

ALL THE WORLD'S A METAPHOR



a different way of seeing

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Inspired by Bertha, heroine for those who dare to be free.

August 2026 - Volume 2, Issue #08

Have you read *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang or Hemingway's *The Old Man And The Sea*? We going to talk about these two books as well as the role of metaphor in, well, everything and in the non-fiction corner: Do you know what it feels like to be a brown hyena?

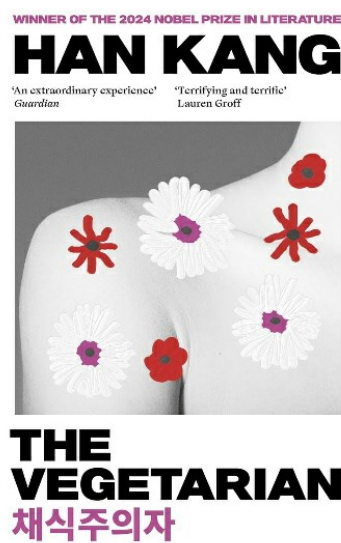
I am delighted to say my first YouTube video for **Bertha's Books** [something for readers, something for writers](#) was published end of July. I'm getting the hang of it and with the help of my editor Lisha Rajdhew, they will surely become more polished. In the **for readers** part you will get a taste of the variety of books I'm planning to talk about starting with *The Old Man and the Sea* and in the **for writers** part I'll tell you what I learnt about the writing techniques on display in that book.

The Vegetarian and The Old Man And The Sea

These two books are just masterful. *The Vegetarian* is essentially the story of Yeong-hye as told from the point of view of her husband who says she is "unremarkable in every way" until she decided to become a vegetarian. That sounds amusing at first, but the book is deadly serious. Despite the enormous and sometimes violent pressure placed on her by her family and society to reverse her decision, she resists. In fact, the more they try and, occasionally, force her to eat meat, the more she retreats from the world. She never explains her decisions, which is part of the intrigue and it's just a tremendous read. Why?

Well, it's got a lot to do, I think, with what Yeong-hye feels about humanity even if she doesn't say so outright. She prefers plants and

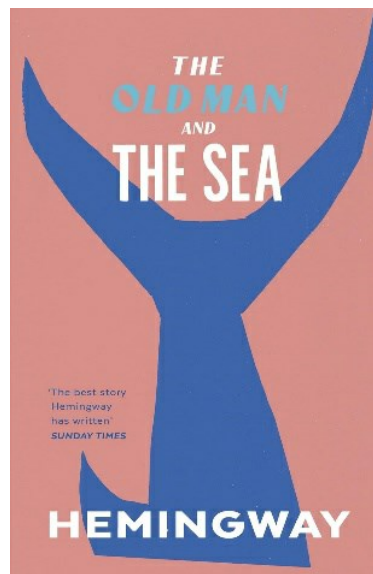
over time becomes more like them consuming nothing organic and living on sunlight and water. After letting the story sit with me for a while and trying to articulate what moved me so much, I did what I rarely do and read some of the highbrow book reviews. I was immediately reminded why I don't usually read them. Most reviewers agreed it's a fabulous book, but the ones I read just regurgitate the social zeitgeist. I think, even with the praise, they sell the book short. Way short. I think Yeong-hye was troubled by many things that humans do and she simply didn't want to be a part of it anymore. Of course, there's all the obvious social stuff (which the reviewers talk about) and choosing vegetarianism was one of the few ways she could rebel. But it's more profound than that. I think she found no meaning in human existence generally. In the end she stops eating entirely and seems to adopt the lifestyle of a plant, surviving only on water and sunlight. She can't bear to be like humans (the aggression, exploitation, violence) even if it leads to her demise. It's moving.



You may ask, what was author Han Kang's intention with the Yeong-hye character and if any of what I'm saying makes sense, or is it just my imagination? Well, I'd say (and it may come as a surprise) that it doesn't matter what the author wanted to say, if indeed anything. That's what makes this so good. In great stories like this one, the writer sometimes doesn't have a 'specific thing to say'. The writer can be just as confused as the reader about what it all means. They discover the character and story as it goes along and it feels a bit like that in this book. As I say that's why the storytelling is so good. It captures something truly fundamental about humanity without a contrived message. We feel it even if we don't really know exactly what it is.

This notion of feeling it rather than analysing it, is also why I found *The Old Man And The Sea* so moving. The protagonist is Santiago. He leads the simple life of a fisherman in Cuba and when the book starts, he has gone 80-something days without catching a fish. His situation is desperate. His friend, a young boy, is prohibited by his parents from fishing with Santiago because they believe his bad luck will rub off on the boy. Santiago does eventually catch a fish, an enormous marlin, after a tremendous struggle over a few days. It's too big to lift into his skiff so he ties it to the side of the boat and it's eaten by sharks before he can get back to shore, despite Santiago's desperate efforts to fight them off. Eventually, there's nothing left of the great fish except its skeleton and on one hand, that's pretty much the story. The story on its

own is entertaining, but my word you feel something, not only for Santiago (partly because he doesn't express his feelings), but there's something else. It feels allegorical, a bit like a parable. We will all have a view of what that is. And the quality of the storytelling is just fantastic. It's vintage Hemingway.



All the World's a Metaphor

You probably know the quote by, I think, Shakespeare (when in doubt choose Shakespeare or Mark Twain) that "all the world's a stage". As far as literature goes, you can also say that all the world's a metaphor. Of course, the fiction that you reading is, well, fiction, but good fiction is often metaphorical with a sense of reality about it. Yes, even fantasy. A well-known director, Tobie Cronjé directed me once and told me that even in the most stylised pieces like pantomime, your performance must be rooted in something real. He's right, and that's why I say metaphor is so important. The portrayal of one thing as another.

Metaphor is just as important at the sentence level as the whole story level. When you read something just notice how you are unconsciously whisked off in your imagination when you read a metaphor as opposed to a simile or an adverb. (Aside: you may also know that Mark Twain said that adverbs are the writer's enemy and this is, I think, what he was referring to. He knew the importance of metaphor.)

The first time I heard or began to understand metaphor, was from my English teacher, the delightful iconoclast and polymath Joan Fubbs. She was wonderful and how I wish I could see her again. First to say thank you and then to apologise. She was knowledgeable, insightful, kind, forgiving and was tasked with teaching us, a bunch of idiotic 17-year-olds at a boys only school. Poor woman.

The Non-Fiction Corner: A Brown Hyena

Coming back to metaphor. Take a look at the clip below about a brown hyena in the Namib. Wow, it's good. Don't you feel like you know her? You feel her? She's inside you or you're inside her? I've watched it a

million times. And when she manages to take the seal pup home for her cubs...the whole thing is captivating.

Lastly, the desert. You may have realised I have a thing for deserts. If you haven't, you will certainly realise that in my forthcoming fiction.

Take a look at [the brown hyena clip here](#), it's beautiful

In October...

...I'll let you know about the book I'm finishing now (Madame Bovary) or Exquisite Corpse if I'm done with that, and more about the YouTube channel. In the non-fiction corner, do you know what a goldfish and a peanut butter sandwich have in common?

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre



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