

In the Beginning Was the Word

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In the beginning was the word. And the word was spoken. And the Great Power said, 'Let them tell stories, to recount the histories of creation and of the ancestors, to provide practical information and moral instruction, and to create a sense of continuity and culture.' And it was good ... for a while.

And the Great Power said, 'Let them write down these stories, that they don't forget them.' And all around the world, the stories were written down in the languages spoken by the people. And the most favoured of these languages was English. And the Great Power said, 'Go forth and multiply.' And thus Beowulf begat Chaucer, and Chaucer begat Shakespeare. And Shakespeare begat Milton and Milton begat Swift, Defoe and Sterne. And thus the English novel was born. And it was good ... for a while.

And from the printing presses in London, there sprang a multitude, which covered the 18th and 19th centuries, always finding new literary territory to explore. Then the Great Power, now residing in Buckingham Palace, said, 'Let us take our language and our stories to the far corners of my Empire, that the peoples of the world shall be able to understand me when I speak to them and we can chat about Charles Dickens.' And they did as she bade them. But some of the people resisted, preferring their own languages, and so their stories were not repeated much. And it was good, for some people ... for a while ...

And after the Second Great War, the Great Power, now living in Downing Street, said, 'Let us gather together the vestiges of our former Empire and call it a Commonwealth, that we can continue to tell each other stories in English.' And many of the peoples of the world, who wanted their stories to be widely read and considered for the Booker Prize, decided that writing in English might be all right, after all. And it has been good, for some people ... for a while ...