

Sacks of Words

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In his book Fiction and the Figures of Life, William Gass tells us characters are merely “sacks of words.” Yes, they are, but it’s we writers who fill the sacks. The question is, how do we do it?

I know one very good writer who begins by listing all the qualities of her characters on a legal pad. These may be things characters say or do or even the clothes they wear—details down to their shoe sizes in some cases. That’s a start, and for some it can work.

Others begin with a specific person in mind. I’ve done this a time or two. I can show you in my high school yearbook the very guy who became my character Weasel in two stories from my first book, Early Yet. Still, I would say this to you and to him were he ever to catch the slight resemblance that character now has to the man himself: once a character is set down on the page and started off into a narrative, that character takes on a life of his own.

So how about that sack? There must be at minimum a little embryonic sack to get our story moving, whether it be a character built from a list on a legal pad or a character less fully formed tossed into some on-going action. But I would suggest we can’t just fill our sack any way we please if we are to be honest writers and true to our characters. Because even though we, little Doctor Frankensteins that we are, brought these characters to life, we must now admit we don’t fully control them.

That recognition that we must relinquish control is essential for fiction to be all it can be. Our characters, even those whose shoe size we know, soon enough develop minds of their own. Here’s how this might work: In Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular, Rust Hills suggests we imagine a tree tipped onto its side. Every fork in the tree’s branches represents a fork in the path of the character’s potential action through the ensuing narrative. At each fork, the character must pause, and we must be attentive to the moment. What is the best next action? As we learn more about our character, as we follow (not lead) our character through that action, we learn more about what she or he might do.

We writers can place obstacles in our characters’ paths, but we cannot dictate how they respond to those obstacles if we want our stories to have a ring of truth.

Here’s an easy example: Our character we’ll call Steve is walking down a sidewalk when he spots a wallet. Let’s admit we put that wallet in Steve’s path. But let’s now wait and see what Steve does. Does he give it to a nearby policeman? Does he give it to the policeman only after pocketing the cash inside? Does he help himself to the credit cards and identification of the owner? Or does he take it home and put it on his dresser while he thinks about what to do next?

Steve can only perform one of these acts. But whichever it is, it goes into our sack of words that make Steve Steve. And that action and the words we use to describe it will tell us more about Steve so that his subsequent actions will be informed by that first one. There is, though, this to consider: Should Steve immediately give the wallet to a policeman, we don't have much of a story. The conflict has been too readily defused. As a result, we're often on the lookout for initial actions that will precipitate complicated results. Very often those are the actions that drew us into the story we want to tell in the first place.

Here's a wonderfully terrible situation in "The Children Stay," an Alice Munro short story. A young mother of two is on vacation with her bullying in-laws and her seemingly weak-willed husband. Her new lover, though, has pursued her and calls her from a nearby motel. The young mother goes to him, a choice that should make most attentive readers cringe. This guy is a lightweight, a very nearly empty sack as William Gass would have it, but the young mother goes to him just the same.

For the story to work, we readers must be allowed to share the sense of entrapment the young woman feels with her in-laws in order for us to see her leaving to be both a convincing and a sympathetic event. Through a number of small sniping scenes, Alice Munro has brought her character to this inevitable fork in her story, and has allowed her to make an extreme choice, to take a major action. When our character calls her husband the following morning to announce she's leaving (actually has already left), he finds his spine and says, fine, but "the children stay." She will be allowed little to do with them as they grow. A devastating turn for character and readers alike. The story's power is realized only if that sense of a character acting of her own volition has been allowed to be fully appreciated by the reader, that the character has seemingly acted of her own free will, even if her actions are seen as unwise. Remember: She's a sack of words, and at some point Munro could have made her sack more comfy. Except she couldn't. As harsh as the turns in this story may be, they are the turns that seem plausibly available to the character given her situation with her husband and in-laws.

Rust Hills has a term for this moment when a story closes and a reader feels, if not happy with the outcome, at least satisfied that the story could end no other way. He calls this moment of looking back from the concluding action to the actions that brought the character to this end, "the inevitability of retrospect." Readers need not be happy, but they must feel, even if they feel great regret for the actions that they've read, that the characters could not have reached another outcome.

The measure of successful fiction might be gauged by how well readers are satisfied with the outcome of a narrative. In Jane Austen's Emma, for example, Emma finally recognizes the older Mr. Knightley is the guy for her, and readers should feel, well, it's about time she came to her senses. On the other hand, there's poor Emma Bovary dying slowly and agonizingly after making a poor job of poisoning herself.

Do readers think she had worked herself into such a corner she had no other choice? For Flaubert to succeed, they must.

Lastly, there is Anna Karenina, dead, too, by suicide after throwing herself under the trucks of a railway carriage. A student confessed in my world literature class some years ago that she had wept many tears for Anna. Sacks of words. When filled correctly, they'll do that to you.