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### Craft Essay: Burning Down the House

Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House* is a collection of essays on the craft of writing itself, and thus makes it quite interesting to write a craft essay on. My aim with this essay, due to the nature of the subject material, is to analyze Charles' own analyses and apply them to aspects of my work and elements of the craft that I am striving towards. I will be focusing on my work-in-progress that is titled "Chaos Mage" and focusing on aspects of the craft that Charles presents in his essays. The collection as a whole is incredibly worthwhile and covers many excellent points, however I will focus on parts that I believe will/are applicable to my own writing.

When discussing dysfunctional narratives, Charles makes the assertion that an emerging model of fiction that centers around assigning fault for a protagonist's misery, thus described as "the quest for blame", prematurely ends a story due to the removal of uncertainty. Once people know who to blame, who is at fault, then the narrative ends because that is the conclusion that has been reached, even if there is more to tell. "In such fiction, people and events are often accused of turning the protagonist into the kind of person the protagonist is, usually an unhappy person. That's the whole story. When blame has been assigned, the story is over." (7) I realize that there are multiple ways of interpreting such a statement, but the takeaway that I personally took was that once it is clear who is at fault within a story then much, if not all, of the tension is removed and the story takes on a linearity that diminishes the quality of the overall work. A reader is not challenged, nor are they as fully engaged by a character that they wholly sympathize with. Having aspects of a protagonist, especially the negative ones, be the result of said

character's own actions makes for a more dynamic and engaging story. This stuck out to me because it is something I am trying to avoid in my own work. My protagonist's quest is catalyzed by a god stealing away her parents, so one would think that the blame for what follows has been assigned from the beginning, and if I am not careful it could pan out that way and lead to a weaker story. However, and thanks in part to Charles, my aim is to have the protagonist's actions following this event define who she is and will become. Some of the blame for her tragedy will fall on her, and my story will not end before it concludes.

Following in a similar vein to the above we shift to a note on character development. Two passages from Charles outline how a character's mistakes, their fallacies and oddities, are what makes them into unique and interesting characters.

“In fictional stories, mistakes are every bit as interesting as achievements are. They have an equal claim upon truth. Perhaps they have a greater one, because they are harder to show, harder to hear, harder to say. For that reason, they are rare, which causes their value to go up.” (19)

And,

“My problem was that I hadn't known the deceased well enough to know his failings – those features by which I might have identified with him – and the litany of praise only managed to distance him from me. I wanted a recital of his failures and oddities, which is exactly what Episcopalians do not hold up for display at funerals.” (23)

What these two passages quite clearly tell us is that protagonists need to be imperfect, or have their perfection be flawed in some way. Being flawed makes them relatable, their mistakes generate intrigue in the reader, and they want to know more.

Faults make a protagonist's virtues shine all the brighter and further engages the reader. This is the second large area that I aim to tackle within my own writing. The beginning of my protagonist's journey may not be her fault, but the choices she makes in complying with the antagonist's demands need to clearly be mistakes, despite the protagonist's belief that they are necessary. That direction is only reinforced by Charles' own words, that the character's flaws must be forthcoming and interesting in order to drive the narrative.

These are just two areas that Charles Baxter touched upon, but they were not all that was applicable to my own journey with the craft. However, covering all of them would greatly extend past the page limit for this assignment. The conclusion to this is that a story must be more than simply black and white, good and bad, in order to be successful. The characters, and even the world, must be dysfunctional in order to overcome the many fallacies associated with creating a story. All easier said than done, but that is what brings forth value to such essays.