

GENERATING JOY:  
A STUDY OF JOY AND ITS ROLE IN  
THE READER'S EXPERIENCE

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## TRANSMITTAL CORRESPONDENCE

Attn: Rodney D. Keller

From: Elizabeth Brady

Date: 11 March 2011

Re: "Generating Joy: A Study of Joy and Its Role in the Reader's Experience"

The purpose of this report is to present findings on the importance of joy in human experience and the subsequent necessity of writers' capitalizing on their opportunity to produce joy in their readers through their works. The report covers relevant information in the realms of psychology, religious studies, literary criticism, and personal reflection. A main problem encountered was the lack of direct information regarding the ability and importance of writers to produce joy in their readers. Adam Potkay's research has been most helpful in assembling this report.

## ABSTRACT

This paper is a report on my research regarding an operational definition of joy, including personal experiences, psychological views, religious views, and views from literary criticism. The purpose of this paper is to provide commentary on why writers should strive to produce joy in their readers. Joy is naturally sought after by every human being, according to Hasidism, and is vital enough in our development that we are able to recognize facial expressions of joy when we are infants. Hence, a joyful experience should be what readers seek upon selecting reading materials and therefore, what writers should seek to produce in their readers. Joy is best attained through ethical and personal experiences; a writer should produce joy through creating and presenting characters that appeal to morality and a strong interpersonal bond.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Generating Joy: A Study of Joy and Its Role in the Reader’s Experience” argues that joy is the central motivating factor in the lives of human beings, and as such, should be the aim of writers’ efforts. This report presents findings in the areas of psychology, religious studies, and literary criticism as well as incorporating personal reflections. The research is limited to studies specifically discussing and examining joy, as opposed to the broader, long-term trait, happiness. The procedural steps for this report include a scholarly database search, identification of possible sources, sorting of sources, and incorporating all sources into a report using proper MLA documentation.

As a creative writer, I am interested in the well-being of my readers. I want to help them experience joy. Joy is a generally well-known emotion, and arguably the focus of our human existence. However, I was unaware of the full significance of joy, and how I could help my readers experience such a satisfying emotional experience. My aim in researching this topic was to gather information regarding the definition and implications of joy in order to more fully direct my future creative works toward bettering my readers.

## I. JOY AND PERSONAL WRITING

My mom found my writing notebook one day when I was a sophomore in high school. One of the batches of scribbles was a play some friends and I had jokingly written about our high school being overrun by vampires. There was a lot of blood and guts and death, and I can just imagine the look on my mother's face as she read it.

"Elizabeth. This is gross. I did not feel good at all when I read this. I am really concerned about you. Why did you write such dark things?"

I rolled my eyes at my mother's obvious naiveté. "Mom, don't worry about it. It was just a joke." My mom didn't give me back that notebook, and didn't forget the topic even though we eventually walked away from the confrontation. She was legitimately concerned about what went on in my mind, and the effect writing these "dark" things was having on my mental and emotional state. For the next two weeks when she looked at me, her eyes said she was wondering what dark monster was inside of me waiting to come out in fiction.

As a high schooler, I figured I knew best, and Mom was overreacting, as usual. It wasn't until I was in college that I realized she was on to something, and something very important: what writers produce, for light or for dark, will affect not only themselves, but their readers as well, and often in very significant ways.

## II. JOY AND PERSONAL READING

I grew up in a very Mormon home. We attended church every Sunday, ate dinner together as a family, had abundant pictures of Christ on our walls, and all ten of the kids' names came from the Bible. I, however, wasn't fully converted in my heart until after I had left it for a while. During my senior year of high school I ignored the religious overtones so prevalent in my home and then left for a college in a different state. That first year of college I did not go to church, I did not see my family much, and I did not keep Christ on my walls or on my mind. Darkness slowly crept into my life and I forgot what it was to feel light.

It wasn't until my cousin died unexpectedly that I realized how dim my life had become. The day after I heard about Allison's death I was cleaning out a bookcase and happened upon my long un-opened Book of Mormon. I remember the flooding feeling of coming home as I began reading. My chest, which had been heaving and constricted from crying and loss, lifted and warmed as I read. I was elated and calm all at once. The feeling was expected and a surprise simultaneously. Light had entered where darkness had been.

As I read, I recognized the presence of a persistent word: *joy*. Even though I didn't fully recognize the concept at the time, the topic of joy has repeatedly surfaced in my studying of the Book of Mormon in subsequent readings. Not only did the reading of the book itself produce joy in me, I unexpectedly encountered the topic and word "joy" innumerable times as I read on. My studies on joy in the Book of Mormon have helped shape my idea of what joy is, how to attain joy, and the power of joy in the lives of those who experience it.

In 2 Nephi 2:25, a large component of joy is identified: "men are that they might have joy" (*The Book of Mormon*). This scripture identifies joy as the central purpose of our human existence. We are on this earth to experience joy; we were even made to experience this joy. As I



began to understand that concept, I realized that this state, joy, should be what I am seeking after in this life. If men exist to have joy, then joy should be the standard by which I judge what influences I allow on my life. And if joy is part of our mortal purpose and the standard of judging what I take into my life, it should also be the standard of what I *produce* with my life.

Through studying the experiences of Alma, we are taught by his example the ways and means of achieving joy. Alma 29:13 describes Alma's position as one called of God to preach the gospel to the people. He acknowledges that he has had much success in his calling, and states that his "joy is full." But success alone wasn't the only key to Alma's joy. He says that his success was given to him by God. His phraseology communicates his humility and gratitude; he isn't claiming the success by his own efforts or even for his own glory. In verse 14, Alma goes on to acknowledge that his joy is "more full" because his brethren are also finding success in preaching the gospel. By verse 16 Alma even declares that the combined success he and his brethren are having, given by God, in spreading the gospel produces a unique physical sensation: "my soul is carried away, even to the separation of it from the body, as it were, so great is my joy." From this example, a recipe of the means of obtaining joy begins to form: it isn't merely a religious calling that produces joy, nor only success, but also gratitude and humility before God, in conjunction with the success of loved ones.

A third lesson I learned about joy through encountering the topic in my studies of the Book of Mormon is the power that joy has in the lives of those who experience it. In Alma 36:20-21, after repenting and receiving the grace of God, Alma discovers the power of joy:

"And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be

nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy.” Alma acknowledges that the pain he had experienced on account of recognizing his sinful state was more powerful than anything he had previously experienced. However, the joy he felt upon repentance came with such power as to exceed the power of his previous pain. Joy can have the power to be the strongest-felt emotion we can experience—powerful enough to supersede our other powerful emotional experiences.

While I did learn much of these properties of joy through my readings in the Book of Mormon, I also noticed interesting patterns revolving around joy in my other reading pursuits as well. Through my experiences with novels I learned the difference between seeking versus finding the effects of joy through novels.

I first heard of Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* in my sophomore year of high school. My creative writing teacher recommended the book to us, even writing and underlining the title in blue ink on the whiteboard. I still remember the way her cursive “K” overlapped the little “i” beside it. I thought, *If Mrs. Goodwin tells me I’ll love it, then I’m dying to read it.* As with many other book recommendations, I didn’t immediately get the chance to read it. My anticipation grew as the book’s popularity grew. I heard that it was on the best seller list. I started hearing that more and more people had read it and recommended it and I knew that when I read it I would love it, just as they said I would. It wasn’t until I was a sophomore in college that I finally opened the book for myself. Ultimately, I was disappointed. I did not have a joyful experience in reading that book—in fact, I found many themes and moments in the book that produced seeming opposites of joy: sorrow, discomfort, and dissatisfaction. I sought that reading experience expecting to experience joy. Not only was I disappointed by the book and the

experience of expecting joy and having that expectation unmet, but I was disappointed that so many people I knew and trusted would recommend a book to me that did not produce a joyful experience in me. Finding joy in literature became an elusive concept because I was met with failure as I sought out a novel that I intentionally chose based on its recommended ability to produce such feelings.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, my reading pursuits have also led me to experience joy as I have taken in books that I had no previous inclination as to their probability of becoming a joyful experience. The most vivid illustration of this is my reading of Nancy E. Turner's *These Is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine*. My mother bought the book and immediately recommended it to me. However, when she told me the title, my nose wrinkled in automatic revulsion. A book that is grammatically incorrect at its onset had no business being included in my repertoire. My mother repeated her recommendation, even being so bold as to say she thought I would be surprised by how much I liked it. I thought to myself that my mother didn't know me at all and dismissed the recommendation without a second thought. It was a full year later before I found myself reading Sarah Prine's words. Even then, I only conceded because one lazy summer evening I realized it was the last book in the house I hadn't read. At first, I remained skeptical. But the more I read, the more I wanted to read. I began to admire the characters, and was surprised to admit to myself that this book, even though I expected very little from it—in entertainment, let alone joy—had produced a very joyful experience in me. I found myself wondering how this book had achieved what *The Kite Runner* had not. What was the difference between the two? And suddenly the answer was there: the extent to which I experienced joy depended on the extent to which I was involved with and admired the characters.

### III. JOY AND PSYCHOLOGY

So what exactly is joy? I have delineated the ways that I have defined, encountered, and sought joy through the Book of Mormon and the surprising power of literature, but what does science say? What is the importance of joy?

Michelle N. Shiota and James W. Kalat, authors of the psychology textbook *Emotion*, define joy as “an intense, pleasant emotional experience in response to a particular event” (Shiota and Kalat 231). This definition differentiates between joy and happiness: whereas joy is a short-term, intense emotion, happiness is a long-term state or affect. In addition to the nature of joy as intense and short-term, “joy is evoked temporarily by a wide variety of events” (231). Joy’s ability to be elicited by many different stimuli mobilizes a number of avenues through which writers can produce the short-term, intense experience of joy.

Joy has also been found to play a role in our human development. J.D. LaBarbera, C.E. Isard, P. Vietze, and S.A. Parisi, psychologists interested in the ability to discriminate between emotions, studied infants’ reactions to the stimulus of viewing a face expressing either joy, anger, or no emotion. Their study found that “infants looked at the joy expression significantly more than they looked at the neutral expression...or the anger expression” (LaBarbera 536). This was the only emotional expression the infants displayed a preference for—LaBarbera reports that there “was no difference in looking time between the anger and neutral expressions” (536). These infants were 4- and 6-month-olds. This finding suggests that humans are designed to be attracted to facial expressions of joy.

But what does our ability to recognize joy in others really mean? LaBarbera and his colleagues found this significant, and explained the implications this way: “these infants recognized the emotion of joy. They may have attended to the joy expression more than the

neutral expression because they perceived the positive reward value inherent in the joy expression” (537). Detecting joy in others is beneficial to an individual because joy is a reward.

How is joy linked with rewards? LaBarbera further explained, “Recognition of joy can provide rewarding and self-enhancing experiences for the infant. Such recognition can also strengthen the mother-infant bond and facilitate mutually rewarding experiences, particularly if the joy recognition leads to joy expression” (537). Recognizing joy is beneficial for infants because then the baby is aware of the mother’s positive feelings directed at them. The positive effects of joy are compounded when the infant can in turn express joy; the mother’s joy then increases and they have a bonding experience, which is evolutionarily crucial for the baby’s survival and the mother’s ability to pass on her lineage.

From an evolutionary approach, the recognition and expression of joy is vital for both parent and child. As LaBarbera and his colleagues discovered, it is also apparently more important to develop at a younger age than other emotions, such as anger. Joy in this way becomes fundamental to our functions and progress as humans. Such an essential emotion should naturally be the goal of our own pursuits, as well as the goal of our interactions with others. Hence, writers need only to capitalize on this knowledge of joy as a driving force and intrinsically rewarding experience in order to produce what readers are seeking.

Another psychological approach to the importance of joy is Carl Rogers’ ideas on self-actualization. Rogers postulated that “all living things have an *actualizing tendency*, a force to develop, grow, and fulfill potential” (Franklin 35). This actualizing tendency is vital to our ability to experience joy because with actualization comes fulfillment, a deep sense of joy. Rogers described the absolute necessity of seeking joy through self actualization: “The actualizing tendency can be thwarted, but it cannot be destroyed without destroying the

organism’” (35). According to Rogers, our very existence depends on the extent to which we seek after and achieve this self-liberating actualization. As we are governed by the actualizing tendency, we then are led to seek achievements that enable us to be in a state that is conducive to the experience of joy.

Rogers also identified organismic listening as a key to actualization and, by extension, joy. Organismic listening is knowing yourself—your “needs, hopes, and dreams. It is not just a cognitive, intellectual, brainy, activity but rather one heavily weighted with emotion” (37). When we know what it is that we need, hope, and dream about, we can seek those things that, when achieved, will fulfill those needs, hopes, and dreams—thereby producing fulfillment and joy. As we go about seeking to fulfill our needs, hopes, and dreams, we learn about our own potential. We learn who we are and what we are capable of. This Humanistic approach states that reaching joy and fulfillment comes from identifying and achieving your needs.

Writers can thereby induce joy in their readers by acknowledging each individual’s actualizing tendency and presenting characters that will help readers vicariously reach actualization through the representation of actualization, or the struggle for actualization, in characters. This can also help expose readers to organismic listening: by identifying with characters or comparing characters to themselves, readers will be in a position to identify their needs, hopes, and dreams. Joy will be a natural result as they are inspired via their connection with the character to seek after those desires and work toward actualization.

#### IV. JOY AND RELIGION

Another means of understanding joy comes through studying religion. Joy is often associated with a deep spiritual sense of being at one with God; hence, religion is a natural source of information regarding joy. According to Confucianism, the meaning of joy is “to act according to one’s own desire” (Huang 70). But this state isn’t something that comes about with ease; Huang qualifies that statement by explaining:

“This is regarded as the highest stage of moral cultivation because at this stage one does not need to worry about any external rules of morality. But this does not mean that at this stage one has acquired a privileged freedom from the constraints of such rules; it means that such rules are no longer needed, as whatever one does, without any consideration of such rules, is precisely what these rules would require one to do” (70-71).

This joy comes when one is freed from external pressure to seek to fill their lives with moral influences and behave according to moral standards because in order to experience this type of joy, one must be in a state of oneness with moral laws, which morality comes through God, and when one is in a state of oneness with God, the motivation to be moral comes from within. This oneness with God is the ultimate state of joy.

Confucianism also states that every human naturally seeks joy, and “so to ask why one should seek joy is indeed unreasonable” (2). Joy is correlated with happiness and positive emotions, and that is the goal of humanity. However, there is a certain type of joy that comes from immoral acts. What, then, is the advantage of seeking the joy that comes through moral acts? Confucianism declares it simply: “to be moral is a distinctive mark of being human. In other words, if one seeks joy in doing immoral things, one is no longer distinguishable from beasts” (2). While there can be a satisfaction found through immoral means, it is a base kind

of fulfillment that doesn't satisfy the deeper, longer-lasting happiness that is uniquely attainable to human beings. To take full advantage of our potential as humans, we must seek the joy that comes through morality.

Critics of that Confucian view might include those who consider morality irrelevant to obtaining joy. However, Confucianism declares that "the ability to feel joy in being moral is present in everyone" (73). Everyone is able to experience the sense of fulfillment in acting according to moral principles, even if they consider themselves outside the realm of morality. Confucianism further explains: "the reason is that everyone has a heart/mind, which a common thing must exist to please... The Confucian answer to the question 'Why be moral?' is that it is a joy to be moral; in other words being moral is what pleases everyone's heart/mind" (73). Our commonality lies in our identity as humans and our possession of a heart and mind. That possession that is shared throughout all of us must work in the same manner, striving for and requiring the same things. Joy through moral means is attainable and satisfying to each of us as possessors of a human heart and mind.

Once that foundation of seeking joy through moral means is established, the prescription to seek joy becomes almost insignificant: "As long as one is in accord with moral principles, one can find joy in anything, whether in poverty or in riches, whether in seeking life or sacrificing one's life" (72). There is not a solitary answer to the means of finding joy, except by abiding to the laws of morality. This makes joy a universally achievable state, available to humans in every station or walk of life. And this joy will bring the most fulfillment. "Since the distinctive mark of being human is a moral heart, and human beings are essentially moral beings, one should seek joy in being moral more than any other joy" (76). The Confucian



way to satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy as a human being is morality: aligning ourselves with the natural desires of our human existence.

Another religious perspective that sheds light on the topic of joy is Hasidism. The Hasidic movement was established by Baal Shem Toy, who developed a unique perspective of the Creation and the purpose of our existence on Earth. According to Baal Shem Toy, joy is an attainable state achieved when we come in contact with and magnify the divinity within the world and each of us. This is because of the “divine sparks” to be found in the world:

“[W]ith God’s creation of the various worlds ‘the sparks of God’ fell into all things that exist in the world. These sparks are still scattered, hidden or neglected, in the things of the world, waiting for man...to raise them up, to release them, and to bring them back to their true and divine origin. Such a release of a divine spark can occur only by a worthy serving of God in the everyday, that is, by deeds that hallow one’s daily life in the world” (Gordon 106-107).

These divine sparks are the motivation in life according to Hasidism. When each of us works toward raising the divine sparks, we draw closer to Divinity and being divine ourselves.

Upon our seeking the divine sparks, each of our actions become more pure and divinely-guided, and we experience joy. “Joyful doing...encourages a person to act in every hour... for the sake of raising the divine sparks...A person who tries to free the sparks may experience joy, because thus one helps...to bring more light to the world, a light whose origin is God’s blessing and joy” (Gordon 107). Seeking the divine sparks is seeking to draw closer to God by being more like Him, eliciting His essence out of the material world around us. The most joyful experiences, according to Hasidism, come from our willingness and ability to be like God and near to God.

By raising the divine sparks in the world around us, joy is not only experienced by each of us at an individual level, but by those around us as well: “Indeed, by giving oneself wholly and passionately... a person can raise the divine sparks with joy and thus bring joy to oneself and to others” (Gordon 116). When we work to raise the awareness and presence of Divinity in our lives and the world in general, others are lifted closer to a relationship with God through our hallowed acts, and we all partake in the joy that comes through being closer to God.

These religious views of joy provide illumination for writers. Morality has been linked with joy in most religions throughout history. Since a large majority of humans have held religious beliefs throughout history, providing joy through means of morality is an ideal avenue to appeal to the greater part of the population. Connecting joy with morality is the mark of humanity, and should be reflected in writing in order to reinforce that connection for the reader’s experience of joy.

## V. JOY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Joy can also be further understood by studying what literary critics have discussed regarding trends of joy in literature. First, joy in literature must be defined. Adam Potkay stated that:

“Joy, most basically, is an emotional response that ratifies something—often something that comes as a surprise—as a good; its opposite is grief or dejection. Aristotle, who had much to say about the proper regulation of all the passions, stressed the educational and civic importance of joy and grief. Teaching people to feel joy and grief at the right things is, he observed in the *Politics*, the crucial function of education” (Potkay “American Beauty” 71-72).

Here, Potkay acknowledges the emotional and moral components of joy; when we experience joy, it validates our designation of something as good. Our own code of ethics helps us identify the good and can produce that joyful ratification, as well as our education—which education can come through reading. Writers have the ability to reinforce codes of ethics at an individual level.

It is important for writers to tap into that ability to influence readers’ sense of ethics for the better because some critics have noted a gradual decline in the trend of experiencing joy in the modern age. Peter H. Van Ness states that happiness used to be defined more simply: “The ancient Greeks associated ecstasy—the state of being outside oneself with joy—with enthusiasm as the experience of being possessed by a god” (Van Ness 216). Joy was clearly identified with Deity and was sought often. However, Van Ness also observed that this trend is declining in our current society: “As human happiness becomes something less readily attributed to God’s blessing, the language of bliss becomes something less readily spoken...the loss of religious experiences of intense joy is cause for real concern” (Van Ness 218). Not only has our

definitional associations of joy become further from association with God, that has led to less and less influence of joy in our writings, and even the rarification of the diction of joy itself.

However, literature is in a position to encourage a change in the occurrence of the diction and the experience of joy. Writers can influence the emotional experiences of readers because “the power of narratives to change beliefs has never been doubted and has always been feared” (Perloff 414). As writers increase the experience of joy in their readers, the belief that joy should be more of a central and expressed goal in life will be renewed. Literature’s ability to encourage change or bolster beliefs occurs because writers capture truths about humanity in an accessible way, more so than a simple psychological study: “behavior is too complex and far-reaching to be left to psychologists alone. Poets, for example, see, hear, smell, and feel things, sensations, and throbbing that psychologists are immune from seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling” (Perloff 413). Joy can be elicited in a reader through the writer’s ability to express the joy they feel themselves.

Even though the portrayal and honest expression of joy in readers may be a writer’s goal, eliciting joy in others may not be the most achievable goal; there is no set formula to determine what produces joy on a large-scale level. Sometimes what produces joy in a given individual may not produce joy, or at least not to the same degree, in another individual. Contrarily, joy may be produced without that intention at all: “the person who experiences joy does so...regardless of your assessment or approval. And yet joy, which is arguably with desire and sorrow one of the three fundamental emotions of narrative, can nonetheless be subjected to ethical discipline: the novelist can, and often does, prompt her reader to feel joy and grief at the right things” (Potkay, “Narrative Possibilities” 1). There may be some readers who will experience a type of joy at points in their reading that wasn’t intended on the writer’s part.

However, the writer does retain the ability to train the reader to experience joy in moments of ethical discipline, when the joy is obtained through means that align with Potkay's earlier definition of joy as "an emotional response that ratifies something...as a good" (Potkay, "American Beauty 71-72).

Potkay elaborates further on the role of joy in narrative by explaining that joy comes as response to an elevation from a lower state:

"The story of joy...turns deprivation into a prelude to restoration, frustration into an occasion for fulfillment: it is, in narrative terms, the ultimate triumph over loss, deprivation, and death. As long as we judge loss, limits, and extinction to be evils, we will never, at least in the stories we tell ourselves, be without joy...Only with an initial loss or fall can there be the joy of recovery, or the resumption at a higher level" (Potkay, "Narrative Possibilities" 14).

Potkay's statement clarifies that even though there may not be a specified formula for producing joy in readers, there is a way to appeal to ethics and natural laws which will enable the reader to experience joy. Although joy can be experienced in response to a number of different stimuli, as long as writers tap into the morals of readers that are uncompromisable in our collective moral attitudes, such as loss, limits, and extinction, to be evils, joy will be experienced on the part of the reader as these evils are overcome and a moral harmony is restored.

## VI. JOY AND AUTHORSHIP

How, then, do writers employ the tenets of psychology, religion, and literary criticism regarding joy to their works in order to produce joy in their readers? We must align our writing with the moral and natural desires of our human existence. First, a Humanistic approach to joy counsels writers to tap into every human's actualizing tendency. Writers can do this by illustrating characters' growth as well as encouraging readers to grow themselves by expanding their previously held viewpoints or opinions. LaBarbera's study indicating that joy is so fundamentally important to our development teaches us that humans desire to experience joy, and must experience it in order to fully develop. As we are designed to recognize joy in others, the simple event of exposure to joy presented in literature elicits joy in readers.

Also, writers can utilize the tenets of Confucianism by recognizing that our humanity depends on our morality. Writers can demonstrate this by illustrating the natural consequences of our human existence through the moral implications of characters' actions. The only way to joy, according to the religious perspectives, is through moral acts. Hasidism similarly declares that joy is produced in those who seek to magnify God in the world around them. The joy thus produced not only affects the individual, but observers as well. In this way, writers can illustrate morality and therefore produce joy in their readers.

Furthermore, the observations of literary critics make it clear that literature has the ability to influence readers. We must be aware as writers that our works affect our readers, and aim to influence them for good. Writers can prompt readers to experience joy at the "right things" by adhering to the laws of morality intrinsic in humanity. Writers can also learn from the purpose of mankind in the Book of Mormon that we are made to experience joy. This dominant emotion has

the ability to overpower all other emotional experiences. Writers can express this through the triumph of collectively moral “goods” over collectively immoral “evils.”

Finally, writers can learn from my personal experiences of identifying with morally exemplary characters as a way to experience joy as a reader. I am able to experience joy as a reader when I am provided an opportunity to be involved with and attached to a character, especially ones who correctly illustrate the laws of morality and embody my natural human desires for good. Bond reader to character through their intrinsic sense of morality, and joy is generated in the reader’s experience.

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