

Going Short

Some authors simply prefer compact storytelling over the novel's wordy road



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I'm a writer, an author. A pretty good one, I've been told. And because of that, I've also been told that I need to try to write a Great American Novel. You know, a novel that is always a weighty, lengthy tome. I'm supposed to produce my version of Carl Sandburg's *Remembrance Rock* or Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.

But I have no desire to spend a thousand-plus pages telling a story. Why would I, when I can do it so well, if not better, in 8,000 words or less?

Potential literary agents and publishers always tell me: Writers first produce one or two successful novels. Only then can I even consider short stories, and even then at my own peril. Intense incredulity always accompanies these explanations. After all, don't authors want to write novels?

I don't. I like to write short stories. It's what I enjoy. It is my passion. It has nothing to do some inability to construct characters or plot, or to tell stories in great detail or be descriptive, or any technical or creative shortcomings. I can "go long" when I write—ask any of my editors. But I enjoy writing short stories best.

My first complete work of fiction was a 4,268-word piece I wrote in seventh grade. It was autobiographical and took its cues from O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." My "The Gift Exchange" centered on a gift exchange taking place in a junior high-school classroom at Christmas. The main character (me) wanted to draw the name of a particular boy she liked, and went through numerous complicated machinations to acquire his name, so she could have an excuse to buy him a Christmas present. Unbeknownst to her, he was also going to great lengths to get *her* name so he could buy her a present. But publicly, the two were sworn enemies. My

English teacher entered the story into a statewide writing contest. It won first prize. From then on I dedicated myself to writing short stories.

I began reading one of the Holy Grails of short-story publishing, *The New Yorker* at 16. I was immediately hooked. Whenever I envisioned my writing career, repeated appearances in *The New Yorker* were always a part of it. In fact, my favorite piece of fiction is a short story *The New Yorker* published in 1948, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." I love everything about it (warning: spoilers follow). I love the calm way it opens, with a group of villagers preparing for what seems a harmless ritual. You get the sense that this ritual is something the villagers enjoy, that the activities bond and unify the group and provide a sense of order. The tension builds stealthily and artfully as you realize what winning the "lottery" entails. Jackson uses symbolism and hidden meaning along the way and, best of all, does it in 2,924 words.

But *The New Yorker* and similar publications featuring short stories grow more and more scarce, and those still around haven't been open to submissions in ages. That leaves writers like me a handful of options: a few writing contests mostly run by university presses, some small independent presses and journals, the occasional anthology, and self publishing.

Maybe the smart short fiction writers went to Hollywood. When I think about compressed storytelling now, I think of television sit-coms, where a beginning, middle, and end occur in 30 minutes, including commercials. I sometimes wonder if screenplay writing might be more lucrative. I often have imagined some story of mine becoming a movie like *Brokeback Mountain*, based on Annie Proulx's incredible short story that was faithfully and movingly brought to life by screenwriters Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry. So while it is possible that my single-minded focus on books kept me from making more money as a writer, I have taken my penchant for "short hand" to some interesting genres as a writer. Erotica is one of them.

Short stories are the norm in erotic fiction. So, along with the other types of stories I write, I write erotic stories. It is often easier to find paying markets for erotica. But it isn't for everyone; most writers I've talked to feel erotica is an even more bastardized writing genre than short fiction, so they aren't usually willing to add that stigma to their burdens. As I experienced, though, once you begin selling erotic fiction, you quickly become an "erotica writer" even if you write other things.

Ultimately, I don't care, because it is still short-story writing. So whether it is philosophical, metaphysical, or sexual, the point for me is always that it takes place in fewer than 8,000 words.

The short form, though, remains a difficult one to market, for both publishers and readers. I have heard from many readers that it takes longer to read good short-story collections. In a 2007 *Washington Post* article, highly acclaimed short-story writer Deborah Eisenberg noted that "[a]ny good story is going to be compressed and very, very layered." So when reading a short-story anthology, as soon as you become comfortable with the characters and the action, it ends and you have to build a new relationship with new characters. In the same article, Ann Close, editor at Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group explains: "You have to enter again into every story."

Maybe it is as simple as supply and demand-if it doesn't sell, publishing houses won't supply it. Short stories don't move units, no matter how good they are or who writes them. I hear this over

and over from the publishing professionals I approach. Well-known writers don't do well in short fiction, so a nobody like me can forget it. I always make sure I am personally referred to the agent/editor/publisher in question by another professional already doing business successfully with them, and perhaps because of this I get more feedback than most. But what feedback do I get? "I need a novel," "I can't sell this," "You write well, but maybe you should teach." In one case when I was pitching an erotica anthology, I got "What's this prosaic crap? Who do you think you are, Anaïs Nin?"

Maybe it is the stories themselves. Stephen King, who has edited the 2007 volume of *The Best American Short Stories*, wrote in a September 2007 *New York Times* piece that he has read "scores of stories that felt . . . airless, somehow, and self-referring. These stories felt show-offy rather than entertaining, self-important rather than interesting, guarded and self-conscious rather than gloriously open." For him, such a tone makes such stories feel like they're "written for editors and teachers rather than for readers." Those short stories start to seem too high brow to entertain the masses, and take on the qualities that make opera, ballet, classical music, and the like seem not particularly fun or accessible to the average person.

No matter how you slice it, the short-story road doesn't appear to lead to a happily ever after for those who want to travel it. The very term "short story" is even old school now-"flash fiction" is the new, happening name.

As for me, I do try to write a novel periodically. I don't want to limit myself. Plus, I just want to see if I can do it. One day, I may find the rest of the words I need to write that Great American Novel-or at least the 50,000-80,000 words required to be in the novel ballpark. But until then, my 8,000 words (or fewer) musings are great, entertaining storytelling. They feature top-notch writing. They make me happy. And on rare occasions, they pay a bill or two. Well, one at least. A really tiny one.