.

Alright. The second method I wanted to talk about I call the Jonah method. So we know of course in the Book of Jonah, Jonah, like Lehi, has a spiritual experience at the beginning. He's called of God. But it goes beyond that in the book of Jonah, Jonah acts in exactly the opposite way (inaudible) For Lehi, he follows the prompting that creates problems. Jonah's actions are opposite what he's been told to do. So the Jonah method is when you put a character in tension with God. Right, and then have a structure either where they come around like Jonah, or the point of the story is this divine indictment. In some ways, the, the whole Book of Mormon.

You might say, if an individual prophet as a Lehi structure, the book as a whole has a Jonah structure because the people, the covenant people are in tension with God and ultimately drift away, right? And the Book of Mormon serves as an indictment of its collective protagonist, the Nephites who are in tension with God and ultimately choose that course.

I've got another example of this method from the Mormon Lit Blitz. I'm going to read to you a passage from toward the end of Stephen Carter's short story Slippery and this story is based on a Book of Mormon image of people's treasures becoming slippery.

So that, you know, if they laid a thing down it was gone, and he interprets that in this sort of overtly miraculous way and retells the story, but with a contemporary setting. So you have people in a modern war and their RVs are missing one day and then their their TVs are missing and video games, computers-Every, every material possession they love starts to disappear and toward the end of the story, the protagonists sort of realizes what is happening and still refuses to just passively let it happen. He sits. He's been sitting up with with a gun, waiting to find what he thinks is a thief stealing things.

And when he realizes, maybe they're miraculously disappearing-Right? The scripture clicks for him. He tapes his hand to the gun so that it won't disappear. He'll hold on to it. And then he falls asleep and wakes up again. And here is this passage. "He looked down and blinked. His hand was inside the kitchen floor, his arm sticking straight up out of the linoleum.

Then he felt the gun pulling away from him, down into the ground, with a steady implacable movement. His wrist bones began to separate as he labored against the force. At first he panicked, almost crying out. But then the panic ignited into a holy rage. He squeezed the trigger again and again, his arm jolting with the recoil, dealing round after round into the earth beneath him. But the gun sank steadily. And Jake suddenly understood that he would lose. He opened his hand. And felt the bond pull tight.

Alright, so you see in this one, again Jake's put himself at odds with God. In this climactic moment he doesn't immediately back down, right? He's actively resisting the spiritual presence. So it's easy for readers to accept this miracle of people's treasures that they've set their hearts on disappearing, right? Becoming slippery as in the Book of Mormon. And it's easier to accept that because that produces tension in the story rather than robbing us of that tension, the way a dramatic, miraculous rescue might.

All right the next method is the Esther method. The Book of Esther is interesting within the Bible. Jewish thinkers identified fairly quickly that it stands out because God is never mentioned as acting in the book, you can assume or maybe it's implied that he did, by, by having created an opportunity for Esther to come into the king's court, etc. But it's never directly stated, right? At this time of a terrible danger for the Jewish community, God does nothing. It's left to the people, Esther and Mordecai, to go out on a limb and take some real risks to protect their community.

So in the Book of Esther, again God isn't manifest in miraculous action. God is manifest in people's commitments. Commitments that are tied up in their identity in community. So another way you can write about religious and spiritual experience is by not directly depicting the divine moment, right? But depicting instead the ways in which those spiritual commitments give purpose and an anchoring (inaudible) especially if those moments again create problems for the character and a kind of source of tension for them.

My friend Janci Patterson and I recently co-wrote a young adult novel, which is not out yet called the Bollywood lovers Club and the premise of this novel is that an active religious sikh young woman moves across the country away from her sikh congregation and extended family into a new school where she meets and falls for a Mormon guy.

So we have both this Mormon character and this sikh character. And part of the reason we did that is that by having two people from different religious communities, right? For readers, we thought it would be easier to accept a Mormon character if they could see that there's also this sikh character, right? And that these two faith traditions coexist, they're on their own terms.

And for both of the characters, they're a source of tension, right? She's anticipating a marriage that's semi-arranged, right? Where it kind of-maybe she initiates it, but it runs through her parents, they make the formal arrangements to somebody else within her religious community. He feels like you shouldn't seriously date somebody if they're not in the church, right? And so for both of them, falling in love with the other one is a problem, right? And it's a thing they've got (inaudible) at the same time it's the thing that draws them to each other.

So again, we use the Esther method, rather than having open miracles in that book, the spirituality is depicted as characters' spirituality, manifest primarily in their commitments to identity and community, and in a plot structure where those commitments are a source of tension.

The next kind of strategy I wanted to talk about I call the Abish method after the character of Abish in the Book of Alma in the Book of Mormon, who we learned in backstory for her that she had this vision or her father had a vision.

And then years later, Ammon shows up and she sees things happening in the Royal Court, people are passing out, right? And not waking back up and and things come together for her and not immediately for everybody else, right? She calls people together and first they're upset, and then the queen and king get up and and everything worked out in the end.

So this is a structure or we can have that spiritual moment of resolution, but it works because it was set up well before and because all these puzzle pieces that that ultimately come together each independently initially-they don't seem to add up, right? Abish has had a vision that doesn't lead anywhere for a long time, right? And that actually puts her in tension with her community. She knows something, she's felt something that is not shared by others.

One contemporary example of this sort of structure is the M. Night Shyamalan movie Signs, where we see lots of different disparate elements, right? That don't seem to add up, that don't have meaning on their own until they come together at the film's climax, right? And at that point, I mean the film overtly treats this as a sign, right? It's about someone who's lost faith because things don't seem to add up, God's not there when you want Him to be there, and then who sees puzzle pieces coming together. And that structure is possible again for audiences to accept because there's a lot of tension, right? And the resolution doesn't rob us of that tension, but feels like a culmination of that tension. So that's the Abish method.

Next we have the Jacob method. This is the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, not the Book of Mormon Jacob. Jacob, who became Israel, who wrestled with an angel. So in stories that I think I was using the Jacob method, there's some elements like the Jonah method in which-in Jonah, God is the antagonist, right? You have a protagonist, Jonah and God's the antagonist until the protagonist figures stuff out. Or I guess doesn't in the Book of Jonah.

He kind of ends bitter, which is the contrast with the Jacob method where there's that that push, right? That competitive tension between the divine and your protagonist. There's also moments of pull. So we go back and forth. And it's in that alternating wrestle with God that we produce the dynamic structure and tension that people expect, right? And that they feel robbed of in a structure they think of as a deus ex machina. (inaudible) they call something a deus ex machina because it didn't produce that satisfying emotional experience for them.

I'm going to read you a poem by Jonathon Penny also from the Mormon Lit Blitz now. This is called Yahweh: Prologue To The Temple. And Jonathan Penny as a poet sort of uses the whole range of language, so listening to it you might not follow everything, but I hope you can follow the feeling, even as some of the language just kind of washes over you.

"I am, but not obsequious: no star-eyed worshipper of will. Defender-of-the-faith at cost. I am a bleeder-at-the-gills.

This gospel hits me where I breathe: it roils the very blood of me; seasons the very meat and meal and sets the organs ill at ease.

I am, but not levitical, no cutter of the hair to cut, no saline soul mechanical. I am a why-er of the what. This Covenant grips me by the groan: It fells and flings me to the soil as I were seed so to be thrown; as I were tiller, tree and toil.

I am a doubter in the dark, a wrestler with angelic limbs. I brook no counterfeiting luck, but look for herolds of high Him. This Ordinance wrings me by the nape. This Cherub bars me from the tree. This Way bow-bends me to the strait. This Lord makes mock and mince of me.

I am, though skeptical of bent, a wearer of the solemn gown-no rustic git obedient, no frail finch by breezes blown.

This image flicks and flutters yet: At once aggrieves and brings relief; it faithful fuddles, frowns, and frets; it holy helps my unbelief.

I am a grasper after Grace. I am a doer of the word. I am a yearner after peace. I am a seeker of the Lord. This Monarch veils himself in love. This Sovereign slips the throng and throne. This Master dredges in the grove and lordly lives among his own.

Alright, so you can see in that piece that again, I mean, we end with God, Right? Coming down into the grove. And that's the conclusion. But I think John earns it by giving us throughout the poem. It's not all just that brightness. It's certainly not tension that's undercut by a brightness. It's this back and forth, this wrestling.

The, the image that at once aggrieves and brings relief, right? The, the help my unbelief is a good scriptural line for that, right? That the one hand there's this reaching out, on the other there's an acknowledgement that, yeah, I don't totally believe, right? Lord, I believe, help Thou

my unbelief. The back and forth dynamic movement produces that that Jacob effect. That's very effective.

The next method I wanted to talk about is the Mary method, named after Mary the mother of Christ, and specifically the line where Luke says, But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

If part of the, the purpose of the ancient Greek deus ex machina was to show off and impress, right? The Goddess in gold as it catches the light, right? And just shines. In the Mary method, the writer earns spirituality by going the opposite direction of showy.

Totally backing away from the big splash of the deus ex machina to give us a quiet intimate moment, right? She kept these things and pondered them in her heart, that there's this closeness, this intimacy to that (inaudible) held tight.

I'll read another Mormon Lit Blitz poem. This is Stillborn by Merrijane Rice.

"You were wanted, not an accident. Your first fluttered cells set plans pulsing-names, knitting, nursery colors, universities. Though two others came before, I saved a part for you.

Sometimes a heart stops beating and dreams bleed free in a slow, red river of barren pain. No healing prayers, no reason sought, none given. Just one of those things.

But it wasn't an accident. You were wanted elsewhere." Alright, in this piece, I think that the end is particularly noteworthy. So we've got this, this story-and using some of that Jake methodology, right? By saying you were wanted, you've got the, the pull. This is a mother who, who expects to give birth and then we've got that pain and that difficulty. So there's that same sort of dance.

But this ending, right? This quiet ending, "It wasn't an accident you were wanted elsewhere." It's really moving to me. And I think part of why it's moving is the intimacy of that moment, right? You've got the line too "No reason sought and none given. Just one of those things." Right? Downplaying it. But publicly I'm moving on from this thing but privately, right? This mother wants to say you were wanted elsewhere and that spiritual final moment just in that one word elsewhere feels totally earned because we're, we're stepping into this character's world, right? We're finding out a secret from them. This thing she's holding and pondering in her heart and that the interest of that, right, offsets the difficulty, people might have accepting a moment of

spirituality. So in the Mary method you earn spirituality by rewarding the reader with access to an intimate moment.

The use of that final word elsewhere reminds me of one last technique we're calling the Mark method, not after Mark as a character, but as a writer. Mark the writer of the Gospel of Mark, right? It used to be that, that scholars in the 1800's would really contrast The Gospel of John and the Gospel of Mark, they noticed that in John, Jesus makes a lot of very direct statements about his divinity. I am the light of the world. Right? I am this, I am that. In Mark, that sort of language never appears.

And so people went as far as to say, well, may-maybe Mark, this older gospel, they didn't believe in Jesus is divine yet. Right? And it was used as sort of this anti-religious argument that that the idea of Christ was developed later. And you could see that in John. Contemporary scholars, even non religious scholars of the New Testament, don't feel that way at all.

Because they read Mark more closely. And when you read Mark closely and pay attention and just don't go into reinforce preconceived notions you may have, one thing you'll realize very quickly is that Mark has Christ doing all kinds of things that the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament describes as being things that only God does. And so, Mark is making a claim about Christ's divinity, but he's making it in an indirect way.

And that's, that's telling, right? His, his structure to talk about the biggest news, he's ever known is to to imply, to show how sometimes spiritual and divine things are right on the edge of your vision and no escape you. Blink and you'll miss it.

Which in Mark the apostles do all the time, right? He's quick to say, and they didn't get it. They missed it, because to Mark, it's somehow more spiritually intense, right? If things are on that edge of reality, that that liminal space means a lot to him. I'm going to quickly read one last passage. This is from a Mormon Lit Blitz story called The Elder Who Wouldn't Stop by William Morris and most of the story is about a missionary named Elder Russell who's training a greenie, a new missionary, and his greenie drums obsessively on everything with his fingers or pencils, whatever else. He's a drummer, just drums obsessively and it's driving all the Russell progressively crazy. And then we get moment.

"One day they were teaching an older man about the Apostasy and the Restoration and priesthood authority. A former academic and government minister, the man spoke Spanish rapidly and in a manner that was syntactically complex and full of asides and digressions.

Elder Russell was trying his best to answer the old man's lengthy, esoteric questions. The greenie was drumming as usual. Other Russell found this especially distracting since he was struggling to understand the old man, and he could feel his blood pressure rising with every beat.

Then, just as he was about to snap, the greenie changed his beat. This startled Elder Russell, causing him to drop the wall of tension that he had been building higher and higher for three weeks now.

The rhythm rushed in, and at first haltingly, but then with increasing confidence elder Russell found a flow of flawless Spanish coming out of his mouth. He had no trouble understanding the old man's verbose reply. The discussion rolled on this way: the greenie drumming; Elder Russell and the old men conversing in perfect understanding (if not always agreement).

And the rhythm was no longer just fingers tapping. It was the flickering of the flame, the snap of the overseers whip, the crack of gunshots in Carthage, the bleating of lambs and the cooing of doves in the temple in Jerusalem.

It was the trembling footsteps in Golgotha. The stumbling footsteps on the ro-" Sorry, "It was the trembling footsteps in Gethsemane. The stumbling footsteps on the road to Golgotha. And the burning footsteps on the road to Emmaus.

The roar of the parting of the Red Sea, the pulsing of white stones touched by the hand of Jehovah, the creaking of handcarts and ox-drawn wagons, the murmur of prayers, the shouts of hosannas, the sighs of relief. It was the beating of hearts, the shatter of raindrops, the whispers of tree leaves, the folding of proteins, the winding of DNA, the vibrating of light or intelligence or truth.

The old man did not commit to baptism, but but he did promise to come to church that Sunday. That Thursday Elder Russell was transferred to Zaragoza where he served out the final six months of his mission. No matter how much he practiced or studied, he never spoke nor understood with that flow and clarity again.

He took to tapping his fingers incessantly and refuse to speak any English at all with his companions. At night, he would lay awake and listen to the flamenco tape on his Sony Walkman and babble silently in imperfect Spanish." So you can see in this story, we had this, this moment of spirituality and it's described through just this cascade of metaphors, right? One after another, it's this, it's this, it's this.

And you get the feeling that he can't, he can't name what it is so he's reaching for everything he has on the way, right? Every approximation.

The Mark technique is to give a spiritual experience, but in ways that, that feel like it's on the edge of expression, because it's on the edge of reality, right? The border between our reality and a greater transcendent reality beyond, or a deeper reality within.

Alright, I'm going to go ahead and share my screen just one more time to conclude and we'll review these methods. So again, we had seven and I'm sure there's more. These are just seven that that I've noticed: The Lehi Method where God incites rather than resolves and we move that structure forward and avoid the deus ex machina that way.

The Jonah method where God is the antagonist, the protagonist is working a cross purpose with God. There's the Esther Method, where God is present as human commitment.

And we experience the world through them. The Abish Method where there are bits and pieces that are unresolved until they come together and it's in that coming together of pieces we've already established that we see the divine. The Jacob Method, where we wrestle with the angels, this dynamic tension with God.

The Mary Method, where rather than the great spectacle of the deus ex machina, we've got cards close to the chest. And the Mark Method where spiritual is, is so great that it exists right at the edge of our attention, in a liminal space at the edge of expressability.

I've seen people use these to great effect. I think these other techniques matter. I'm glad you guys were interested in this session, and I hope that means that you're experimenting with how to depict spirituality or or the divine or religious experience in your work.

And it's, it's my professional experience that this can be done well and that resonates with many readers deeply, on this deeper level when you do. So again, go ahead, swing for the fences, right? Give it a shot, but use the techniques that help that moment of spirituality Work for us emotionally instead of robbing us of general catharsis are those other things we tried on a fiction. All right. Thank you very much.