

Perfect Miniatures

FLASH FICTION DEMANDS that the writer accomplish a great deal in a small space, but what kind of complete narrative can you actually pull off in just a few pages? We've already talked about short pieces that detail only one incident, those that sketch a character, some that are based on letters, and so on. How about if you're wedded to traditional plot and character and don't want to give that up? In that case, you should try working on miniatures. The term *miniatures* in this usage refers to those tiny pictures you occasionally see in art museums: a full portrait of someone, but only 3" × 3". The body is tiny, but with everything in perfect proportion. How did the artist execute such a picture? Did he use a tiny brush?

Once again, representation is key. That's what art equals, anyway, not the thing itself—a dog, a house, an unhappy marriage—but what you see on the canvas or the page: a mournful-looking basset hound, an A-frame cabin, two people in the same bed, sleeping as far apart from each other as they can.

Miniatures intensify the principles of representation. In a story, if you represent a thing by a type, you're taking some large idea or shape, such as justice, and portraying it representationally, such as through a series of court cases. In a miniature, you don't have the time or space

for that kind of development. You've got to move, and fast. You want justice? Give us a court verdict. Trying to portray a friendly town but don't have time for the ice cream truck, the kind-hearted policeman, and the pedestrians who smile and say hello? Give us just a crossing guard helping a kid across the street.

In poetry, this kind of compression may be metonymy, synecdoche's cousin, which uses a related part to represent the whole, as in the familiar saying, "The pen is mightier than the sword," where the pen is obviously "writing," and the sword is a stand-in for warfare—or peaceable means of persuasion as opposed to violence.

You can see how this kind of imagery works: by suggestion rather than full description, by having the reader eke out a phrase or a line into a whole paragraph or page, based on the reader's experience. The question is how one pares down to the essential details.

Let's take a man's body. We could sum him up, from his male-pattern baldness and bullet-shaped head to his beer belly and hammer toes. But instead, think about what you're trying to convey specifically, and leave out all the rest. If he's old-fashioned, give him one of those curving mustaches that you can see in photographs from the Victorian era. Or a cut of clothing that no one wears anymore. If the point is that he's muscular, just give us a shot of his pecs.

The same simplification applies to plot. The guy's unlucky in love not three times, but just once, with the other times hinted at in a sentence to make your point that he's a loser. The sameness of a routine that you'd ordinarily spend a page on, to demonstrate the rote movements, you can outline with a detail and note that it repeats daily. Practice learning how to select what's crucial and omit the rest.

In a sense, a perfect miniature is like those capsule book reviews in 100 words or fewer. Instead of containing an introduction to the author, a framing of the subject, a plot summary, an analysis of the author's technique, and so on, these mini-reviews cut right to the chase (insert better metaphor here). The opening is both a lead-in and the beginning of the plot outline; the next sentence introduces the characters; the third tells us what's at stake and how the book progresses; the fourth

comments on the author's skill; and the fifth pronounces judgment. If pressed, you could probably omit sentences four and five, smuggling in a bit of each into sentences one through three. What's omitted, and why? Note that leaving out certain details heightens others.

EXERCISES

① Below is a five-sentence character. Cut out what you think can be deleted without too much damage to the description. Rewrite it so that it's both tight and evocative.

Charles Henry was a large man, upward of 275 pounds, who made the rickety staircase where he roomed tremble every time he came down from the third floor. He ate prodigiously, over 5,000 calories a day, from eggs and toast and bacon and more eggs and bacon every morning to his late-evening snack of pretzel sticks and cheese dip. But he kept his weight from ballooning to alarming levels by dint of nightly exercise: dressed in a pair of old long johns, pulling on an old rowing machine in the basement, next to the furnace, which seemed to roar encouragingly after every stroke. By day, Charles worked in Denton's, the last surviving furniture store in Greenville, selling sofas and armchairs, tables and cabinets, from nine in the morning to six in the evening. He had a sometime-girlfriend named Maxine, who worked across the square in the First National Bank but who liked to drop in on Charles during her lunch hour and lounge in one of Denton's top-of-the-line sofas with her feet up.

② Now do the same with this plot:

While he was helping a couple pick out a bed, Charles heard a noise from the front of the store, as if something was scraping along the floor. He turned his head to see a scrawny man desperately trying to lug a table out the door. No one else was in the store just then—Ted was on his lunch break—so Charles simply shouted, "You put that back right now, you hear?" But that just had the effect of making the man haul all the harder, till suddenly he had it out the entrance. Charles lumbered after him like a bull in a button-down shirt, but the guy had already

let go of the table and was halfway down the street, looking back at Charles and headed right for an oncoming truck.

READINGS

John Collier: "The Chaser"

Alan Austen, as nervous as a kitten, went up certain dark and creaky stairs in the neighborhood of Pell Street, and peered about for a long time on the dim landing before he found the name he wanted written obscurely on one of the doors.

He pushed open this door, as he had been told to do, and found himself in a tiny room, which contained no furniture but a plain kitchen table, a rocking chair, and an ordinary chair. On one of the dirty buff-colored walls were a couple of shelves, containing in all perhaps a dozen bottles and jars.

An old man sat in the rocking-chair, reading a newspaper. Alan, without a word, handed him the card he had been given. "Sit down, Mr. Austen," said the old man very politely. "I am glad to make your acquaintance."

"Is it true," asked Alan, "that you have a certain mixture that has—er—quite extraordinary effects?"

"My dear sir," replied the old man, "my stock in trade is not very large—I don't deal in laxatives and teething mixtures—but such as it is, it is varied. I think nothing I sell has effects which could be precisely described as ordinary."

"Well, the fact is—" began Alan.

"Here, for example," interrupted the old man, reaching for a bottle from the shelf. "Here is a liquid as colorless as water, almost tasteless, quite imperceptible in coffee, milk, wine, or any other beverage. It is also quite imperceptible to any known method of autopsy."

"Do you mean it is a poison?" cried Alan, very much horrified.

"Call it cleaning fluid if you like," said the old man indifferently. "Lives need cleaning. Call it a spot-remover. 'Out, damned spot!' Eh? 'Out, brief candle!'"

"I want nothing of that sort," said Alan.

"Probably it is just as well," said the old man. "Do you know the price of this? For one teaspoonful, which is sufficient, I ask five thousand dollars. Never less. Not a penny less."

"I hope all your mixtures are not as expensive," said Alan apprehensively.

"Oh, dear, no," said the old man. "It would be no good charging that sort of price for a love-potion, for example. Young people who need a love-potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise they would not need a love-potion."

"I am glad to hear you say so," said Alan.

"I look at it like this," said the old man. "Please a customer with one article, and he will come back when he needs another. Even if it is more costly. He will save up for it, if necessary."

"So," said Alan, "you really do sell love-potions?"

"If I did not sell love-potions," said the old man, reaching for another bottle, "I should not have mentioned the other matter to you. It is only when one is in a position to oblige that one can afford to be so confidential."

"And these potions," said Alan. "They are not just—just—er—"

"Oh, no," said the old man. "Their effects are permanent, and extend far beyond the mere casual impulse. But they include it. Oh, yes they include it. Bountifully. Insistently. Everlastingly."

"Dear me!" said Alan, attempting a look of scientific detachment. "How very interesting!"

"But consider the spiritual side," said the old man.

"I do, indeed," said Alan.

"For indifference," said the old man, "they substitute devotion. For scorn, adoration. Give one tiny measure of this to the young lady—its flavor is imperceptible in orange juice, soup, or cocktails—and however gay and giddy she is, she will change altogether. She will want nothing but solitude and you."

"I can hardly believe it," said Alan. "She is so fond of parties."

"She will not like them any more," said the old man. "She'll be afraid of the pretty girls you may meet."

"She'll actually be jealous?" cried Alan in a rapture. "Of me?"

"Yes, she will want to be everything to you."

"She is, already. Only she doesn't care about it."

"She will, when she has taken this. She will care intensely. You'll be her sole interest in life."

"Wonderful!"

"She'll want to know all you do," said the old man. "All that has happened to you during the day. Every word of it. She'll want to know what you are thinking about, why you smile suddenly, why you are looking sad."

"That is love!" cried Alan.

"Yes," said the old man. "How carefully she'll look after you! She'll never allow you to be tired, to sit in a draft, to neglect your food. If you are an hour late, she'll be terrified. She'll think you are killed, or that some siren has caught you."

"I can hardly imagine Diana like that!" cried Alan, overwhelmed with joy.

"You will not have to use your imagination," said the old man. "And, by the way, since there are always sirens, if by any chance you *should*, later on, slip a little, you need not worry. She will forgive you, in the end. She'll be terribly hurt, of course, but she'll forgive you—in the end."

"That will not happen," said Alan fervently.

"Of course not," said the old man. "But if it does, you need not worry. She'll never divorce you. Oh, no! And, of course, she herself will never give you the least, the very least, grounds for—not divorce, of course—but even uneasiness."

"And how much," said Alan, "how much is this wonderful mixture?"

"It is not as dear," said the old man, "as the spot-remover, as I think we agreed to call it. No. That is five thousand dollars; never a penny less. One has to be older than you are to indulge in that sort of thing. One has to save up for it."

"But the love-potion?" said Alan.

"Oh, that," said the old man, opening the drawer in the kitchen table and taking out a tiny, rather dirty-looking phial. "That is just a dollar."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," said Alan, watching him fill it.

"I like to oblige," said the old man. "Then customers come back, later in life, when they are rather better-off, and want more expensive things. Here you are. You will find it very effective."

"Thank you again," said Alan. "Good-bye."

"*Au revoir*," said the old man.

[1,057 WORDS]

DISCUSSION

As psychologists have noted, love is a power relationship. Change this power imbalance and create a different flash fiction. Or have the old man offer something else.

Jeffrey Whitmore: "Bedtime Story"

"Careful, honey, it's loaded," he said, re-entering the bedroom.

Her back rested against the headboard. "This for your wife?"

"No. Too chancy. I'm hiring a professional."

"How about using me?"

He smirked. "Cute. But who'd be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?"

She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel.

"Your wife."

[54 WORDS]

DISCUSSION

How does distrust create its own plot? Apply the lesson of this story, in a nonfatal way, to the beginning of a relationship.

Intermission: Cutting Down

TIME TO FOCUS ON THE ART OF REDUCTION. You've finished your story, which weighs in at 526 words, 26 too many for the M. M. Memorial Flash Fiction Contest. Or maybe your flash fiction about an archery match seems perfect—until your friend and best reader tells you that all those *thwocks* grow monotonous. Maybe you've done what so many authors in command of powerful effects do: registered the slap and the reaction but then described them, as well. No need to show him blush *and* say he's really embarrassed. Or you just use too many words in too many phrases in various paragraphs composed of too many sentences like this.

No author wants to be accused of padding, but a flash fiction writer really has to make every word count, especially when there's a word count. Consider TMI, Too Much Information, as it applies to how your character gets ready for work. Claiming you included some of that "for the rhythm" isn't a good excuse.

Go ahead, start paring down—but how? You can approach the task in several ways:

- Slashing, in which a whole paragraph may go if it's just unnecessary background. Who really needs to know that Roy wears a hairpiece,

that he puts it on a stand when he goes to bed, that it's his third in three years . . . though these seemed like fun facts at the time you wrote them. In a story that may be no more than a page, that may translate into cutting a sentence here and another there. No need even to let us know that Roy is balding, unless the plot hinges on it.

► Microsurgery, in which you cut individual words.

Delete "the fact." "He couldn't stand the fact that she smoked" becomes "He couldn't stand that she smoked" or, even better, "He couldn't stand her smoking."

Cut expletives. No, not swear words; rather, weak constructions like "it is" and "there are," which begin far too many sentences. Who needs "There was a cat on the table" when "A cat was on the table" serves the purpose better, and "A large cat covered the table" replaces the weak "to be" verb with something more active? Cutting out the expletive in your sentence means that you get directly to the subject and may even force you to rephrase more actively: "It was not a happy time for her" becomes "She hadn't been happy all of April."

Cut dialogue tags. Do you really need that ping-pong game of "he said, she said"? How many replacement verbs have you cooked up for "said"? "Fumed," "sighed," "stated," "pronounced," "averred" . . . Cut "he said" and, in its place, put a short action-verb sentence. That will identify the speaker and build some action. Not

"I don't like you," she said.

but

"I don't like you." She yawned.

That way, you can cut the next two sentences, which were all about how boring she found him.

Cut "very." Not "very bright," but "brilliant." Not "very hungry," but "starving."

Cut adjectives and adverbs whenever possible. Not "brilliant woman," but "genius." Not "yelled angrily," but simply "yelled."

Cut creeping A&B-ism. "I am sick and tired of your constant and never-ending fits and tantrums." Nah. "I'm tired of your tantrums."

Note that cutting away usually strengthens a line of prose rather than weakening it because the emphasis doesn't have to be shared among so many words: the difference between "Go to your room" and "Go!"

Some writers have even developed an entire aesthetic philosophy of cutting. Below are the first two rules from "Imagisme," published in a 1913 issue of the magazine *Poetry*, supposedly by a writer named F. S. Flint, but really cooked up by Ezra Pound and a couple of friends.

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

Pound intended these rules to apply to poetry, but they apply just as well to flash fiction, where a concentrated essence is crucial. Cut the abstractions, such as your two lines about unfair due process, and give us instead a phrase to evoke that concept, a crooked lawyer. Instead of truth, justice, and the American way, give us Superman. William Carlos Williams, a contemporary of Pound's, put it this way in his poem *Pater-son*: "no ideas but in things."

Get rid of words that are there for padding or rhythm or just for the hell of it. If a word doesn't help the story along in plot or characterization or imagery, lose it. Be brutal. Sometimes the loveliest cluster of words you've got doesn't help in advancing the narrative. Hemingway famously said to find the one sentence in the story you're most proud of, and cut it, on the assumption that it's too showy.

Some additional tips:

Read your work out loud to hear where it can be condensed. You can often catch errors that way, too.

What you might consider a space constraint might also spur resourcefulness. Necessity is the mother of all sorts of ingenuity.

When deciding what to cut and what to save, decide what your story's about, then proceed along that theme. If your piece is about the indignity of growing old, you can omit that scene when your character was nineteen or reduce it to a one-sentence memory.

Cutting isn't just your problem. All writers face this issue. Here's a 497-word story about it:

Bruce Taylor: "Exercise"

Take a story from real life, one you are having trouble focusing. Cut the story in half. Cut it in half again. What you're left with is the essentials of the story you will be able to see more clearly.

(257 words)

They have said nothing to each other for weeks except what matters to the day, the children, the budget or the dog. He is upstairs at his office window. She is reading in a chaise longue in the shade some book her recently widowed mother gave her. She sighs, he imagines, at how it was an easy mistake for a young girl to make, a less likely error, perhaps, for a man so much older.

Who remembers mostly a white dress, a waist your hands could fit around, the scent of Juicy-Fruit and Noxzema. When he asks what's wrong, she always says she's happy; the only thing is, if he were sometimes a little happier a little more often too . . .

What she thinks of him now he doesn't even know, but fears it's so much less than what she thought at first, when he was what he can't imagine now, and obviously isn't to her now, and why and why? In the grief of his fifties, hard liquor sits him down to pray.

They treat each other as tenderly at least as they'd treat a relative or friend, a needy stranger or the obligatory guest. Whatever it is they might be discussing escapes to the underside of the birch leaves in the gathering breeze. The lights across the river are brighter and seem more distant than the stars. The swallows give way to the bats and a tiny spider spins at the ruined screen a web someone less desperate might be tempted to take as a metaphor.

(128 words)

They have said nothing to each other for weeks except what matters to the day, the children, the budget or the dog. He is upstairs at his of-

fice window. She sighs, he imagines, at where love has led her and how it was an easy mistake for a young girl to make.

He remembers a white dress, a waist your hands could fit around, the scent of Juicy Fruit and Noxzema—he wants to ask her what she remembers.

They treat each other as tenderly at least as they'd treat a relative or friend, a needy stranger or the obligatory guest. Whatever it is they might be discussing escapes to the underside of the birch leaves. The lights across the river are brighter and seem more distant than the stars.

(63 words)

They have said nothing to each other for weeks except what matters to the day. She sighs at where love has led her. He remembers a white dress. They treat each other as they'd treat a stranger. Whatever they might be discussing escapes to the underside of the birch leaves. The lights across the river are brighter and more distant than the stars.

DISCUSSION

What details stick out most to you? Which version do you like best, and why?

EXERCISES

- 1 Take any story you've written that's longer than five pages and try to make it into a piece of flash fiction, which we'll call 1,000 words or fewer. Note: you have to first decide what your story's really about so you can cut away the other material.
- 2 Take someone else's story, and perform the same kind of cutting job. What decisions did you make and why? Was it easier than working with your own material or harder?

Character Sketches

THE WRITER ANNE LAMOTT has described how character in fiction develops slowly, like a Polaroid picture, but flash fiction doesn't usually proceed at that pace. To some extent, the impression of character in brief depictions mimics reality: no one hands you a thick dossier on the person you're about to see; rather, you catch a glimpse of a teenager on a skateboard with a red-and-white-striped scarf—and then you lose sight of her behind the bridge. Or you sit in a library carrel across from a rheumy-eyed gentleman who keeps clearing his throat. Unless you happen to strike up a conversation, that's all you know.

Maybe a few beguiling details are all that's necessary. Never mind the plot; focus on the individual. For many readers, that's what matters most. In a character portrait, you can do without any specific action and just focus on noticeable aspects: his sweaty hands, her big feet, his way of eating hamburgers in a circling maneuver, or hers of peeling fruit with a knife and fork. They can be physical or psychological attributes, habits, employment, or even bits of the past or future: "Five years from now, Karla will have a three-month love affair with the paralegal at her law office."

Whatever details you choose, make them count in a pattern: Richard's collection of harmonicas makes people think he's musical, though

he can't even carry a tune—which is odd because he lives with a blues guitar player. In his dreams, he performs onstage in front of huge crowds, playing all 73 of his instruments.

A character sketch is just that: a sketch. It's not a filled-in portrait but an outline, a suggestive pattern, a line on a graph from which the reader can extrapolate. You can cram your small space with details in seventeen different directions, but unless you're veering toward parody, you're probably better off with the flash fiction principle of pared-down representation. Stick to one or two defining traits and their implications. They needn't be big and important, just salient—and not abstract. Don't say that Alex is a good cook; say that his veal piccata has just the right amount of lemon. Sure, Elizabeth is tall, but a better visual clue for readers is that she can dust the top of the refrigerator without reaching for the step stool.

Don't like static portraits? Bear in mind that character is potential action. Henry James in "The Art of Fiction" famously declared, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" If you have two women in a bar, both in love with Tom, and then Tom shows up, you've put together a conflict that may blow up during the first round of gin and tonics. Or: a man desperately wants to stay sober, but the woman he loves is an alcoholic who craves similar-minded company. So how much does he love her? Given appropriate character description, the reader can imagine a future.

Also, character sketches don't have to be merely description. Dynamic characters *move*, physically or psychologically. Look at the way he fidgets at the back of his night class in accounting. What's he got in his knapsack? By the end of your flash fiction that character may have changed his ambitions or at least be on the road to something new, even if it's only a different way of thinking. Raymond Carver once wrote a short piece called "Fat," in which a hefty man at a restaurant, through his huge appetite, influences a waitress to expect more from life. The portrait may not seem like it amounts to much. But it does.