



CLOSE-UP:



STRUCTURE AND PACING

Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

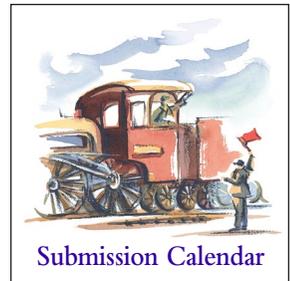
ANDREW PORTER, *interviewed by Trevor Gore:*

You say your first drafts are often not written linearly. What's that look like and at what point does it become more linear?

It's hard to describe what I mean. I don't really think about the overall structure of the story in a conscious way as I'm writing it. I'm aware of certain conflicts, certain thematic elements, etc., and I try to write scenes that I think will address or explore these conflicts and themes, but I try not to think too much about how it's all going to fit together in the end.

I might wake up one day and decide that I want to explore the narrator's relationship with a particular character, and so I'll write some back story about that relationship, and then maybe I'll write a few scenes between the narrator and that character. Then, if I like a particular scene I've written, I'll write a few different versions of that scene for comparison later. All the while, I'm very aware that most of what I'm writing on a particular day won't make its way into the final draft of the story.

I realize this might sound a little strange to most people, but after a while, the actual events of the



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story become apparent to me. I'll write a scene one day, remembering a scene I had written the previous day, and I just know how those two scenes might fit together in the actual story. **It sounds a bit haphazard, but by the time I've generated all of the content in my initial draft, I'm already pretty aware of what scenes I want to focus on and what the basic chronology and structure might look like.** ■

JAVIER MARIÁS, *interviewed by Eli S. Evans:*

In one of his American lectures, Italo Calvino describes fiction as something that performs an operation on the time that it contains. Given the way in which your novels tend to circle back on their own past, as well as your well-known propensity for digression, what would you say is the operation that your work performs, or tends to perform, on the time that it contains?

This is certainly something that I'm concerned about. I think I've said on other occasions that a novel allows you to make exist the time that usually doesn't exist. Which doesn't mean, really, that it doesn't exist at all. But time doesn't give us time. Time itself is too quick. For instance, think of having a long conversation, during a whole night, with your fiancée or your girlfriend or your wife or whatever, because you are about to split up. You discuss and you argue and you talk and you explain your reasons, and that lasts a whole night, as often happens in that kind of a situation. And afterward, when you recall that very long night, maybe the thing lasted for hours, but you probably remember just a few moments of it, and maybe not the main ones, or those that would appear to be the main ones, but maybe, instead, just a sudden movement, or a pause in the argument, or maybe just a look. And that, in a way—even if it lasted a very short period of time, and maybe you didn't even notice it while it was happening—is what really lasts in your memory, and so your memory makes that last much longer than it lasted when it happened.

In a way, that's something that happens in life, somehow, although only retrospectively. But in a novel, you can do that while things are happening, while things are taking place, and hold on to the time that time usually discards. Poor time, you might say. He can't do anything other than that, because more time is always pushing behind him. But you can do it in a novel. In a novel, you can manipulate time—not in the sense of distorting, but in the sense of, sometimes, giving it back what belongs to it, but what usually can't be seized in the time of real life. Of course, one of the reasons

that I write novels is to lose time, or to waste it, which also means that you're able to feel it, to weigh it. ■

JOSH WEIL:

We've all been there: a moment when something of such import happens that the space life allows for it seems too small. For me, the time my grandfather broke free of his dementia to speak last words to me was like that. The time I came home to an empty apartment and knew my marriage was over was like that. But so were the few seconds—at the end of ten years, of three attempts at novels, of a whole adulthood of trying—when my agent told me that I had finally sold my first book.



Unfortunately, life doesn't let time expand to hold these things the way they warrant. Luckily, writing does. I call it breathing room. And I think it's one of the most underappreciated (even at times derided) ideas a creative writer can employ.

Much of the writing world seems to almost worship brevity. The contained moment in an Anton Chekhov story. The way Gordon Lish scraped Raymond Carver's work to the bone. "Cut to the quick." "Trim the fat." It's often good advice. One of the rules I find most useful in thinking about scene is David Mamet's exhortation: get in late and out early.

But sometimes brevity is bad. Once, a class I was in read two versions of the same Carver story—one edited down, one fleshed out. **Most of us admired the shorter one, but were more moved by the longer. And, in my own writing, it's precisely when a moment demands that I break Mamet's rule that I know I've hit the vital part.**

We shouldn't let Mamet or Lish (or our workshop mates) scare us from letting our work breathe. There are plenty of terrific examples of writers who do so: No one gives important moments full rein like Toni Morrison; Cormac McCarthy can spend whole paragraphs describing items in a trapper's cabin; it's part of how they imbue places and moments with weight. W.G. Sebald circles back to the central elements in his novels, deepening our understanding of them the way William Faulkner does by returning again and again to moments. The key is this: each of these writers chooses carefully the moments at which they allow their stories a little more room.

So how do we recognize those moments? I find that two blocks usually stand in the way, one external, one internal. There is the expectation that others will want a story to get where it's going as quickly as it can (surely, it would be better to get there a little later if means the result hits us a little harder). But there is also the way a powerful moment can gust up and sweep a writer forward—often a sign that the moment might be worth revisiting and slowing down. ■

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE,
interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

I wondered about the way you structured the narrative [in Half of a Yellow Sun]. The story doesn't unfold in sequence.

Well, I was writing a novel and not a political thing, and I wanted to have an opportunity to play with the structure. Also I wanted to keep my characters humanized—fully human—I didn't want readers ever to forget that these were real people who had a life before the horrors they had to endure. So I started long before the war, just to let my readers get to know my characters. I didn't want to throw them into war. In the classic war novel, you start off and the characters are thrown into a war and we watch them suffer.

I noticed that the war becomes real around a third of the way through when Richard is at the airport and sees this massacre—especially of this passport control/customs person he has been talking with—it's harrowing and vivid. And shocking. And of course it resonates for Churchill and the reader from that point on.

Olanna's incident actually happens before Richard's—where she sees her family members have been killed and she is on the train back to the East—

Oh, yes, yes, yes—that's where she sees the mother on the train with the head of her child. That's one of my concerns about the chronological back and forth. I started to reconfigure the narrative's sequence. [Laughs.]

My brother said to me when he was reading it, “Did I miss something? Did I miss some pages?”

By the third section I was flipping back to make sure I knew or understood



Photo credit: Okeke Adichie

the time and sequence—I'm sorry I interrupted.

Of course I didn't want to confuse my reader. I kept going back, hoping that I had used concrete detail to tell you when you move forward and back—I hoped that there were a few markers so the reader would know, "Oh, okay, we're back." And also in the second section when we skip to the late sixties, there are things one doesn't know. "Where did Baby come from and what happened?" For me, again, it was simply a technique of fiction—I wanted to keep the reader engaged. ■

BENJAMIN PERCY, *interviewed by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum:*

What aspects of composing a short story or collection of short stories did you find useful in writing this novel? What wasn't so useful?

Novels are a different beast entirely. We're not just talking about a long short story. The language can't be as intense—or the reader will get exhausted. The structure isn't as precise—the novel encourages some messiness and digression. The engine is different—you can't get away as well with an elliptical structure, with a juggling act, as you can with short stories; the novel has a much more causal arrangement, with one thing leading to another. ■

PETER HO DAVIES, *interviewed by Jeremiah Chamberlin:*

Your short fiction seems so conscious of structure and form. There's a wonderful elegance to your work, structurally. Do you think that there are a limitless number of forms? Or, as writers, do we tend to recycle structures?

I certainly don't feel myself to be inventing structures when I'm writing stories. Very often you're given the gift of a great idea. It just comes from somewhere. Then the struggle is to find a form, a voice, a style that best serves that idea. My sense is that there are enough structures out there already to serve most of the stories I want to tell. There's an argument that says if you have something very original you want to say, then you should generate a very original voice or form or style with which to tell it. I think that's true, but I also think that storytelling has been around a long time. It's about communication. I don't want to invent a new language to communicate with you. I want to use the language that we know. Issues of form are part of that language.

So do form and structure operate best when they're invisible?

For me that's true. As a reader, when I see form and structure fronted in the course of the story, I become very conscious of the writer. In some instances I think it's useful to be aware of who's telling you the story because it can lend itself to interesting effects. But I don't want it to be there in most of the stories I come across—it feels as though it's an indication of some “slip-page” on the part of the author. I want to pay attention to the world that's being created, not to the writer who's created that world. **Because form is a language, a means of communication, when you alter it radically, you may very well have created a new and original form, but you run the risk that no one will be able to understand the “grammar.”** Like with language, we don't create new words so much as combine the existing ones in fresh, hopefully exciting new ways. So I think it's possible to approach form in that fashion. It doesn't have to be a straightjacket. There's a bit of wiggle room with the way in which we combine certain ideas or forms or structures. And I think that that can provide some amount of novelty, but also some comprehensible and recognizable novelty. ■

MAILE MELOY, interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:

In addition to your writing being exceptionally powerful in its concision, you have a great technical gift for plotting and pacing. Can you take your story “Red from Green” (which first appeared in the New Yorker) and explain why you chose not to resolve the story within the envelope of the central action—fifteen-year-old Sam Turner's awkward rafting trip with her attorney father and a client—and instead pushed the action ahead by many months to end at the east coast boarding school Sam has left Montana to attend?

I wanted Sam to have time—for the consequences of her decision to leave home to have settled in, and for her understanding of what happened to have deepened, and taken on context. I needed her to grow up a little, before the story could end.

On the flip side of “Red from Green,” the action in “The Girlfriend”—where a father painfully questions the girlfriend of a boy who murdered his daughter—you have compressed the entire story into a very short span of time (with some flashbacks) and in one location (a hotel room). Why did you use this technique here rather than, say, jump ahead at the end of the story and show the father reflecting back on the confrontation in the hotel?

I wanted him to discover what he discovers about his daughter's death in the course of the story. If he were reflecting back, then the story would begin with him already knowing everything. I wanted him to come to the information as the reader does. As a reader, you think it's one kind of story, and then it's another—and in a way, that's true for him, too. ■

SABINA MURRAY, interviewed by Leslie McGrath:

“Paradise” is a marvel of elements of craft, specifically shifts in tone and the use of repetition. Would you talk about the choices you made and how they served your purposes?

I don't use repetition much. There's little need in fiction. But this story is concerned with individual memory and communal memory and the notion that we are moved by tragedy that affects indirectly. And there's a sort of drumbeat that moves through the story. I had more of a traditional narrative when I started writing the piece, but the story seemed false and what was necessary was what *created the need* to write about Jim Jones: that seemed true. This story is scaffolding with a few scenes thrown in to give a sense of what the story I might write might be. I left it like this because it most closely replicated my fear as a child and my fear as an adult. Not many things scare me. Jim Jones does. That's all the story needed to say and I found that incantatory prose did it best. ■

LYNNE TILLMAN, interviewed by Brian Gresko:

Years ago the *Village Voice* asked me who was my greatest influence and I wrote about listening to Ray Charles when I was eight. His range, repetition, intonation, and rhythm were really important to me. I would dance and sing along. You can't get different voices on the page without paying attention to rhythm. ■

K.L. COOK, interviewed by Lucrecia Guerrero:

Your novel The Girl from Charnelle is structured into four parts, and each part begins with a section that returns to the issue of the mysterious mother. Why choose this structure, and at what point did you decide to go with this structure?

In my original structure, the four 1958 sections concerning the disappear-

ance of the mother happened chronologically and appeared first in the novel, as an extended prologue. But as I continued to write and revise, I understood that the central narrative question was this: Would Laura, like her mother and sister before her, leave Charnelle, and if so, under what conditions? Once this became clear to me, I thought about the chapters concerning the mother differently, and I decided to use them as prologues to the different sections, so that the reader, like Laura, would keep looping back to this central mystery. After I made that decision, I felt liberated to deepen the thematic connections between the 1960 chapters in each section and the preceding 1958 chapter. For instance, part three of the novel is called “Careful,” and begins with the harrowing story of the crazy family dog, Greta. The chapters that follow are full of emotional trapdoors and dangers for Laura, and deliberately echo the dangers in the Greta chapter.

Whenever you write a book, you are searching, I believe, for the invisible design. Sometimes you know it from the beginning. Sometimes it reveals itself as you’re writing. Sometimes it only reveals itself in revision. The goal, though, is to find the design that reinforces the most pressing thematic and dramatic intentions. ■

DEBRA MONROE, *interviewed by Victoria Barrett:*

I think there are readers who want more action and suspense, and there are readers who want more contemplation. You can surely go too far in either direction: a hyperactive set of characters without motives, or endless stream of consciousness. Ideally, a story has both. What place on the spectrum, what balance between action and contemplation, is right for you as a reader is a matter of personal preference. ■

MARY GAITSKILL, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

BookForum said, “Veronica is a story that is dismantled into existence, as if the reader were examining a skeleton, bone by bone, without knowing what it was, how it connected, with only the vaguest sense of how it related to the human body.” How did you arrive at the elusive, associative structure for the narrative?

It was very hard. It was intuitive. I knew I wanted to blend the different time frames. I didn’t want to divide the story into different sections with the past, the far past, and then the present where she’s older. I wanted to

blend them together. When people think deeply about anything, their minds dismantle time and see things together, and I wanted to capture that feeling where things are happening all at once.

It's layer upon layer.

Yes, and the layers are shifting and changing places.

Did you have to pay specific attention to the transitions so that readers would know where they were?

Sometimes that happened naturally, and the line breaks were helpful. But sometimes I used words or images as cues; I'd repeat a certain word, but use it in a different context. Say, in the present I'd have Alison opening a metaphorical door with an image or thought, and then in the line break she'd be in the past literally opening a door. I could create a subliminal connection that way.

This is not a book that I thought would do well. I thought people would lose patience with the language and the moving back and forth in time.

What about the language did you think would bother people?

I thought people would think it was overly associative, that there was too much emphasis on the language. I thought it would be seen as too dense or metaphorical. ■

CARYL PHILLIPS, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

As a young man, I was very attracted to the form of the Polish writer Tadeusz Konwicki's books. His work, like the work of many Eastern European writers and artists, employed narrative strategies that made sense to me. These were writers, artists, and filmmakers who lived in a world where they never knew what was happening from day to day. It was like a bizarre, surreal dream. One minute they were German. The next minute there were tanks in the street and they were Russian. Within their lifetime, they had no idea how to combat this bizarre series of transformations. That's like being a migrant, basically. One minute you're hot, sitting in the Caribbean, and then the next minute you're cold and sitting in London.

After The Final Passage and A State of Independence, your work took a new direction. The structure of your novels changed drastically. Do the experiments in structure of these later novels have to do with this drifting that you mention?

The structures grew out of the subject matter. To be honest, looking back now, I don't think I would have had the confidence to write books such as *The Nature of Blood* or *Crossing the River* as a first or second novel. With *The Final Passage* and *A State of Independence*, I felt like I had done something that was reasonably conventional in terms of chronology. After that, I didn't want to mimic the form. I wanted to push at the edges of how you tell a story. To find a contentment with an ability to tell a story and then repeat that form, just pour new characters and new plot points and situations into it—it just seemed a little too premature to have found a solution to how to tell a story. I wanted to keep pushing at the boundaries. Luckily, the subject matter that I found myself dealing with kept demanding that I address the issues in the stories with something that was formally more challenging than before. I got a couple of books done, and maybe it was time to spread my wings a bit. But I'm not sure that I would have had the wherewithal or the courage to have done that initially. ■

COLUM McCANN, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

One of the exciting things about your body of work is the different structure of each book. At what stage do you hit on structure?

The story finds the form. I think that's the way you have to let it fall. I have to find the character first. I have to find what he or she wants. That's why I'm proud of *Zoli*. What I like about it is that it's a strong female character, really my very first strong, most central female character. She carries the whole narrative, more or less.

Is it important for you to create a different form or shape for each book?

I never think that the shape will be different. I don't consciously set out and say, "I can't do what I did with *Dancer*." I think the characters and the story find their own form. That's the best way to put it. I also know it's a bit mysterious to say that, but if you're being entirely honest, it will come out the right way. You might chop it up later.

For whatever reason, my books tend to span a certain amount of time. *This Side of Brightness* spans from the 1920s to 1990. *Dancer* spans from the 1940s all the way up to 1990. *Zoli* spans from the 1930s to 2003. There



is a certain amount of uniformity. One of the things I'm actually thinking about now is a tiny moment in New York history. If I ever get the chance to write it, it will be interesting to see how it's possible to stretch one moment rather than talk about a huge arc of years. It's something that Peter Carey does really beautifully. You get that moment, and it's like an accordion. ■

RUTH OZEKI, interviewed by *Kyoko Amano*:

As far as letters go, very often they are convenient because they allow you to fast-forward, and in fact a lot of this stuff is convenient because it allows you to compress information and fast-forward through time. So, for example, the letters sent back and forth between Yumi and her mother [in *All Over Creation*] allowed me to fast-forward through Yumi's life from the age of fourteen to thirty or forty or something like that.

Twenty or twenty-five years that's just compressed in multiple letters.

It's sort of like that filmic device where the calendar pages go flying off. I mean you can think of it like that, too. **It's a way of really short-cutting through time without summarizing. Summary would feel very clunky and unsatisfactory.** ■

D.B.C. PIERRE, interviewed by *Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais*:

You said you have the idea for your third novel. Have you begun writing it?

I've got a hundred pages of notes that I've winged along the way. It's the first novel that's been fully formed in my mind, and I don't think that I'll have to explore because this is a nicely structured clock full of explosives.

Was it on your original list of ideas?

Yes. It's grown since then. I know exactly what I want to do now. It will be nice and almost mathematically crafted with a constant tension. You'll quickly see that it's going to be hardcore and that it's not going to relent. It's just going to climb and climb, and at the end you'll wonder if you've fallen. That's the feeling I want, anyway. ■

DAVID LEAVITT, interviewed by *Kevin Rabalais*:

What's an example of a story you put away and then, years later, resumed?

Years ago, in the collection *A Place I've Never Been*, I published a very short story called “Gravity.” This story had originally been much longer—something like forty pages, which I saved. Many years later, I happened to stumble upon these pages and, upon rereading them, recognized that I could excavate a second short story from them. This story, entitled “Dinners at Six,” was published last year in the *American Scholar*. While “Gravity” focuses on the protagonist’s relationship with his mother, “Dinners at Six” is about his relationship with his father. The names are the same and, if you read the stories back to back, you realize that “Dinners at Six” takes place several years before “Gravity.” In the original, forty-page version of “Gravity,” the section that comprises “Dinners at Six” was a flashback. However, the stories function independently. ■

TIM GAUTREUX,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Your stories often take the reader through an event that changes a character’s life, usually within the first paragraph.

The purpose of telling a story is to get people involved. Why would you not want to get a reader’s attention? If you start to tell a joke, would you start with five sentences of explanation? No. You begin by saying, “A Jew and an Arab got onto a streetcar.” There’s an immediate conflict there. A joke is the archetype of all human entertainment. Like the joke, the basic story structure is composed of initiation of conflict and then the development of that, called rising action, which leads to either a climax or an epiphany, and, last, there is a falling action. That structure is not just peculiar to the short story. It is a natural organic thing the human mind craves.

People who experiment with the short story often turn out things that are hard to read, and it’s because they experiment with the wrong thing. They can experiment with point of view, with the time period, setting. But they choose to fool with the one thing that will trip them up and ruin the story, and that is basic narrative structure. They will do something like Washington Irving does in “Rip Van Winkle,” start out with eight hundred fifty words of description of the Hudson River Valley. I’ve had to beat students with a stick to read “Rip Van Winkle.” They say it’s boring, and they are absolutely right. That story is put together like a Yugo. ■

LEE SMITH, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

Where did you get the idea that Ivy's story [Fair and Tender Ladies] should emerge through letters?

I had been trying for a long time to think how to cover the span of a woman's whole life without writing a book that was 1600 pages long!

I love to go to yard sales, and I went to this one in Greensboro where three mean sisters were selling everything that had been in their mother's house when she died. They were selling everything she owned—her Tupperware and china and glasses and clothing, and this box of letters. It turned out their mother had saved all the letters that her daughters and sisters—especially her sisters—had written her over her whole life, and she had filed them for all those years.

I said, "Are you going to sell these letters? Don't you want to read them?" And they said, "Uh-uh." So I bought them. I just thought it was horrible that nobody would read them after she had saved them her whole life.

I went home and read them, and while none of them was particularly literary, the thing that struck me was this incredible sense of fullness and wholeness of that woman's life, and her sisters' lives. And there was my answer: that maybe letters would be a good way to cover a huge span of time. Because you can have one letter, and three years later another letter can allude to all that happened in between. ■

WILLIAM LUYAAS, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

What is it like "building" a collection? How does a person decide what stories will be in a collection?

I think that stories in a collection ideally will share something in common. In my first collection, I included stories in which ordinary characters confront trauma or loss and find in it opportunities for survival, as Gabriel García Márquez puts it. So the stories are related thematically. There is also a breeze of the apocalyptic blowing through many of the works. This breeze becomes a gale-force wind in the second collection, wherein the stories are linked, with characters, settings and situations repeated. I suppose the novelist in me finds it easier to compose stories that, while standing on their own, keep returning to the same narrative terrain. ■

MELANIE RAE THON,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

My approach to the stories in *First, Body* emerged from the lives and voices of the characters. These people are not in possession of their stories in the same way that Lizzie Macon is in possession of *Meteors in August*. Lizzie is making a deliberate effort to tell her story coherently: she has an investment in trying to move chronologically. It's a way for her to control her family history—or to imagine she can contain and understand her sister's disappearance. The characters in *First, Body* don't know or experience their own histories in that way. Their memories erupt; the past splinters the present. In "Little White Sister," Jimmy's memories are cyclical. By the time I finished that story, I was sitting in a room by myself in Vermont chanting the story backward and forward. I worked in eighteen-hour stretches. The story has internal logic, an organic movement, but Jimmy spins through many memories in order to explain to himself why he fails to help a woman in trouble. **In our memories, some brief events become vast and timeless while entire years of our lives shrink to seconds; events that happened five months in the past fuse with those that happened two decades ago because there is some mysterious connection through image or sensation or emotion. ■**

MYLA GOLDBERG, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

You have notes in the margins [of Wickett's Remedy] that are comments from the dead, literally expanding the boundaries of the text both in form and meaning.

One of my favorite books is Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. It looks like an annotated epic poem, and it turns out that that novel actually lies in the annotations. I liked the idea of having extra text that influenced the book, and I wanted to emulate that somewhere, someday, sometime. I realized that this was a book about the unreliability of memory, and the annotations started out as footnotes correcting things that were said in the main text. They evolved into voices, and then a chorus of voices, and then a chorus of voices that ran down the page that were actively involved with the story as you were reading it rather than in their own little section at the bottom of the page. It's an organic outgrowth of the fact that this is about the fallibility of memory.

And it throws into question the narrator's reliability.

Which is a larger point about the reliability of anybody's thoughts and memories.

All of these experiments with form bring us back to earlier in our conversation when you were talking about form and language. In Wickett's Remedy you were able to stretch out and expand into new forms. Were there things you hoped to incorporate or experiments that didn't work out?

There were all sorts of abandoned children along the way. I did so much research reading medical textbooks about how the flu virus replicates. I wanted to write the first-person perspective of the virus entering a body and replicating and spreading, but that didn't go anywhere. I was going to incorporate the modern-day search to try to figure out the virus and how it works, but that didn't work.

Your story tells you what stays in. That's the primary challenge when you're working with unusual structures. Sometimes when you're working with these things, you get a great idea for some new structure you like and then you try to come up with a story that you can use with that structure—that never, ever, ever works. You have to let your story tell you how it wants to be told. Almost every story can be told conventionally and work just fine, but almost every story also has a non-traditional way to be told, but it has to tell you what that is and you have to follow it. You can't come in with a preconceived idea or it's going to feel forced. ■

CARYL PHILLIPS, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais*:

How does structure develop for you?

It grows organically. I always ask myself, "What is this book going to look like? What is the shape of it going to be?" I have an idea of what that shape will be, but I never really know until I start. A very concrete example of this comes from the book I'm writing now. To all purposes, it's comprised of three essays. The central essay is about eighty pages long. It's based on the life of a boxer who lived and died in Britain in the mid-twentieth century. I first came across his story twenty years ago and have spent a long time thinking about him. I finished the essay, and then about four weeks ago I realized that the place he said he was always happiest is a holiday resort in north Wales that he owned for a short time. I knew instinctively that I had to go there. I didn't want to have to go there. I was busy with other things. But I knew I had to write something about it. I didn't know if the trip there

would produce just a few lines of color in the piece or if it would spawn ten more pages, but I went there instinctively. While I was there, I realized that the boxer had three daughters who are still alive. I knew that I had to interview them. That's the real story. Now, the book has been held up because next week I'm going to fly to London and interview them in the hope that it will provide a deepening of the story.

This is pretty much how my fiction goes, as well. My plan with the essay was to write eighty or ninety pages about this boxer's life. But in the writing, you begin to uncover new ideas. Even in nonfiction, the same thing happens. The form of the essay changes. I become restless. I begin to just sense the form. Either you submit to this instinct to further develop and further refine the form, or you stick to your original idea and work within certain parameters. In the case of *Crossing the River*, *The Nature of Blood*, and several other of my novels, I began to trust my instinct and submit to it. In other words, if I discover something in the journey, then I'm prepared to tear up the original template and follow to see where it leads. **With the development from my first novels to the later works, the one thing I learned in that journey is not to be afraid to follow your instinct.** And you must make the reader follow you. In my earlier books, I had a much more conservative sense that I must serve the reader. After that, I decided that shouldn't be the case. If my instinct tells me that I need to do something, then I follow it.

Each of your books brings its own demands and teaches us how to read them in their own way.

The British writer Margaret Drabble said to me not long ago, "The thing about reading your books is that with each book I learn how to read the next book, because you're teaching me how to read them." I knew she meant it as a compliment because she's a generous, spirited person, but it took me a while to figure out exactly what she meant. At this time last year, I was in Dublin, and Roddy Doyle was introducing me at a reading. He said, "The thing about your books is that they're not easy. Can't you make them easier for us? We want to read them before we go to sleep, but we just can't because we're not going to slide into them. Why are they so hard?" Again, it took me a while to discover what he meant. But yes, he's right. Why are they complex? Why are they so challenging?

Why, do you think?

I think it has to do with that transition that I tried to articulate ear-

lier, realizing at a certain point that I wanted the reader to follow me. I always had a reasonably cogent idea that the books in themselves constitute a body of work. I always figured that if the reader sees the bigger picture it will become clearer. If you follow book by book, maybe they are difficult individually, but based on Drabble's point, if you manage to stumble through one, then perhaps you're not so surprised when you get to another one. From one book to the next, you begin to realize that certain conventions will be ignored and certain counter-conventions are prevalent. ■

DAVID LONG, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Pacing is really critical for the flow of the story. You always get a choice in how you handle a piece of material. You can either give it a full scene, you can summarize it, or you can account for a long patch in somebody's life in just a sentence, if you want: *And things went pretty smoothly for the next three years.* You've covered three years in one sentence. In the next sentence you move to when things are not moving smoothly again. Sometimes, for pacing purposes, you'll decide that a scene needs some air let into it, so, where you've had a long passage of exposition or a long passage of summary, you'll try to zero in on a moment and give two or three little exchanges of dialogue—little half-scenes, you might call them—and then you can go back to what you've been doing. It just breaks it up. It's like when people have been sitting too long and they need to stretch a little bit or they need to see something that's here and now. Scene is always inherently more interesting than exposition. It's more vivid and more immediate, so you want to get into scene as often as you can. ■

ANDRE DUBUS, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

I do something similar to an outline in the notebook I'm writing in. Take *Voices from the Moon*, for instance. Before I started it, I worked it out so it started one morning and ended later that night. I knew the sections would have alternating points of view, and I knew the young boy would control the point of view for every other section, because it's his story. I chose which sections would have which character's point of view. I wouldn't call that an outline, but I guess you could. I just said, "This is where people will be." I make notes in the margin when something comes to me. ■

AMY HEMPEL, interviewed by Debra Levy and Carol Turner:

What prompted you to write something long instead of short?

The first few sentences. I wrote the first few sentences of what I thought was another story, and I could tell immediately that it didn't sound like a story. The pacing early on seemed different. It seemed longer, it seemed bigger. ■

PAUL THEROUX, interviewed by Michael Upchurch:

What I have trouble with is [knowing] how long it's going to take to develop a sequence. I knew, for example, that the beginning of *The Mosquito Coast* was going to be this asparagus farm in Massachusetts. I thought it might be a chapter or two. Well, it turned out to be quite a bit longer than that. I can't remember how long—but a lot.

The first part of *Millroy the Magician*, similarly, I thought the county fair was going to be one chapter—the fair, and then Jilly disappears and ends up in Millroy's trailer, and off they go: the book begins. But, actually, the county fair occupies much more space because, in elaborating the characters and the situation, it usually takes more space than I envisage. I'm very, very bad at imagining the size of a book—pretty good at plotting, pretty good at characterization, I think. It's just that I never know about length. I start a short story and it sometimes becomes a novella. Sometimes it's just a three-page story. With a novel, I know it's going to be a novel. I just don't know how long of a novel it's going to be. ■

GEORGE MAKANA CLARK:

I like to throw everything into a story. Someone tells me there's too much going on in a story, I'll throw in more stuff, because life is complicated and I think a story should be as well. There are so many things that are acting upon us. If you want a simple motivation-action sort of story then you should go into the juvenile-literature section. Life is not that simple. ■

THISBE NISSEN, *interviewed by*
Linda B. Swanson Davies:

I'd started out thinking I was going to write stories about these people, about Roz and Edwin and Miranda, and my goal was to have each chapter [of *The Good People of New York*] stand as a story on its own—but to create a novelistic arc of the whole thing so it wasn't just connected stories. It was Kevin Canty who gave me the words to put on that. He was very interested in opening the porthole for a little bit, interested in a slice of people's lives. He wasn't interested in dramatic arcs and resolution, in these crafty fiction elements. He was really interested in just opening the door for you, for a little while, to look in. That's the way that I conceived of each of these episodes, or stories, or chapters. Let me open the door here a little bit onto these people's lives and show you this phase, you know, show you fifth grade or something. So I was going at it that way, just sort of opening the door at whatever point I felt like I needed to see what they were doing.



Photo: Sandra Dyes

One of the reviewers had mentioned that you omitted important happenings. I didn't experience any loss over those omissions, myself, but it was interesting leaving out the death, the divorce, and something else—

The first sex.

Yes, yes, yes. And so my question is how did you decide what to omit? Maybe instead it's how did you choose what to represent?

Where did I open the door? People do keep commenting on that to me, and I really did not say to myself, I'm going to leave these things out, I'm going to keep you guessing. It really was just me opening doors in little places. I get very frustrated reading books where chapters begin, "She woke up the next day." Just tell us what's important!

But I wasn't conscious of doing it. I knew I was writing an episodic novel, but I was not so conscious of leaving out these major events. For me they *were* in there. Maybe I would have been interested in going through that first fumbling sex, or something, but that scene for me was much more about the part where she runs into the counselor in this sort of sexual position and she's on her way to do something that's so similar but so different. That was that moment that really interested me. I'm not sure I was even

positive if she did have sex with the boy, like it maybe made sense to me a little later on, and I realized, Oh, Miranda's done this before. Miranda knows something.

At some point, I did realize that there are people who aren't going to like this. You know, the people whom it's really offended or who have really felt like, What the hell is this? This isn't a novel—you left out everything! ■

PAM DURBAN, *interviewed by Cheryl Reid:*

I've learned a lot from Chekhov about structure. What's possible in a story. It doesn't have to be some tight progression of actions toward epiphany. It can be much looser than that and still get somewhere and be about something, and hold some kind of shape. ■

BOB SHACOCHIS, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

There was an original vision of the book [*Swimming in the Volcano*] that would have established a thirty-year time frame, and I found it absolutely unmanageable. When I got to, say, year five of working on the book and I got in the middle of the book, it was like its ass just kept ballooning out laterally and getting bigger and bigger. I couldn't move it down the street. It was impossible because everything had to be developed out to keep that thirty-year frame. So I tore that stuff out of there, just let this be in that two-week-plus frame in the first year of the Carter administration. ■

CHRIS OFFUTT, *interviewed by Rob Trucks:*

People have often commented on the structure of the book [*The Same River Twice*]. Let me tell you, that was a result of hundreds of hours of experimenting with chapters and sections and cutting and moving, and at one point I strung up clothespins in my office with pages of manuscript, so I could see everything all at once, so I could see all the lines, and I was utterly enveloped, then, in the pages of the manuscript. ■

AMY HEMPEL, *interviewed by Debra Levy and Carol Turner:*

We've heard you refer to "Tumble Home," the novella in your new book, as

“the long thing.” There’s a certain intimate horror inherent in that description. What’s that about?

I had no intention or desire to write a novel, but I did have fear of novels. I couldn’t bring myself to say the word. It seemed like an impossible thing to do, even a novella. It was too overwhelming, I couldn’t manage it, so I tried to kind of come in sideways, you know, not look at it head-on. And so it became “the long thing.”

Do you mean overwhelming time-wise or psyche-wise?

No, just size-wise. I write very short stories, and I couldn’t imagine how to sustain something beyond fifteen manuscript pages. That was the longest thing I’d written until the novella.

Yet you seem to have found your way. There are a lot of short-short pieces that are woven together.

Well, I’m certainly not the only one to do this, but I think the only way I could conceive of doing something as long as a novella was by breaking it down into manageable portions. Some people would view a novel as breaking down into chapters; even that is too large for me to handle. Because I wrote in these little moments, or vignettes—not in a specific linear form—it made sense to me to just collect moments. It was the unit of construction for me—the vignette. Some of the vignettes are one line long; some of them are a couple of pages. It’s like building a mosaic, or patching together a crazy quilt. Eventually you just trust that these stories are occurring to you for a reason, that they will ultimately cohere and be more than the parts.

Why do you think you see things in terms of moments, instead of the longer view?

I think I know why that is—it’s because I don’t assume I’m here for a long time. I don’t assume that any of us have a long time. I think that’s presumptuous, and I know exactly when I starting thinking this way. It was when I was nineteen and had a serious accident and my life was imperiled for a time—a short time, but still it was, and it really spun me around. Long after I recovered, I no longer took for granted that I had all the time in the world. I would not sit down and think, Well, for the next five years, this is what I hope to be doing. I’m thinking, Well, for the next five minutes, what can I think of, what comes to mind? ■

ANNIE PROULX, interviewed by Michael Upchurch:

In The Shipping News, there are a number of narrative threads that are woven together extraordinarily well, whereas Postcards has a more improvisatory feel. Was The Shipping News the more meticulously planned book?

Because *Postcards* is a road book and because Loyal was a character who wandered at random, I wanted that spacy, random, stumbled-across, maybe-it-happened-maybe-it-didn't feeling in it. I worked hard to get that effect.

In *The Shipping News*, because of the knot theme, I literally wanted to braid together ropes of story. So this is a game for me. I like to have a little puzzle or game in everything I write. I had these little threads and strung them through the whole thing, and tried to come out with some kind of a knot at the end: a stopper knot. And it was great fun to do, to try to pull this off. I had much private amusement working with these thin little bits of stories through the whole thing. ■

DAVID MALOUF, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

How do you rewrite or edit, on the level of the sentence?

The reader is more affected by the music and rhythm of the book than we take account of. Sometimes, I deal with sentences on a musical level. Also, certain ideas belong to the same, long, physical phrase or structure. I like sentences which have their own contradiction—not just qualification—but sentences that may begin in one place and seem to be saying one thing, but they go on to discover quite the opposite. That's the way the world works.

Flaubert said that the last pages of *Madame Bovary* already existed as music before he had words for them. A lot of things in my books come as snapshots, or visions. I'll see a scene or a character doing something, and the images will tell me what's going to happen. In the actual writing, I'm certainly aware of the music of the sentence and paragraph. I frequently put down a notation of long and short stresses for a phrase or an adverb or adjective in a sentence when I can't yet think of the words. I'll know the rhythm, though. ■

LYNN FREED, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

In addition to your novels, short stories, and short shorts, you've published essays in newspapers and magazines.

The danger of doing too much of such work is that one can find one's self writing to the word constraints—a 1,500 or 2,500 word length, for instance. One begins to feel all work in such lengths, such shapes. It can be dangerous. It can get into the rhythm of the blood. ■

SANDRA CISNEROS, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

In the edition of Caramelo I have there is a [song] at the end of the book that doesn't appear in the finished copy.

You are talking about the final chapter, which is a *pilón* chapter. *Pilón* is what the grocer gives you as a little token of thanks. He throws in some extra of whatever it is you bought. Or a toy or candy. Just to say thank you for patronizing her store.

Hmm, the grocers in Boston don't do that.

Well, the Mexicans do. And it's called *pilón*, and it's not a word used in any other country in that sense. It's a Mexican term. In your galley copy, we also had a song. We didn't get the copyright clearance for that song, unfortunately. So we had to drop that lovely title and mush the *pilón* explanation. That's why you don't see it there. Which is too bad because I sure liked that title, "Chile Naughty Bitter Sweet"—but that's a literal translation from one of the lyrics. ■

ANDREA BARRETT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

In many of your stories, and in The Voyage of the Narwhal, you use letters and journal entries to reveal the inner lives of your characters. The journals become the real treasure and consolation of the expedition for Erasmus, especially Dr. Boerhaave's journal. Why did you decide to use journal entries to expose the characters' inner lives? What does the narrative gain from this?

Two things, I think. One is that these forms are utterly characteristic of the time. People kept diaries and journals so often among the upper, educated classes, the traveling classes, that the use of them seemed true to the time. I wanted to make a novel that had somewhat the same shape and intent as a

characteristically 19th-century novel, even though it was also a kind of critique of 19th-century novels, so I employed some of the forms that people employed then. Not only were diaries and journals common, but novels often employed diary and journal entries. Additionally, I like the texture of first-person diary or letter or journal entries juxtaposed to a third-person narrative. It breaks up the narrative and makes for a more interesting texture. It gives some contrast. So it's partly an aesthetic decision as well.

These journal entries also provide information that creates tension in the narrative—information that we could not have if the point of view was limited to the men on the *Narwhal*. For instance, Alexandra reveals the fact that Kane has come back with relics. This information casts a new light on the *Narwhal's* situation, and increases the tension.

Were you aware of getting so much mileage out of the journal entries as you were writing?

Not initially as I was writing, but I was aware as I was revising that it was helping to do those things. I was consciously revising in those directions to let those entries carry some weight. Sometimes I could make a compact journal entry carry the weight of what would've been a lot of exposition in the main part of the narrative. ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, interviewed by Sherry Ellis:

When I look back on it now, I find it amazing that this collection [*The Laws of Evening*] hangs together as coherently as it does. I actually think it hangs together better than if I'd tried to plan it out. I think it's because each story piqued a new interest, which led to the writing of another story, which piqued a different interest, and so on. And that process linked the stories in a truly organic way. ■





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