

A Flash in the Pan: Getting Started on Short-Short Fiction

The flash fiction, the short short story, the sudden fiction: whatever you call them, it is in these tightly compressed forms that the techniques of fiction and the compression of poetry meet and merge to create exciting new modes of expression. Through brief (under 1,000 words, and in many cases under 500) in-class readings, students will see how such tiny stories can pack a huge punch. After discussing how these narratives-in-miniature are structured, as well as what they can teach us about longer forms, students will have the chance to do in-class exercises, and will walk out with rough drafts of a couple very short stories that they can continue to hone, as well as with a new sense of how to bring economy to their sentences in writing of all lengths and genres. **Who Should Attend:** Writers seeking to jump-start their imaginations and experiment with shorter forms, as well as busy writers who don't have the time right now to spend on the Great American novel, but who want to keep their writing chops fresh.

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A Brief Introduction To / Some Definitions of Flash Fiction

“Definitions by length are for editorial convenience. For the editors of *Collier’s* (an American magazine published from 1888 to 1955), a short short was a story that fit on one page of their magazine. The editors of the original *Flash Fiction* anthology [...] picked 750 as an upper limit because this could be printed on two facing pages of a digest-size literary magazine. Page layout and word-count definitions don’t say much about the experience of reading or writing short shorts, however.

“I do like the definition offered by fellow writer Kate Wilhelm in her introduction to my short short collection *Flaming Arrows*/ as Kate expresses it, a novel invites the reader to explore an entire house, down to snooping in the closets; a short story requires that the reader stand outside an open window to observe what’s going on in a single room; and a short short requires the reader to kneel outside of a locked room and peer in through the keyhole. For me, that captures an essential characteristic of most short shorts. They are not just short, but also, typically, compressed.” ~**Bruce Holland Rogers**, “Writing Fixed-Form Narratives: Who’s Going to Stop You?” *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*

“‘Each drop encases its own separate note, the way each drop engulfs its own blue pearl of light.’ This description of rain, from Stuart Dybek’s story ‘Nighthawks,’ is as close to a definition of flash fiction as I can personally offer. A successful flash enchants us, each small story successfully rendered engulfing us for a brief moment—in a ‘flash’ [...]—in its own brand of light, or truth. And the effects linger on, sometimes for decades.” ~**Tara L. Masih**, “In Pursuit of the Short Short Story: An Introduction,” *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*

“Flash fiction is a place for reckless daring. You write strange sentences in a new voice. You attempt bold plot structure. You explore a topic you’ve always avoided. But playing isn’t enough—you must also take risks.” ~**Deb Olen Unferth**, “Put Yourself in Danger: An Examination of Diane Williams’s Courageous Short” *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*

“The most famous flash fiction in Spanish is by Augusto Monterroso, a devilish Guatemalan who lived as an exile in Mexico. It reads: ‘When the man woke up, the dinosaur was still there’ (*Cuando el hombre despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí*). A number of readings unfold: a man wakes up and finds himself many centuries ago; dinosaurs are still around, only in another time zone; a man wakes up inside another dream and has to kill the monster to be free....But, also, a series of parallel flash stories are possible: when the man slept, the dinosaur stepped out of the museum; when the dinosaur woke up, men were already extinguished; the man awoke and in the mirror he found a dinosaur.” ~**Julio Ortega**, “A Flash Before the Bang” *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*

Nicole Rivas
497 words

DEATH OF AN ORTOLAN

On my first date with Penny, I was very nervous because I was only nineteen and Penny was fifty-two. Over coffee, she told me that she was divorced and had two kids, both older than me. Actually, Penny was already a grandmother. She said her grandson's name was Carapace, which I know for certain because I had to ask twice. Penny and I talked a lot about the war, and I said some pretty stupid stuff that I quickly regretted. But Penny didn't see things that way. "You have a beautiful mind, like a curly Q," she told me. I had never been on a date with a woman before, and so I hid my hands beneath the table and tore my paper napkin into tiny pieces. I couldn't believe it when Penny said she wanted to see me again. I went home that day and wrote all about it in my diary.

On our second date, Penny and I went to an aquarium. She paid for both of our tickets because I was only working part-time at a pizza shop and making minimum wage. Penny, on the other hand, was a gynecologist. More specifically, she was my gynecologist. When we were watching the piranhas rip apart a human cadaver I said, "Penny, I've been thinking, and I'll feel terrible if this turns into something real. I don't have anything to offer you. I'm not even in college." And I couldn't believe it, but as soon as I said that, Penny grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me on the lips. Her tongue was like the inside of a tomato. When she pulled away she said, "It's too late, because this is already something real. I love you more than I love my own children."

On our third date, Penny and I had a picnic and she showed me how to eat an ortolan. I thought we were just going to have some cheese and maybe some grapes, but she pulled these little balls of foil out of her picnic basket, and when she unwrapped them I saw that they were tiny birds. She explained that they were caught in nets, stabbed in the eyes, fed excessive amounts of grain, drowned in jars of brandy and roasted. I was horrified, which led to a deep, philosophical conversation about good and

evil, but before I could get reoriented Penny said, “Hurry up, your ortolan is getting cold.” And I suddenly realized that I didn’t want my ortolan to get cold, even though that morning I’d never even heard of an ortolan. Penny handed me a cloth napkin to put over my head while I ate the bird bones and all—a tradition. I was so nervous, because this was only the third date with a woman I’d ever been on, let alone a gynecologist, *my* gynecologist, and it was a good thing those napkins were cloth, or else I would’ve ripped them to shreds all over again.

~from her chapbook *A Bright and Pleading Dagger* (August, 2018)

The House of Women by Bruce Holland Rogers

381 words

Women were all I knew of family. Family meant a household with my mother and three sisters so much older that they loved me without rivalry. Rivalry they reserved for each other. Other boys had fathers who took them hunting. Hunting was, for me, a mystery of guns and blood. Blood mysteries in our house were different.

Different boys came courting my sisters, giving me quarters to go away. Away is where they took my sisters, eventually. Eventually, it was just the two of us, me and my mother in a house I tried to fill with a loud guitar and an old Mustang that spent most of its time on the garage floor in parts. Parts were the vehicle of my initiation, for when my friends were with me we could speak the code of cams and carburetors and go to a country that we imagined was for men alone.

Alone and on my own at last, I found further paths into the world of men. Men working with me at the garage went for beers after work, bowled weekends, hunted in October, all to be away from their wives. Wives and children, they joked, were God’s punishment for youth. Youth, they urged me, was meant for raising hell.

Hell-raising, according to my workmates, was a matter of drinking hard and of spending Saturday nights with girls whose names a man would forget by the time he told the story Monday. Monday mornings didn’t find me bragging of such exploits, though. Though I went for beers and bowled sometimes and even learned to hunt, I disappointed my adopted brothers. Brothers shouldn’t speak with their brothers’ wives with quite the ease that I did. Did they think that noticing a different hair style or knowing where to find the shoes to match that handbag was flirting? Flirting was what they called it to my face, though behind my back, they muttered other things. Things at work have improved only slightly since I met and married Bonnie.

Bonnie hoped our first would be a boy, so I haven’t shared with her my relief that we’re having a girl. Girl one, I hope, of two or three to come. Come to me, my daughters, and bring me home to the house of women.

—from *The Writer*

Eleven Essentials of Writing Flash Fiction

by Randall Brown

FlashFiction.Net, October 29, 2009

<http://flashfiction.net/2009/10/thursday-craft-eleven-essentials-of-writing-great-flash-fiction.php>

Here is **the demand of the flash form**: To find in compression what could not be found otherwise, to view the constriction of time and space as a need for urgency and profundity.



And here are The Eleven Essentials to **Writing Great Flash Fiction**. (Coincidentally, these are the eleven things I try to do when writing flash fiction):

1. **Have strong desires create an immediate urgency.** I love when characters go all in. The trick (for me) is figuring out why now, of all times, they decided to do it. It's more about the strength of their desire, their decision to commit to something rather than what's at stake that draws me to them. We find them afire with wanting.
2. **Twist expectations from the outset.** Readers come to stories full of predictions. Scare the bejeebers out of them! They expect you to zig, you zag, not in the final sentence, but immediately. Serepentine, Shell! Serpentine!
3. **Create tension through revelation rather than omission.** Hiding things from the reader is just plain mean, and it's manipulative, too, especially when the POV character is hiding things that he/she clearly knows. Try to create tension by showing your cards. And the other person's cards. And maybe the whole gosh darn deck, if you'd like. Reveal, reveal, reveal. You be the person to put the "flash" in flash fiction.
4. **Use specificity to create the supernatural.** Make your details so vivid & so real that they take on the quality of dreams. The world of story already has that sense of supernatural wonder, where the gods and goddesses (i.e., the author) throw the very obstacles at a character that will get the character to transform into the person he/she was destined to become. Charles Baxter, I think, had a chapter on defamiliarization, where the everyday object becomes so imbued with exactness and wonder that it becomes something altogether other, like a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens.
5. **Make a truth—rather than a twist—the goal of your ending.** Rather than misinforming the reader throughout (lying!) just so you can jump out and say "Gotcha!" at the end, try anything else, even if it means completely informing the reader about what's going on throughout (revealing everything), so that each word can take the reader/character/writer closer to grasping something just out of our grasps. Make it something that will resonate.
6. **Use dialogue to dig deeper.** In *Donnie Darko*, a temporal "accident" causes an alternative universe to be formed, and within this alternative universe, the universe and everyone in it conspires to get Donnie to do what he must do so that the "real" universe and everyone in it won't be annihilated. Make that happen in your universe, so that dialogue exists to make the character confront what needs to be confronted, forcing the character (continually) to dig deeper for answers. Everyone who talks to your character has this sole purpose: to make the character face the very thing that will lead that character to have his/her destined ending.
7. **Figure out what you, as writer, desire to know.** A lot of what experienced writers tell new writers, I'm coming to think, are lies, things to tell them so they can weed out the competition a bit. Like "write what you know." If I only wrote what I knew, I'd be writing stories about guys figuring out how to write stories. The real secret is to write what you want to know. At my MFA at Vermont, Doug Glover worked to convince me that literature "is a way of thinking in which you think by pushing your characters through a set of actions (testing that character in a series of scenes which involve the same conflict)." I began to think that, if indeed writing stories is a way of thinking, then it might make sense if I had

something to think about, something to figure out. So maybe, I thought, I should have the character be dealing with something that I, the writer, also wanted to discover. Now, once I've convinced people that this is true, that they should write not necessarily what they know but instead what they want to know, I will write what I want to write: a story about a guy figuring out how to write a story. Because no one will be writing that.

8. **Compress to charge sentences.** What's it really mean that "every word counts" in flash fiction? I'd like to see some examples of 750-1000 word flash fictions where every word has that kind of weight. Some writers write as if to make every word equal, as if no word counts. Or so that only a single word carries the burden of the story. There's rarely, though, a sense of wordiness to flash. The question I ask has to do with what word is or isn't needed. It might be the realization that in *I gripped her arm tightly as if holding a gun's barrel* I don't need *tightly*. And it's sometimes more than that. There is, in flash, for me, the desire to say what needs to be said and that is all.
9. **Create "weighted" images & patterns.** After a draft, I read it to discover the images that arose (as in dreams) without any conscious awareness on my part. I try to figure out the ones that seem to connect to each other. I work with those. I might hint at them in the title. These things create subtext, that thing that gets you into the very, very literary magazines
10. **Avoid "ready-made" phrasings.** It's a failure of creativity. Creative writing with cliches. Whoever heard of such a thing. The day I write with cliches is the day hell freezes over.
11. **Use words in the title that create multiple meanings.** I don't like titles that summarize what the story is about. I like titles that work to uncover something hidden and central. Write revelatory titles, as if they're both the first and last word(s) on the matter. Make it so that the title in some way changes everything.

Flashes to Check Out (warning; some may contain adult content)

Tom Saunders's "[Outer Space](#)" in *Smokelong Quarterly*
 Mary Miller's "[Angel](#)" in *Vestal Review*
 Rusty Barnes's "[The Way It Is Scripted, The Way It Goes](#)" in *Ink Pot*
 Jai Clare's "[Memory of Sky](#)" in *SmokeLong Quarterly*
 Joseph Young's "[Poems on Small Dogs](#)" in *Ink Pot*
 Nance Knauer's "[Drinking from the Well](#)" in *Ink Pot*
 Daphne Buter's "[He Wrote Sixteen Pencils Empty](#)" in *Smokelong Quarterly*
 Pamela Painter's "[Ghost Story](#)" in *Vestal Review*
 Joseph Young's "[What Happened Was](#)" in *the angler*
 Jeff Landon's "[Five Fat Men in a Hot Tub](#)" in *Smokelong Quarterly*
 Kelly Spitzer's "[Disintegration](#)" in *Vestal Review*
 Katrina Denza's "[Crimes on the Bus](#)" in *Long Story Short*
 Stephen Douglas Gullion's "[A Flute Named Desire](#)" in *Adirondack Review*
 Kim Teeple's "[Raw Silk](#)" in *Salome Magazine*
 Nance Knauer's "[The Scent](#)" in *Dead Mule*
 Robert J. Bradley's "[Blind Love](#)" in *SmokeLong Quarterly*
 Ellen Meister's "[A Crack in the Foundation](#)" in *Ink Pot*
 Claudia Smith's "[Bluebonnet](#)" in *Juked*
 Gary Cadwallader's "[Out of Scale](#)" in *flashquake*
 Ellen Parker's "[Metallic](#)" in *SmokeLong Quarterly*
 Robin Slick's "[Picnic](#)" in *SmokeLong Quarterly*
 Lesley Weston's "[The Lamb Misused](#)" in *Night Train*
 Terry Dehart's "[Clear Cut](#)" in *FRiGG*
 Cliff Garstang's "[The Learned Llama](#)" in *Six Little Things*

Foster Trecost's "[A Quiet Evening](#)" in *Flash Me Magazine*
Ramon Collins's "[Sgt. Nelson, KIA](#)" in *Long Story Short*
Lydia They's's "[Grace Notes](#)" in *Flashquake*
Beverly Jackson's "[The Cucaracha](#)" in *Tattoo Highway*
Dave Clapper's "[Spike. Resonance.](#)" in *FRiGG*
Bill West's "[August, 1946](#)" in *Right Hand Pointing*
Maryanne Stahl's "[Looking for Rabbits](#)" in *Word Smitten*
Bob Arter's "[Grace](#)" in *Ink Pot*
Bonnie Zobell's "[Movement in the Wire](#)" in *Juked*