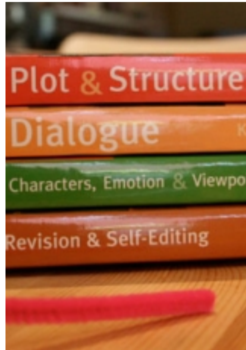

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Structure, Perspective, Editing: A Writer's Favorite Books on Craft

By Thomas Dodson

There is certainly no shortage of books designed to aid and inspire the writer of fiction. There are books about process and others about editing and publishing the final draft, gatherings of exercises and prompts, memoires of the writing life, and psycho-spiritual pep talks for the writer who finds himself in a rut. I've collected (and benefitted from) many such books, but there are a handful I return to again and again for their insights on specific elements of fiction craft—narrative structure, point of view, characterization, or dialogue mechanics. There are four in particular that I can recommend to any writer of fiction looking to hone her storytelling skills.

The first of these, and the most original in form, is Madison Smartt Bell's *Narrative Design*. Aside from its introductory and closing remarks and two brief essays on different approaches to story structure, *Narrative Design* consists entirely of twelve stories by a variety of writers along with Bell's meticulous commentary. The stories in the first half of the book make use of linear structure, the kind of narratives that fit more or less into a Freitag triangle—that illustration you've no doubt seen in a textbook or drawn on a whiteboard with a vertical axis of time, a horizontal axis of plot and the line of the story ascending from rising action to climax and then descending to its conclusion.

The other six stories follow what Bell terms a "modular design." In these narratives (more common in experimental writing), a unified structure is achieved not through the chronological advance of causally-connected events, but by the assemblage of story elements into some kind of meaningful pattern. In a modular design, elements of the story generate meaning through their arrangement, the relationships they have to one another.

Take the structure of Donald Barthelme's story "The School," for example, in which a series of discrete and seemingly unrelated tragedies are visited upon a group of schoolchildren. The individual events are sad, but the total effect is comic; and the story, when taken as a whole, evokes timeless questions of mortality and sexuality, death and renewal. The first season of the HBO drama *West World*, with its multiple, intersecting timelines exploring the nature of memory and identity, provides a contemporary example of modular design at work.

For those less keen on abstracting stories into triangles and networks, Bell's copious endnotes provide a methodical, nearly line-by-line reading of each story. Reading Bell's notes on these stories (and the summaries he provides at the end of each) is not unlike watching a magician as he reveals the mechanics of his tricks—the means by which each illusion was actually pulled off.

James Wood's *How Fiction Works* has a different focus, offering the best discussion of point of view I've ever encountered. Wood is especially interested in that mode of modern storytelling that eschews the first person, yet stays close to the consciousness of a single character, what in fiction workshops is often called "third person limited" or "close third person," and which Wood refers to as "free indirect style."

This style, Wood argues, allows a close psychic proximity to the narrating character but also frees the writer to transcend the limitations of that character: "thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character's eyes and language but also

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It's not uncommon in a workshop setting for a reader to suggest that a narrator's turn of phrase or choice of metaphor seems to come from the author rather than the narrating character—"Would he she really think that? Would he even know that word?" Sometimes these comments originate from a reader's unacknowledged prejudice (poor, rural, and working class people, for example, often know a lot more words than more affluent readers think they do), but other times the writer has simply overloaded the narrator with her own ways of thinking and speaking.

A point to be drawn from Wood is that the approach to this tension is not to banish the writer's understanding and vocabulary from the text spoken by the narrator (if this were even possible). The intrusion of the author on the narrative voice is not, Wood suggests, a problem to be solved, but rather an opportunity to be exploited for literary effect.

Mary Gaitskill's story "An Old Virgin" provides an example of just this "free indirect style." The narrator, Laura, is a more or less ordinary person, a nurse who works in a clinic in Houston. In the course of her work she encounters a middle-aged woman who reports that she has never had sex. Laura is fascinated by this and tries to imagine what it might be like to be a forty-year-old virgin:

She imagined walking through the supermarket, encased in an invisible membrane that was fluid but also impenetrable, her eyes wide and staring like a doll's. Then she imagined virginity like a strong muscle between her legs, making all her other muscles strong, making everything in her extra alive, all the way up through her brain and bones.

This passage displays Gaitskill's talent for combining the visceral ("a strong muscle between her legs") and the extravagantly creepy ("her eyes wide and staring like a doll's"). But the simile is entirely appropriate for a nurse who knows quite a bit about muscles, brains, and bones. Elsewhere in the story, the narrator makes other, spookier observations that seem to belong more to Gaitskill: "In her pointy shoes, her feet were like little hooves." Or when Laura says of herself:

Even when she was in public, talking to people or driving through traffic, or carrying forms and charts and samples in the halls of the clinic, she dimly sensed the greater part of herself inside out, like a bug tunneling in the earth with its tiny sensate legs. All through the earth was the dull roar of unknown life-forms. She could not see it or hear it as she might see and hear with her human eyes and ears, but she could feel it with her fragile insect legs.

With this description of a world teeming with "unknown" and perhaps unknowable alien creatures detected through human limbs transformed into the "sensate legs" of an insect, we appear to have ventured beyond what we might expect from Laura's perceptions and language and into the consciousness of someone like Franz Kafka or David Lynch—or, more to the point, Mary Gaitskill. This mixing of the author's insights and imagery with those more closely rooted in the experience of the character, however, deepens rather than disrupts the narration of Gaitskill's story.

Wood credits Gustave Flaubert with the invention of "free indirect style," and drawing from stories by Jane Austen, Anton Chekhov, Henry James, and James Joyce, provides a number of examples of writers performing the rhetorical balancing act between the consciousness of the narrator and that of the author. Wood is an erudite critic, but *How Fiction Works* is not all literary history and narrative theory. Wood also offers practical advice about how to make best use of the style. He suggests, for example, dispensing with such phrases as "he thought" in close third person and just stating the point-of-view character's perceptions as if they were reality.

Whereas Wood's study draws its examples almost exclusively from the heavy-hitters of the novelistic tradition, David Corbett's *The Art of Character: Creating Memorable Characters for Fiction, Film, and TV*, offers illustrations that will be familiar to those of us who haven't read the entirety of the Western canon. Corbett's book draws examples of superb characterization not just from *Macbeth* and *The Great Gatsby*, but also from classic films such as *The Godfather* and popular television dramas like *Breaking Bad*.

The cornerstone of Corbett's method for creating and deepening characters is to write scenes dramatizing important moments in those characters' lives—lots of scenes, many more than will appear in the finished story or novel. "Character biographies created from scenes," Corbett argues, "are intrinsically more useful than

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provide them with the desires, frustrations, vulnerability, secrets, and contradictions that will make them truly memorable.

Every first draft—no matter how elegant in its construction, artful in its use of perspective, or deft in its characterizations—is going to need some revision and editing. In their book *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print*, editors Renni Browne and Dave King have provided an invaluable guide to perfecting those second and subsequent drafts. In chapters on point of view, dialogue, proportion, and voice, the authors offer practical advice about the techniques and mechanics of fiction writing.

Brown and King have strong opinions about what makes good prose, and they don't hesitate to offer forceful recommendations. In dialogue, for example, they advocate using only the unadorned "said" for speaker attributions and eliminating any "-ly" adverb that modifies "said." The word "said," they argue, is "an almost purely mechanical device—more like a punctuation mark than a verb. It's absolutely transparent, which makes it graceful and elegant." *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* is full of such straight talk, supplemented with illustrative examples and exercises for putting the authors' prescriptions into practice.

There are, of course, many more wonderful books on the craft of fiction writing, the *Art of*... series, for example, edited by Charles Baxter. In each book, a writer focuses on a single craft issue: Joan Silber on the art of time (including advice on how to how to use specific details to enliven a summary that condenses many years), Stacey D'Erasmo on the art of intimacy (examining the way in which human connection can dislocate the self and defamiliarize the world), and Baxter himself on subtext ("that subterranean realm with its overcharged psychological materials … the implied, the half-visible, the unspoken"). The books are brief, each volume a pocket-sized epiphany, just the right size to bring with you to a favorite bar or coffee shop.

Writing can be difficult and discouraging work, but it's made a little easier with the help of thoughtful and generous writers like Bell, Wood, Corbett, and others, willing to share what they know about the craft of fiction with the rest of us.

Thomas Dodson is a Boston-based writer, designer, and librarian whose stories have appeared in Beloit Fiction Journal, Chicago Quarterly Review, Consequence Magazine,and elsewhere. He founded the journal Printer's Devil Review in 2010 and served as its editor and designer for five years. He was also the executive editor of the Best Indie Lit New England series.

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