

# The evolution of adventure in literature and life

or

Will there ever be a good adventure novel about an astronaut?

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The literature of adventure had a beginning – will it also have an end? How has the literature of adventure changed, and how will the adventure literature of the future differ from that of the present? Adventures are special because they involve extraordinary challenges and risks. They involve situations and settings that are outside the normal frame of existence, that probe the boundaries of human effort. They explore the unknown, the exotic, and the misunderstood. Adventures are one of the most common subjects in oral story telling – they have always fascinated people and form the basis for some of our earliest literature. But adventure is by its very nature inherently linked to the environment, technology and infrastructure of the society in which it exists. As these change, the nature of adventures both real and imagined also changes, affecting what we write and what we read. In this essay I will discuss how the nature of adventure depends on setting and situation, speculate about how these have changed and will change through time, and throw out some ideas about how this might affect the literature of adventure of the future.

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## I. WHAT ARE ADVENTURES AND WHY ARE THEY INTERESTING?

A perusal of the OED makes it clear how the meaning of “adventure” has evolved through time. Starting in the thirteenth century, an adventure was “that which comes to us, or happens without design”, and had a clear association with “chance, hap, fortune or luck”. In the fifteenth century it acquired a connotation of risk taking, danger, or recklessness. In the sixteenth century it had taken on the modern connotation of “an exciting or remarkable incident”, “an unusual experience or course of events marked by excitement and suspense, a daring feat, a prodigy or marvel”. By the seventeenth century the possible meanings were broadened to include a possible association with financial speculation or business ventures. This reflects an evolution from adventure as risk for its own sake to adventure as risk experienced for a purpose. In the twentieth century this broadens even further to role playing in computer games, adventure travel (often involving physical challenge or rough living situations), adventure camps, and even adventure play grounds. This modern association is with manufactured situations or challenges, designed for entertainment and possibly character building.

In the sense that I think we mean by adventure fiction, an adventure involves an unusual experience or course of events marked by excitement or suspense. It is something out of the ordinary, and often involves an unusual challenge. A private eye can take on danger and a mystery story can have suspense, but we don’t call these adventures because they take place in a well-circumscribed world. The only real unknown is the identity of the criminal. Adventure is a less circumscribed and much more open ended form.

The evolution of semantical associations with the word reflects a parallel evolution in the nature of adventure itself, that tracks the evolution of society and technology. But first a bit more about the types of possible adventures.

## II. A TENTATIVE TAXONOMY OF ADVENTURES

### A. Mode of initiation

There are many reasons why we embark on adventures.

### 1. *Accident*

This is adventure in its old sense. Being at the wrong place at the wrong time, like the literary critic Humphrey Van Weyden in *The Sea Wolf*. While on the way to Mill Valley to spend a weekend discussing Nietzsche and Schopenhauer with a friend, contemplating his recent piece in the *Atlantic Monthly* and the division of labor that makes some men sailors and some men literary critics, his ferry collides with another ferry and sinks. He's fished out of the San Francisco Bay by Captain Wolf Larsen and pressed into service on a sealing ship. All very good for his character, as it turns out. (The message is to be careful lit. crit. people – this could happen to you too).

### 2. *Risk for its own sake*

The fact that some people intentionally take risks for their own sake makes it clear that the desire for adventure is inherent in the human psyche. For the joy of feeling excitement, we sometimes put ourselves in situations where we must face risks and challenges, even if they are artificially induced. We invent challenges with no practical value, like being the first person to row a boat across the Atlantic or setting the record for walking backwards. (When I was hitch-hiking from San Francisco to Santa Cruz I once met Plennie L. Wingo, the world's backwards walking champion, but that's another story). For me this kind of adventure is incompatible with real heroism. How can you respect someone that puts themselves in danger for no good reason? Adventure literature is not well represented in this category, though there are some remarkable memoirs, such as Jon Krakauer's account of commercial attempts to climb Everest gone wrong in *Into the Void*, or the account of the first around the world solo sailing race, as depicted in *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*.

### 3. *Return – rational adventure*

This genre of adventure is motivated by a purpose with personal or societal benefit, such as commercial enterprise, empire building, or scientific discovery. One willingly takes on challenges and their associated risks in the belief that they will yield a return that will make them worth it. The adventure is embarked on to achieve a goal that is valuable for its own sake. The adventure is not frivolous, but rather is driven by a tangible purpose that the

protagonist believes can be justified on a cost/benefit basis. The expected rewards outweigh the risks. These are the basis of the adventures in Melville, Conrad, or the voyages of James Cook. This is often amplified by chance – Odysseus is returning from the war (motivated by profit and honor) and due to the whims of the Gods, he wanders for ten years. The age of exploration gave rise to some of the grandest adventures of all time, to which we owe some of our best literature. This is perhaps adventure in its richest sense, and it is this type of adventure that I want to focus on here. Adventure motivated by return is what I will call *rational adventure*.

There are good reasons why we relate to rational adventures. To make a gambling analogy, the difference between an adventure based on risk for its own sake and rational adventure is like the difference between your average sucker gambling in a casino and someone with who has a system. The sucker is boring. But the person with the edge creates suspense. Will they pull it off? Do they have what it takes? Can they take the heat from the pit boss? Could I do it if I were in their shoes? Almost anyone can passively drift through life – few are cut out for adventure – we ask ourselves whether we could do it too, or at the very least take vicarious pleasure in someone else’s struggles and success. A hero should have a purpose for their heroism.

In finance this can be measured quantitatively as the ratio of return to risk. This ratio is called the Sharpe ratio, in honor of the Stanford economist Bill Sharpe who first pointed out its importance. A good investor wants the highest possible return with the lowest possible risk. Good investors know that nothing comes for free – if you want a good return, you are going to have to take risks to get it. So it is with adventure. The best rewards are only obtained by experiencing significant risk. Someone who takes risks for no return is a fool, but someone who takes on risk for a return can be a hero. Of course, the difference between the two is not always clear. The most satisfying characters are people that we can relate to, who do things whose motivations we understand and empathize with. An irrational thrill seeker might be interesting, but is less likely to be empathetic. In contrast, we all understand the idea that to get a good return we may need to take risks. The fact that we understand why the main characters set out to do what he or she does means that we are even more deeply in his or her shoes when things go wrong and danger sets in. We all secretly believe we are rational, and we relate to rationality better than we relate to stupidity.

## B. The setting

The other important aspect of an adventure is its setting, which can be physical or mental.

### 1. *Physical*

The classic adventure is physical. It involves crossing the ocean or the desert, experiencing physical privations such as thirst and hunger, and most of all danger. The hero is pushed to the edge of his or her abilities, and is forced to do things that are not part of ordinary life. It is physical, apparent, and easy to visualize and understand.

### 2. *Mental*

Although we might normally think of adventure as taking place in a physical setting such as the sea, with physical risks such as death, adventure can also take place in the mind, as in scientific discovery, drug-induced hallucination, or a computer game. The expanding importance of the mental domain through time is reflected in the evolution of meanings in the twentieth century as reported in the OED. The opus of mental adventures is not large – I think of Hunter Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, or Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*. More on this later.

## III. MY THESIS

My thesis is quite simple. Rational adventure in a physical setting is becoming increasingly rarer in the modern world. The evolution of technology and infrastructure has altered the kind of adventures that we can have, so that people with adventurous spirits either take on risk for its own sake, or they embark on rational adventures in the mental domain. Adventure literature has evolved to reflect this, and will evolve even more so in the future.

To explain what I mean in clearer terms I first want to give an example of rational adventure in a physical setting, discuss the crucial role that this has played in oral story telling, and motivate why rational adventure is fundamental to the human spirit and why we are interested in it.

#### IV. WHY IS ADVENTURE FICTION FUNDAMENTAL TO LITERATURE?

Adventure fiction is the form of literature most directly connected to story telling, an art that has waned in modern American culture. Oral story telling can focus on many different things, like love or ethical conflict, but most good yarns involve adventure in one form or another. Adventure fiction is our most visceral literary art form, and adventure fiction springs directly out of oral story telling. It is not a coincidence that many if not most of the earliest works of literature concern rational adventure.

In the modern world we are disconnected from the tradition of oral story telling, and we have a hard time imagining what it is like to live in a society where it thrives. At a typical contemporary dinner party someone might occasionally find the space to relate a brief anecdote, perhaps a few paragraphs, but since I became an adult, I've almost never heard anyone other than a professional narrate a real story in a social setting with more than other person present. I am acutely conscious of this because I grew up in a small town where this was not the case. My home town was Silver City, New Mexico, with a population of around 5,000, about 50 miles from the nearest town, which had even fewer people. A friend of mine who was an ex-hippie who had lived outside of Silver City in the 80's once said to me, "Silver City's not just a time warp – it's a reality warp". The big difference between Silver City and the world all of us here live in is that, at least when I was a kid, there wasn't much to do. Time was a commodity that everyone had in abundance. People didn't have dinner parties, they just came over for dinner. And if someone was good at telling stories, they told stories, even long ones. The big difference is that people in Silver City had the time to listen. Most of the stories that were told were adventures.

Why are people so fond of telling and hearing stories about adventures? I think it is because adventures probe the boundary of what people can do, and help us define who we are. Homo sapiens is an extraordinarily malleable species. We only know what we are capable of by pushing ourselves to the edge. Almost by definition going to the edge is what makes something an adventure. Hearing someone else's adventure makes us reflect on ourselves, what we might have done, whether we would have done it the same way, whether we could have survived or endured or been as lucky or unlucky as the protagonists in the story. By giving us a view of what is possible and what is not possible, and providing a framework to think about this, an adventure story tells us about who we are and what we

might or might not be capable of doing.

Of course, in adventure fiction, we are always left wondering about the difference between what is true and what is false. There is a very important difference between a memoir and a tall tale, but it isn't always easy to tell the two apart. In a good adventure story we often find ourselves asking "come on - did this really happen?"

The Icelandic Sagas provide one of many links between story telling and adventure fiction and provide a good setting to illustrate the value of a narration of rational adventure. They concern events that took place from about 850 - 1050 AD, when Iceland and Greenland were being settled, which were not written down until the 13th century. They are narrated with remarkable crispness, precision and realism, with a style more reminiscent of Dashiell Hammett than Homer. One wonders how this could be after 200 - 300 years of oral transmission. My theory is simple: Iceland has very long winters, during which the Icelanders had almost nothing to do. They had a lot of time to tell and retell the same stories, and to develop their skill at story telling. As a result memories of remarkable events were transmitted with unusual accuracy and great attention to drama and detail. The writers who eventually recorded these stories had the good sense to write them down in a form that resembles that of oral story telling, without too much embellishment.

The Sagas provide a good illustration of my point about how fundamental rational adventures are. The Icelanders were primarily farmers, and indeed many of the sagas are not about adventures in the usual sense, but are rather about disputes between neighbors and kin, most typically involving topics that you might expect farmers to be concerned about, like land boundaries or conflicts between men over women. But a large fraction of the Icelandic Sagas are classic adventure stories. A typical motif that plays many times involves a young man who comes of age and gets a desire to see the world and make something of himself. He asks his father to provide him with a boat so that he and his friends can go raiding. The father finds the funding for the boat, the expedition is provisioned, and the adventure begins. The protagonist then finds himself in all kinds of unusual situations, involving danger, honor, serving kings in foreign land, conflicting loyalties, and falling in love with inappropriate women (which usually happens during the winter). Or as in the Saga of the People of Laxardal, an outstanding young man comes back to discover that his brother has married his betrothed after lying by implying that he had remained in Norway and planned on marrying a Norwegian girl.

Women also feature prominently in the sagas, though in different roles. One of the strongest women is Gudrid Thorbjarnsdottir, who is featured in the Sagas of Greenlanders . According to the sagas she co-led two of the six expeditions to the new world, and was the first European woman to bear a child there. Her introduction in the Sagas says simply that "She was the most attractive of women and one to be reckoned with in all her dealings". She was remarkable for her cleverness, her beauty, her strength of character, and her endurance. Her second husband was a son of Eirik the Red (discoverer of Greenland). She had four husbands, and later in life became an anchoress and was one of the leaders in the conversion to Christianity.

Another woman who does not emerge so favorably is Gudrid's in-law Freydis Eiriksdottir. To quote from her introduction in the Saga of the Greenlanders:

Eirik the Red farmed at Brattahild. There he was held in the highest esteem, and everyone deferred to this authority. Eirik's children were Leif, Thorvald, Thorstein and a daughter, Freydis. She was married to a man named Thorvard, and they farmed at Gardar, where the Bishop's seat is now. She was a domineering woman, but Thorvard was a man of no consequence. She had been married to him mainly for his money.

Heathen were the people of Greenland at that time.

There were altogether six expeditions to the New World recorded in the Sagas. The first was the accidental discovery by Bjarni Berjolfsson, who was blown off course and after wandering for a long time spotted a huge land, probably Newfoundland. Since it was late fall, he decided to come back to Greenland without even landing. After he returned he was ridiculed for his cowardice (an example of how an adventure story sets norms). After that there were three expeditions, led by Eirik the Red's three sons in order of seniority. The third was co-led by Gudrid, who had just married Eirik's third son Thorstein. On the way to the new world Thorstein got sick and died and the trip was aborted. After an interval Gudrid remarried an Icelander named Thorfinn Karlsefni, who was descended from Aud the Deep Minded, who of the characters that opens the Saga of the People of Laxardal. She was a Viking queen originally from Dublin and a leader of one of the early expeditions that settled Iceland Thorfinn was the third of Gudrid's four husbands. Thorfinn and Gudrid decided to organize another expedition shortly after they were married. This time they

made it and spent several years in the new world, during which Gudrid had a child named Snorri.

While they were there they suffered several attacks from natives, and during the last of these Gudrid's dark ex sister-in-law Freydis played a noteworthy role. To quote from the Saga:

After that they saw a large group of native boats approach from the south, as thick as a steady stream. They were waving poles counter-sunwise now and all of them were shrieking loudly. The men took up their red shields and went towards them. They met and began fighting. A hard barrage rained down and the natives also had catapults. Karlsefni and Snorri then saw the natives lift up on poles a large round object, about the size of a sheep's gut and black in color, which came flying up on the land and made a threatening noise when it landed. It struck great fear into Karlsefni and his men, who decided their best course was to flee upriver, since the native party seemed to be attacking from all sides, until they reached a cliff wall where they could put up a good fight.

Freydis came out of the camp as they were fleeing. She called, "why do you flee such miserable opponents, men like you who look to me to be capable of killing them off like sheep?" Had I a weapon I'm sure I would fight better than any of you". They paid no attention to what she said. Freydis wanted to go with them, but moved somewhat slowly, as she was with child. She followed them into the forest, but the natives reached her. She came across a slain man, Thorbrand Snorrason, who had been struck in the head by a slab of stone. His sword lay beside him, and this she snatched up and prepared to defend herself with it as the natives approached her. Freeing one of her breasts from her shift, she smacked the sword with it. This frightened the natives, who turned and ran back to their boats and rowed away.

Karlsefni and his men came back to her and praised her luck.

This passage is a remarkable example of the way in which an adventure brings us out to the boundaries of normal human behavior. If this were a scene in a movie, with a pregnant J-Lo fighting off bandits and scaring them by slapping her sword on her breast, we wouldn't

believe a moment of it. Freydis may have been crazy, but no one could accuse her of being a coward. This story tests lots of limits – cultural limits of conflict and superstition, the physical limits of warriors, the mental boundaries of fear. It also illustrates the power of surprise.

By the way, Freydis goes on to lead the sixth and last Viking trip to the New World, with her husband of “no consequence”, Thorvard. Though he may have nominally been the co-leader, as the sagas make clear at the outset, she was the real boss. In a paranoia fit, she has half the members of the expedition murdered in their sleep. The Vikings never returned to the New World.

## **V. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADVENTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

Adventure is intimately related to technology and social infrastructure. This is because technology and social infrastructure shape both the rewards and the risks in life. The quest for gold could never happen until society reached a level of development (or devolution, depending on your point of view) in which a metal could be arbitrarily given a value that would allow the individual or country who gained it to achieve extraordinary wealth. Technology determines what is possible – without boats, one could never have maritime adventure, much less maritime literature. Technology determines whether the adventure happens on camels or space ships, and whether the fights take place with knives or guns. Fighting with a knife is up close and personal and visceral in a way that fighting with a gun isn’t – you can smell your opponent, you look right into his or her eyes.

Social infrastructure is even more important. In the middle ages, a simple journey to the next town was likely to be dangerous, risking encounters with highway robbers or sorcerers. Social infrastructure determines national boundaries, the quality of police forces, and emergency medical service.

The world has changed dramatically since the time of the Vikings. They sailed from Greenland to the New World in challenging waters, in wooden boats that could not sail up wind, without charts or navigational equipment or life rafts or even any detailed information about what they would find. They had balls, or in the case of Freydis, tits. It is quite a contrast from a modern sailing voyage. I recently took a sailing trip down the east coast,

and there were times where I felt like I was in danger. But I had charts and a GPS, as well as an auto-inflating life raft stocked with a month's supply of food and an EPIRB – a beacon that I could activate and cause a satellite to send a signal that would cause the coast guard to come find me. If I had a serious problem I knew I could just call the Coast Guard and they would come fish me out. I was motivated by scenery and solitude – important returns for me, but not worth high risks. I was willing to pursue the adventure because the risks were low. The Vikings in contrast were motivated by return – not the fantastic visions of gold and absurd wealth that motivated the Spanish, but rather lumber, skins, the possibility of a good place to settle down and farm and raise children. They were willing to take high risks to get these returns (though in the end they decided the risks were not worth it).

My thesis is that rational adventure in a physical setting is disappearing as the technology of safety and social infrastructure covers the world. As an example, I recently saw a show at MOMA on the design for the sake of safety. This has dramatically lowered our risk of physical danger (something that is strongly supported by statistics). The whole world has been visited and mapped and blanketed by cell phone coverage and GPS. But its not just that the risks are lower. The more important point is that the world is known, and the returns to exploration are lower. The world the Vikings so bravely explored is now well covered. The opportunities for return that involve exploration and discovery are largely gone. We've been to the new world, to the poles, we've climbed the highest mountains and probed the deepest parts of the sea. I already mentioned Jon Krakauer's memoir *Into the Void*, a chronicle of the absurdity of being the first blind person to climb Everest, or the first neurotic socialite. The dangers there are real, but the return is elusive at best.

Of course, one has to be careful. Adventure is relative to normal experience. For a Yanamamo tribesman, hunting in the jungle, encountering anacondas, jaguars, piranhas and hostile people from other tribes is a normal experience. Were he suddenly placed in New York, the same tribesman would feel at great risk and, from the point of view of a Yanamamo reader or listener, would be in an ideal setting for an adventure. The situation is obviously reversed for the New Yorker transported to the Amazon. I am not arguing that rational adventure in the physical domain has disappeared entirely, but rather that it is slowly changing. Six months ago I attended a conference with anthropologists and archeologists working in the Amazon, and I was struck by the increasing knowledge that these native people have of the western world and their increasing ability to participate

in international political dialogues. The unknown aspect of the physical world is rapidly diminishing.

Wait a minute you say – what about space? What about astronauts? Aren't they doing just what Cook did when he circumnavigated the globe so many times? Well, sort of, but not really. When I was a kid I read everything about exploration that I could get my hands on. I thought it over and decided my only opportunity to be an explorer was to go into space. I was quite sure that I wanted to be an astronaut. The first sign of trouble came when I read a book that described that qualities that astronauts needed to have. I was pretty confident until I read that they had to be able to wake up quickly, and I knew that this was something I was famous for not doing. I did everything I could to change that – set alarms (which I usually slept through. (I can add that two of my children inherited this trait of mine – and both of them had to have deaf person alarms that shook their beds when they were in high school).

As I grew older I realized that the other problem with being an astronaut is that you had to first join the military and become an experienced pilot and I knew that wasn't for me. But I got another chance at it when NASA decided that they wanted some scientists to become astronauts. My college classmate Sally Ride is the most famous result of this program. At the time I was in graduate school with the man who later became her husband, Steven Hawley, and I seriously considered applying. I remember discussing this with my girlfriend at the time, who told me that it would be crazy for me to apply. It wasn't that she was worried about safety. Her point was that the bureaucracy and rigidity and lack of creative outlet would drive me crazy. Not to mention that she was not willing to move to Houston. Tom Wolfe summarized this well in *The Right Stuff*, where he chronicles the transition from the world of test pilots to that of astronauts, and concludes that the chimpanzee Ham was a better and more effective astronaut than any of her human counterparts.

## VI. WHAT IS THE SHAPE OF A MODERN RATIONAL ADVENTURE?

Adventures in the rational world take place increasingly in the mental domain. They happen in silicon valley (where people discover technology that didn't exist before), or in science (where people discover properties of the world we didn't know). In the sixties they happened by taking drugs, which induced mental states we previously did not know were

possible. The world of Conrad, Melville and London is gone for the foreseeable future. While we can imagine the kind of world we see in Star Wars, physics says that it is really, really unlikely. The distances in space are so huge, the amount of energy required to move at speeds approaching that of light is so large, and the times to traverse the distances even at speeds approaching that of light are so long, that unless there are some significant surprises waiting for us in physics, this kind of a world will never exist. When we write about this, we are merely taking adventures that are familiar from maritime fiction and stories of cowboys and indians and changing the background props. Okay, I'm exaggerating a bit – we can use science fiction to imagine other consciousnesses and probe our own minds. But we will probably never have an author like London or Melville or Conrad who can write about these things from experience.

One can correctly argue that we already have lots of good novels about astronauts. Lem alone has written a handful of them, and when I re-read Assimov's *Foundation Trilogy* as an adult I was surprised at how much I still enjoyed it. But as I said before, these are not astronauts modeled on real settings – they are works of pure imagination, in settings that we know are imaginary and are unlikely to ever occur. The authors have no direct experience in which to ground these adventures. They draw on their imaginations, making analogies to other settings, but as maritime and western adventures. As a result, such work lacks the textural grit of Conrad, Melville, or London. To compensate for the input of direct experience, literature is forced to evolve. We will always have a desire for rational adventures, but (at least for the foreseeable future), it will continue to evolve from the physical to the mental.

It is a serious challenge for a modern writer to narrate an abstract adventure in a manner that is compelling for a typical reader. It is striking to me that, to the best of my knowledge, there has never been a novel written where the dramatic focus of the plot centers on the drama of scientific discovery. There are plenty of novels where this serves as a brief preamble to other events, such as the emergence of a monster or a device that can alter our minds, which subsequently provides the main basis for the plot. What I am talking about is a work where the act of scientific discovery is the main event. There are a few memoirs, such as James Watson's book *The Double Helix*, but this is the only good example I can think of, and this story has the advantage that discovering DNA is not too abstract – it would be a much more interesting challenge to write a novel about a cosmologist. Of course the problem

with such novels is that most people can't understand what they are about. It is one thing to wade through the maritime jargon of bulkheads and mizzen masts, and quite another to try to write a story in which it is necessary to build suspense by discussing a quest to prove a theorem relating Kolmorov entropy to the sum of the Lyapunov exponents of a dynamical system.

As the late entries in the OED suggest, in the modern world adventures increasingly take place in abstract environments, such as the virtual reality of a computer game or the even less real setting of a "reality" television program. Perhaps we will abandon our need for rational adventures. But somehow I doubt it. My hope is that the creativity of future humans and future writers will surprise us, and that there will be a rich literature of rational adventure in the future. Perhaps as our minds evolve, through genetic and engineering as foretold in the novel GATTACA, or cybernetic engineering as foretold in *The Forbin Project*, we will find a richness of mental rational adventures that contemporary humans cannot imagine. For example, in a world of super-intelligent humans, the account of the quest to prove a theorem may take on a universality in its drama that seems inconceivable to us now. I believe that rational adventure is fundamental to the human spirit, and that it won't go away. But it will evolve of necessity to take place in the increasingly abstract domains that characterize the boundaries and frontiers of an evolving and ever more complex and abstract world. As a result, it will evolve into forms that are difficult for us to even think about at this point in time.