Principles of a story (edited by teacher down to approx. 1300 words)

**BY RAYMOND CARVER**

*From Anton Chekhov to James Joyce, the short story defined modern fiction. Subsequently, it became a form defined by America. Here, one of the great US writers explains why he came to prefer the story to the novel*

Back in the mid-1960s, I found I was having trouble concentrating my attention on long narrative fiction. For a time I experienced difficulty in trying to read it as well as in attempting to write it. My attention span had gone out on me; I no longer had the patience to try to write novels. It’s an involved story, too tedious to talk about here. But I know it has much to do now with why I write poems and short stories. Get in, get out. Don’t linger ....

Some writers have a bunch of talent; I don’t know any writers who are without it. But a unique and exact way of looking at things, and finding the right context for expressing that way of looking, that’s something else. Every great or even every very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications .... It is the writer’s particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes. It is his world and no other. This is one of the things that distinguishes one writer from another. Not talent. There’s plenty of that around. But a writer who has some special way of looking at things and who gives artistic expression to that way of looking: that writer may be around for a time.

(....)

I overheard the writer Geoffrey Wolff say “*No cheap tricks*” to a group of writing students .... Writers don’t need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the smartest fellows on the block. At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing—a sunset or an old shoe—in absolute and simple amazement.

It’s possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring—with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader’s spine. That’s the kind of writing that most interests me .... In Isaac Babel’s wonderful short story, “*Guy de Maupassant,”* the narrator has this to say about the writing of fiction: “*No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place*.”

Evan Connell said once that he knew he was finished with a short story when he found himself going through it and taking out commas and then going through the story again and putting commas back in the same places. I like that way of working on something. I respect that kind of care for what is being done. That’s all we have, finally, the words, and they had better be the right ones, with the punctuation in the right places so that they can best say what they are meant to say. If the words are heavy with the writer’s own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise and inaccurate for some other reason—if the words are in any way blurred—the reader’s eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved. The reader’s own artistic sense will simply not be engaged. I have writer friends who’ve told me they had to hurry a book because they needed the money, their editor or their wife was leaning on them or leaving them— something, some apology for the writing not being very good. “*It would have been better if I’d taken the time*.” I was dumbfounded when I heard a novelist friend say this. I still am, if I think about it, which I don’t. It’s none of my business. But if the writing can’t be made as good as it is within us to make it, then why do it? In the end, the satisfaction of having done our best, and the proof of that labour, is the one thing we can take into the grave. I wanted to say to my friend, for heaven’s sake go do something else. There have to be easier and maybe more honest ways to try and earn a living. Or else just do it to the best of your abilities, your talents, and then don’t justify or make excuses. Don’t complain, don’t explain.

In an essay called, simply enough, “*Writing Short Stories*,” Flannery O’Connor talks about writing as an act of discovery. O’Connor says she most often did not know where she was going when she sat down to work on a short story. She says she doubts that many writers know where they are going when they begin something. She uses “*Good Country People*” as an example of how she put together a short story whose ending she could not even guess at until she was nearly there:

 When I started writing that story, I didn’t know there was going to be a PhD with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women I knew something about, and before I realised it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg. I brought in the Bible salesman, but I had no idea what I was going to do with him. I didn’t know he was going to steal that wooden leg until ten or twelve lines before he did it, but when I found out that this was what was going to happen, I realised it was inevitable.

When I read this some years ago it came as a shock that she, or anyone for that matter, wrote stories in this fashion. I thought this was my uncomfortable secret, and I was a little uneasy with it. For sure I thought this way of working on a short story some- how revealed my own shortcomings. I remember being tremendously heartened by reading what she had to say on the subject.

.... For several days I’d been going around with this sentence in my head: “*He was running the vacuum cleaner when the telephone rang*.” I knew a story was there and that it wanted telling. I felt it in my bones, that a story belonged with that beginning, if I could just have the time to write it ....I made the story just as I’d make a poem; one line and then the next, and the next. Pretty soon I could see a story—and I knew it was my story, the one I’d been wanting to write.

I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories .... There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won’t be a story. What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it’s also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. VS Pritchett’s definition of a short story is “*something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing.*” .... The short story writer’s task is to invest the glimpse with all that is in his power. He’ll bring his intelligence and literary skill to bear (his talent), his sense of proportion and sense of the fitness of things: of how things out there really are and how he sees those things—like no one else sees them. And this is done through the use of clear and specific language, language used so as to bring to life the details that will light up the story for the reader. For the details to be concrete and convey meaning the language must be accurate and precisely given. The words can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes. ■