

From Poets & Writers

7/99 Journal: (#8) Read your short story article. Plan a 5-10 minute summary to present to your group on Tuesday. Leave evidence in your journal. Note whether you read the short article ("Plot, the Bones of a Story" = one journal entry), the medium article ("The Lingerie Theory of Narration" = two journal entries) or the long article ("Writing Short Stories" = three journal entries).

The Lingerie Theory of Narration

VICTORIA'S SECRET REVEALED

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380

THERE are many excellent ways to learn about narration—reading John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* and Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, for example—but perhaps the most accessible lessons about such writerly matters as description, overwriting, and opening and closing stories can be found by reading (well, *reading* is probably imprecise) the Victoria's Secret catalogue, that ubiquitous 90-page glossy circular that most women (and some men) find in their mailboxes about once a month.

Over the years, I've tried to not pay too much attention to these catalogues. Mostly, I've just pulled them out of my mailbox, eyes averted like a Puritan's, and deposited them straight into the recycling bin. Just flipping through those pages can make the average gal crave Prozac—how those women manage to look that glamorous in just their underwear can be downright depressing. (For many men, I imagine, it's another matter....) But not too long ago I started noticing the similarities between the vsc and writing fiction, how both rely on a certain level of artful seduction.

In his book *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Literature* (University of Minnesota, 1984), the literary critic Ross Chambers reminds us that the storyteller's primary job in narration is to "exercise power" over the reader, to make him want to listen. In order to succeed at controlling the "other," Chambers says, a story's speaker must both "achieve authority" and "produce involvement." But how does the speaker provide enough information but not so much that the reader feels alienated or overwhelmed?

All writers struggle at some time with the problem of balance between authority and involvement, seduction and revelation. Beginning writers commonly struggle with how much description to employ, and more advanced writers commonly struggle with how much plot is too much or too little. And there is no better place to find answers to such problems than in the Victoria's Secret catalogue, where the arts of seduction and revelation are so commonly and successfully practiced. After all, the secret of the effective lingerie ad is the same secret at the heart of effective storytelling—to provide, moment by moment, the *illusion* of imminent exposure, to give the viewer (read: reader) the uncanny sense that something fundamentally compelling is



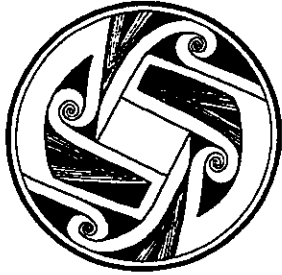
JULIE CHECKOWAY
is the director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Georgia and the editor of *Creating Fiction* (Story Press, 1999), in which a version of this essay appears.

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always *about to be* revealed. In short, it is the art of the tease, the craft of selective "coverage," that works to enthrall.

THE PROBLEM OF OVEREXPOSURE

Clear description—of setting, of character—is fundamental to good fiction, and becoming as concrete as possible in description should be a writer's first goal. Some writers know intuitively how much description is enough and how much is too much, but for others it's an acquired skill. There are several useful things to remember in order to master it.

The first is the old saw that fiction is, at its heart, economical (stories more than novels, of course), and that one must choose material with a conservative, even sometimes miserly, touch. Description should therefore not be wasteful or redundant (unless you're trying to make some thematic point by being repetitive or maximal). One needs only to describe a house once, for example, as long as nothing has changed the second time we visit it. One needs to say only once that the paint is flaking and that the tree is dying. And, as my former teacher John Barth—himself a maximalist—used to say, description needs to be "illustrative" rather than "exhaustive," meaning that you need to give the reader information that is useful and thematically important rather than information that is merely compulsively comprehensive or too intently microscopic.

One secret to deciding if a particular passage of description is necessary to the story as a whole is to think of the story as an arrow pointing toward what Edgar Allan Poe called "the unified effect," meaning that moment when all the story's elements come together. Does the particular passage of description point *toward* the unified effect, or away from it? Whenever you encounter a passage of your own description about which you are unsure, ask yourself, What function does this passage have in this piece? What am I trying to achieve by putting this in, and what of any essential nature would be lost if I were to leave it out?

It wouldn't do, for example, in a lingerie ad for hosiery, to have a model wearing an elaborately sequined and very showy full-length slip. If the unified effect is "buy these panty hose," then the camera should focus on the panty hose and its closely related accoutrements. It's a matter of remembering the overall goal of the work of art. It's as simple as that.

OVERCOMING OVERWRITING

Sometimes writers become so enthralled with specificity and description that they begin to confuse them with mere wordiness. Overwriting, as this tendency is called, is a form of excessive love of language and as such is important and even necessary for writers to indulge in occasionally. The solution to overcoming overwriting is simply to remember the notion of economy and to learn to exercise restraint.

In an effort to conquer her overwriting, an acquaintance of mine used to cut her dearest overwritten sentences (the ones that Annie Dillard says in *The Writing Life* come with "price tags" attached) out of her manuscript with scissors and deposit them in a manila folder she called her Goddess File. Anytime she was blue or just wanted to see what a brilliant writer she was, all she had to do was open up the Goddess File and admire snippets of her handiwork. If cutting back on adjectives and adverbs and fancy, unnecessary verbs or keeping a Goddess (or God) File doesn't work for you, you might just have to wait it out. In time, it will pass. But bring supplies along—canned goods and a pup tent. Gather firewood. Sometimes it takes a while.

The important thing to remember is that overwriting occurs when a writer is interested in seducing only herself, when she has become drunk on her own language, inebriated by her own ideas. In the end, overwriting is a date with only yourself, the ultimate lonely-hearts endeavor. It's a lingerie ad posed so elaborately and intricately and with so many signals and cues that no viewer will ever be able to, or want to, fully take it in.

OPENING THE CURTAIN

The lingerie ad is neither the beginning nor the end, but the middle. The once dressed at the picture frozen in time.

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BEGINNING

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**OPENING AND CLOSING
THE CURTAIN**

The lingerie ad, like the short story, is neither the beginning of a striptease nor its end, but more of what occurs in the middle. The subject of the lingerie ad was once dressed and will, presumably, not be dressed at all very soon, but right now, in the picture before us, we see the subject frozen in time—in the act of disrobing.

Fiction is also a frozen moment in time. It generally catches characters in the middle of their lives, just when their habitual way of being in the world is about to give way. The playwright Edward Albee once said that the beginning of a piece of fiction is like the opening of a curtain on a scene that was already in progress before the curtain parted, and that the closing of the curtain doesn't mean the action of the story ceases, but merely that we are prevented from watching it any longer.

The challenge facing the story writer—and the model in the lingerie ad—is to imply a great deal about what happened before (“I was once dressed”) through exposition or implication (“There are my pants on the floor”) and to imply, as well, what may happen once the curtain closes again (“I will soon be undressed. See how my bra strap is slipping off my shoulder?”) but—and this is important—to always keep the reader's attention totally and completely focused on what is happening *right now*.

BEGINNINGS

How *do* you decide when to open the curtain on a story? How can you know where to begin?

The answer is largely dependent upon the particular story you wish to tell and on the unified effect you wish to reach by its end. Sometimes the beginning of a story is the polar opposite of its ending, as in John Cheever's “The Enormous Radio,” a tale that reveals by its end that the main characters, Jim and Irene Wescott, are not all that they seem. Cheever opens the story with a comprehensive description of how the husband and wife *appear* to others, but makes clear by the last paragraph that they are,

in fact, liars and cheaters, far from the middle-class ideal of respectability that they seem at first to embody.

Other beginnings are meant to serve as the planted seed of a story's ending, the original kernel. Shirley Jackson's “The Lottery,” which ends with a human sacrifice, begins: “The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green.” Jackson's ending may seem, like Cheever's, to be a reversal of the original picturesque view, but it is also true that the annual human sacrifice (like sacrifices of old) seems to ensure or reinforce the fertility and physical beauty that is so carefully described at the beginning. So, it's important to ask yourself what sort of relationship you'd like your opening and ending to have.

A related question is where *in time* to begin a story. Should you begin far back in a character's past and move forward, or should you begin in the present and make use of flashbacks only where necessary? The answer relates back to issues of description and overwriting. *If* you want to open the story with material about the character's deep past, then there *has* to be an important relationship between that past and what is about to happen in the action of the story. In other words, does the opening material point toward the unified effect?

Most stories open, though, not at the very beginning of events but in the middle of the action, in what is commonly known as *in medias res*. Stories start this way because that is where the energy is, where the *oomph* or the push is to get the story going, to get it in motion on the page. Some examples: “I know what is being said about me and you can take my side or theirs, that's your own business. It's my word against Eunice's and Olivia-Ann's, and it should be plain enough to anyone with two good eyes which one of us has their wits about them. I just want the citizens of the U.S.A. to know the facts, that's all” (Truman Capote, “My Side of the Matter”). “When Blake stepped out of the elevator, he saw her”

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(Cheever, "The Five-Forty-Eight"). "Powerhouse is playing!" (Eudora Welty, "Powerhouse").

A tip: Because you may be a writer who does character sketches or background first when you're writing a story, you may find your most powerful beginning not in the material you wrote initially but in the material you wrote once you really found the story's voice. Character sketches or background material can be used as exposition later in the story rather than up front, where it can tend to look and feel heavy and not pull the reader immediately into a story. Look for places in your drafts where the voice is especially strong and seductive, where it seems to be speaking with urgency and energy to a listener, where it has power. That, in many cases, will be the best place for you to begin.

AVOIDING THE APOCALYPSE

The problems of seduction and revelation arise again when a writer comes to composing the ending of his story.

"Great is the art of the beginning," said Thomas Fuller, "but greater the art of the ending." Endings present a complex challenge. Should the ending be the absolute and final-word summation of all that has gone before, or should it be clever, coy, full of riddles and trickery? How much revelation is too much? How little is too little?

Writers in the late 20th century are deeply influenced by film and television, and inevitably, this can show up in our stories in the ways that our endings are constructed. If we're not careful, we can fall into the trap of creating big bangs or killing off our characters, not to mention manufacturing cheap trick endings.

The problem with apocalyptic writing (the story in which the car actually crashes, the house burns to the ground before your eyes, the relationship completely falls apart) is that it is filmic rather than literary and, therefore, moves away from the primary purpose of fiction—to let us see into the hidden life of things. Filmic endings are generally simplistic

and momentarily satisfying, like the completed striptease. Literary endings are often ambiguous; they let the story rest not in perfection but in the startling beauty of irresolution.

One story that avoids the apocalypse beautifully is Raymond Carver's "Little Things," originally published under the title "Popular Mechanics." Only a page or so long, the story is about a nameless couple who are breaking up and fighting over their baby. As the story progresses, each makes claim to the baby, literally—grabbing an arm and pulling for dear life. Carver's story is obviously a brilliant contemporary rewrite of the famous biblical King Solomon tale, but he is smart enough to end "Little Things" before the baby is actually hurt. The baby is slipping out of the mother's grasp. The father is also losing his grip. Surely the baby is about to fall and be injured, or perhaps even killed, but Carver doesn't show that. Instead, his last line is the biblically resonant "In this manner, the issue was decided."

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Avoiding the trap of writing the big summation does not mean that writers should aim for anticlimactic stories. Instead, they should go for a more complex climax, one in which external action does not overshadow the fundamental human story but complements it.

TRICK ENDINGS

A related problem for writers is the temptation to use trickery at the ends of stories. Trick endings may be startling and interesting wake-up calls for the reader but, like apocalyptic endings, they ultimately draw the reader's attention only to the writer's ability to manipulate data.

Fiction writer Gordon Lish once said that the last line of a story should be like the little piece of string that one pulls when one is trying to build a ship in the bottle. You pull the little string and the whole structure, already fit snugly inside the vessel of the glass, goes up, masts and all, entirely constructed—*Voilà!* Lish's point isn't that the last line could be a big bang or a trick but that it ought to reveal the thematic and structural connections between all that has come before.

In most good literary fiction, you're likely to find such last lines. In Frank Conroy's story "Midair," the main character, Sean, has been haunted and frightened his entire life by the memory of an occasion in his childhood when his father dangled him from the window of an apartment building. In the final scene, Sean, in middle age, finds himself trapped in an elevator with a young man who is as frightened of heights as he was when he was a boy. But instead of panicking—as he always has—Sean reassures the young man until the doors finally open. When the story ends, Sean emerges from the elevator, amazed at his sudden calm. "Here in the darkness, he can see the cracks in the sidewalk from more than forty years ago. He feels no fear—only a sense of astonishment." Similarly, there is the powerful moment at the end of John Updike's "A and P": "His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of

iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter."

What characterizes literary fiction, like Conroy's and Updike's, from popular fiction or film is that, generally speaking, its writers exercise a degree of healthy repression and restraint in their endings. No big car chases, no conflagrations, but rather a moment of highly charged and enigmatic linguistic beauty that suggests cataclysm rather than practicing it. Usually, this is a moment before change is about to occur, before resolution is enacted. At the end of another brilliant Raymond Carver story, called "Fat," a waitress stuck in a miserable and unsatisfying relationship with a cook in a diner says, "My life is going to change. I can feel it." Carver has resisted the impulse to actually change the waitress's life. Instead, he suggests the pathos in her *desire* to change and in her inability to do so. He resists taking the story to its natural conclusion and ends it instead with a breathtaking look out over the horizon, the suggestion of possible things to come. "It isn't fair, it isn't right," cries the human sacrifice, Mrs. Hutchinson, to the encroaching mob in "The Lottery." "And then they were upon her," reads the last line.

One final piece of advice about endings: Look for them a few paragraphs or pages above where you think they should be, a few moments before the character jumps off the cliff of possibility. Often, surprisingly enough, embedded somewhere in the body of the manuscript is the perfect and subtle ending, waiting for you to find it.

The fundamental secret, then, to the effective ending in fiction is to practice the same sort of restraint one sees in Victoria's Secret lingerie ads—enough coyness to tantalize, enough enigma to tease, but never, ever too much naked abandon. Resist, at all costs, the impulse to perform a fictional striptease for the reader. Practice instead a kind of sexy modesty—which is, perhaps, in the end, the most seductive narrative style of all. ∞

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