Storytelling versus writing

I am a huge Scandi-noir fiction fan. Recently, I was reading (yet again) a mystery by an Icelandic author (in translation, of course). I noticed the writing was a bit stilted. Some of the phrases didn’t sound right, and I can only imagine this was a translation/translator issue. Translating is hard work. You need to understand the language, obviously. And you also need to understand author’s tone and intent so you can choose the best word or phrase when many will do. This is especially true with colloquial expressions that don’t translate directly. And I am sure these colloquialisms, and some peculiarities of Icelandic culture didn’t quite make it in the translation. And yet there was a blurb on the book jacket by an American crime author, praising the Icelandic author, saying she was a “magnificent writer.” I doubt that the American read the work in the original Icelandic, so she had no way to judge the writing. What she was judging, and rightly so, was the *storytelling*.

Storytelling versus writing

Good storytelling is not the same as good writing, and neither is good writing also good storytelling. Writing and storytelling are two different, albeit related, skills.

Good storytelling pulls you in. It makes you want to know more.

Good writing is about knowing how to use language and its mechanics to communicate ideas clearly.

Can you have one without the other? Yes, you can. And I would argue that the best stories are also the best written.

Photo by Yaroslav Shuraev from Pexels

Think about your favorite book

If you've ever read a book with an intriguing plot, but with utilitarian writing, you understand that storytelling is a skill separate from writing. Books written by good storytellers who are mediocre writers are readable because you are interested in the story and you want to know more.

If you've ever read a book that's so well written, where the words sing, but there is no discernible plot or the story being told is boring, chances are you stopped reading or read the book super slowly. Beautiful writing alone does not make a readable book.

And I would bet that your favorite books, the ones you recommend or perhaps even re-read, are the ones that have a great story and are well written.

Here's the bottom line for content writers

For those of us who write any sort of content, focusing on *what* we are trying to say should come first. Then, we should think about *how* to say it. If we get both these elements—storytelling and writing— done right, we'll create content worth reading.