

## Clyde Edgerton

### Advice on fiction Writing

CAROLINE GORDON, A TEACHER and fiction writer, advised Flannery O'Connor through the mail. O'Connor, in her letters, collected by Sally Fitzgerald in *The Habit of Being* (1979) advised other young writers. Some of that advice, paraphrased here, may help young creative writers as they think about the creative process.

Ignore criticism that doesn't make sense.

Make the reader see the characters at every minute, but do this unobtrusively.

An omniscient narrator using the same language as the characters lowers the tone of the work.

Never do writing exercises. Forget plot; start with a character or anything else you can make come alive. Discover, rather than impose meaning. You may discover a good deal more by not being too clear when you start. You sometimes find a story by messing around with this or that. Once you have finished a first draft, see how you can better bring out what it says.

Read *The Craft of Fiction* by Percy Lubbock and *Understanding Fiction* by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks.

If there is no possibility for change in a character (i.e., a character is hopelessly insane) then there is little reader interest in that character. If heroes were stable, there wouldn't be any story--all good stories are about a character's changing. Sin is interesting; evil is not. Sin grows out of free choice; evil is something else. Characters need to behave as themselves as people, not as abstract representations of some idea or principle which is dear to the writer. Be careful about a tendency to be too omniscient and not let things come through the characters.

Add a character to make another character "come out."

You can write convincingly about a homesick New Yorker if you have never been to New York but have been homesick. A character must behave out of his or her motivations, not the author's. Don't try to be subtle . . . or write for a subtle reader.

Write two hours a day, same time, sitting at the same place, without a view--either write or just sit. Follow your nose. To get a story you might have to approach a vague notion from one direction and then another, until you get an entrance. Sit at your machine.

In a short story, write for a single effect and end on what is most important. At the end of a story gain some altitude and get a larger view. You shouldn't appear to be making a point. The meaning of a story must be in its muscle.

Use dialect lightly--suggest. Get the person right.

"A word stands for something else and is used for a purpose and if you play around with them irrespective of what they are supposed to do, your writing will become literary in the worse sense."

A novel or short story says something that can be said in no other way. A summary or an abstraction will not give you the same thing.

"The less self-conscious you are about what you are about, the better in a way, that is to say technically. You have to get it in the blood, not in the head."

"My business is to write and not talk about it."

Writers seeking the secrets to good writing, might keep in mind O'Connor's statement from *Mystery and Manners* (1969): "My own approach to literary problems is very like the one Dr. Johnson's blind housekeeper used when she poured tea--she put her finger inside the cup."

One final--delicate-yet-crucial--requirement for writing fiction: "Perhaps you [a correspondent] are able to see things in these stories that I can't see because if I did see I would be too frightened to write them. I have always insisted that there is a fine grain of stupidity required in the fiction writer."

See also Sally Fitzgerald, ed., *Georgia Review*, vol. XXXIII, no. 4, letter from Caroline Gordon to Flannery O'Connor (1979); E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927); Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* (1987); Andre Marquois, *The Art of Writing* (1962); Louis Rubin, *The Teller in the Tale*, (1967); Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story* (1978)

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## Exercises

1. WRITE A PARAGRAPH DESCRIBING SOMEONE you dislike. Now write a paragraph from that person's point of view about anything. Next write a short fictional scene (omniscient point of view) about a fictional character based on the real person you dislike. Now write the same scene from the character's point of view. Discuss what you have learned about writing from the point of view of an unlikable character.

2. Observe couples eating in a restaurant. Decide which couples are married and which are not. Describe the nonverbal communication, movements, etc. of a married couple and of a not-married couple. Read your description to another person and see if they can guess whether or not the couple being described is married. Discuss how non-verbal communication constitutes action in a story--how it furthers plot, defines relationships between people, etc.

3. Instead of writing 1 - 10 down the left side of a piece of paper, start with the year you were born and under it write the next year--up until the present. Circle the ten or twelve most memorable years. Beside the circled years write down the most memorable event or two in that year. Now decide if you have uncovered material for fiction (or for a character in a story) that you previously had not thought about.

4. Think of any event that happened to you before you were ten years old. Write a sentence describing that event. Now write the following, "What if:" Under "What if:" write fifteen possible plot lines that would follow the event. See if you have new material for a new or old story.

5. Think of your last argument with a loved one. Find and describe the fear which lay beneath your anger. Write from the point of view of the other person (s) in the argument. Switch from real life to fiction and have the "other character" (originally you) say out loud the fear which you wrote down above. See if you can get a story or a scene in a story out of what you are doing.



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