

## Owning the Form Frank Soos

If writing a good sonnet requires an inhabitation of form (14 lines of ten syllables with a few variations among the metrical feet), what about those forms that are looser, a little less rule-bound? The short story, for example. Is it possible to take such a form in hand and move it to fresh unusual places?

If we go back to Aristotle, we can find a prescription for writing an effective short story: start as closely as possible to the climactic action, begin with a rising action which will buy some energy to spend on space for flashbacks, hit that climactic mark, then quickly conclude.

This formula will work, but what if that form, energetic as it may be does not really fit your question? What if it is actually disingenuous at bottom? In Richard Ford's The Sportswriter, his narrator Frank Bascombe has given up on literary writing and the short story in particular because "if it is literature's job to tell the truth about these moments [moments when we are fully in an emotion], it usually fails, and it's the writer's fault for falling into such conventions." Frank Bascombe then sites James Joyce's epiphanies as "a good example of falsehood." Think especially of "Araby," a story that went straight to my young heart when I read it as a senior in high school. Or think of Updike's lighter "A&P." These stories traffic in that moment of emotional intensity. But what if those moments seem fewer and less authentic to us as we grow older? What if we outgrow that comfortable form?

In Alice Munro's first volume of stories Dance of the Happy Shades, we can see a woman who becomes a model for me of all the short story can be at a time when she is still driving with her learner's permit in her pocket. While Dance did win Canada's Governor General's Award for Fiction when it came out, the stories are best seen in retrospect as those of a writer teaching herself her craft. So a story like "Day of the Butterfly" makes use of the Joycean method of an older narrator looking ruefully back at an event in her past. "Thanks for the Ride" ends with a mocking line that could be an epiphany if the narrator could only grasp it. And "A Trip to the Coast" is modeled closely on Flannery O'Connor structures seen in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or "Greenleaf."

With the stories in her third book, Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You, Munro begins stepping away from conventionally structured stories and moving toward questions that can't be resolved in a simple epiphany. The title story features a limited third person narrator, Et Desmond. Et is a spinster (yes, I think Munro would feel comfortable with that word being applied to Et), a dress maker who lives with her sister and brother-in-law. She has had a life-long a crush on that brother-in-law apparent to readers but not to herself. And she has a mythic world constructed around the couple. They are Arthur and Guinevere. And if they are, there must be a Lancelot. He appears as her sister's old high school boyfriend come back to town.

With no real evidence, Et chooses to see her sister's death as a suicide, a reprise of a foolish teenage gesture. Her version of events, readers begin to see, is built on the flimsiest scaffolding of facts. That's Munro's point. The story becomes a meditation on how people choose to interpret the world they inhabit. There is no therefore, no epiphany that would capture this moment in one emotional burst. Instead, the reader is offered a provocation: A question of how, rather than a statement of therefore.

Unlike his character Frank Bascombe, Richard Ford does not abandon literary writing for a career as a hack sportswriter. Though his method is different from Munro's, he finds ways to make more emotionally honest structures. In his collection Rock Springs, Ford often sets up stories where young male narrators are caught in emotional situations beyond their immediate comprehension. That's the case in "Great Falls" when a game poaching father takes his son home to a scene where they encounter the mother and her lover in the house. There's simply too much for the boy to take in. After that moment wherein nobody gets shot despite the father's "trying to find out how," the story does not close. Instead the boy is left to puzzle out the events of that night, of the following days, of the life that stretches forward to the time of the telling of the story. For Richard Ford, the continuing ripples of such moments of conflicting emotions, of failed emotions matter much more than a tight conclusion simply arrived at.

The old Aristotelian method has its value. Readers have grown comfortable over the centuries with thrilling feel of rising action, with the surety offered by a tight climactic moment. To walk away from that method requires a different relationship between narrator and reader. Tone in a story such as Munro's "Friend of My Youth" is both intimate and confused:

I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same. The dream stopped, I suppose because it was too transparent in its hopefulness, too easy in its forgiveness.

Here's a narrator taking us into her confidence right away, yet keeping open the hard question she must ask herself. There's also the implicit warning. We're not going to be satisfied with a simple surprise; we're not going to be rewarded by uplifting hope or forgiveness. Instead we're going to go on a hunt with this narrator for a harder to grasp version of her mother and one of her mother's old friends.

A short while ago in rejecting a story of mine, an editor told me he was looking for something "edgier". I guess I don't do edgy, don't exactly hold with edginess as a method. Maybe what I'm looking for is lumpiness, that quality that makes a story a mushy meander, a way to dig in with a narrator and the characters, to sort out their questions in a long-term way, a way, that as with the stories of Alice Munro and Richard Ford, offers not a sharp point but rather a long running sense of wonderment, the long view question of how we live our lives. There is a risk here, of

going against a comfortably established grain, but if our stories want to plumb the messy depths of complex characters, fresh surprising structures must follow. And we must ask readers to learn how to live with these structures.