



TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction: The Case for Cunning & Craft	I
I. People	19
II. Point of View.....	40
III. Structure and Plot	63
IV. Dialogue	92
V. Description.....	116
VI. Scene, Summary, and Flashback	137
VII. Voice and Style.....	157
VIII. Theme.....	181
IX. Revision	202
X. Inspiration, Perspiration, Publication	234
Selected Bibliography: Books on Craft	256
Index	258

CHAPTER I

People



Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing.


—F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Rich Boy"

1. FICTION IS ABOUT PEOPLE

On the oak-paneled wall of his den, my father-in-law keeps a varnished wooden plaque. The plaque, an injunction against gossip, reminds him that “Great minds talk about ideas, average minds talk about things, and small minds talk about people.”

In fiction writing, the hierarchy is reversed. What readers of fiction most want to learn about is people. Not ideas, opinions, or philosophy; not *The Communist Manifesto*, *Robert’s Rules of Order*, *The Merck Manual*, or lore about nuclear submarines. Novels and short stories fascinate us because, as Flannery O’Connor put it, they show us “how some folks would do.” That’s what fiction does best, why it gets written and read. Call it an enlightened form of gossip.

People are not fiction’s main subject; they are its only subject. Ahab, Don Quixote, Leopold Bloom, Holden Caulfield, Scarlett O’Hara, Miss Jean Brodie, Hamlet—we remember the characters in fiction like real people we’ve grown to love, fear, or despise. They fascinate us.

 *Since the novelist is himself a human being there is an affinity between him and his subject matter which is absent in any other forms of art.*

—E.M. Forster

Some people say they don’t read fiction, because when they read they want to learn something; they don’t want to waste time on stuff that’s not true. They are misguided. You can learn plenty from other kinds of books. But if you want to learn about human nature, fiction’s the place to go. Biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs will take you only so

deep into the human psyche. And what a politician or celebrity *says* about herself and what she really thinks and feels are doubtlessly different things. How else but through fiction can you stand in a motel room with two adulterous lovers after a postcoital quarrel, and see not only their gestures and the looks on their faces, but what’s in their heads? How else can you learn what it’s like to hack your landlady to death, or to feel the wham of a dose of heroin, or to cower in a muddy trench in the Battle of the Somme—and not just be told about it, but experience it personally?


Journalists misquote; nonfiction lies. Want the truth? Ask a novelist. *I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart and the truth of imagination.* And the truth of imagination doesn’t lie. It doesn’t lie because it taps into the universal unconscious, the place where dreams and myths shared by all of us are born. It is no less reliable a source of truth than the deep instincts that prompt us to love and fear.

Fiction is our way into experiences that we’ll never have, and into people we’ll never know or never meet—or want to, necessarily. Malcolm Lowry’s drunken Consul (*Under the Volcano*) as a houseguest? No thank you. Between cloth or paper covers, though, I’ll gladly have him over to dinner. I’ll even take him to bed with me.

2. MOTIVATION

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams’s frazzled heroine, Blanche DuBois, calls death “the opposite of desire.” To the extent that people want something, they exist. This is especially true of fictional characters. Begin with a character who wants

something, and you're off to a good start. On the other hand, those who want nothing from life exist as shadows, or like sticks of furniture in an otherwise bare room. From such people it's hard to extract a single solid action, let alone a whole plot.

 *No fiction can have real interest if the central character is not an agent struggling for his or her own goals but a victim, subject to the whim of others.*

—John Gardner

People who read fiction aren't interested in shadows or furniture; they're interested in people, in characters. What drives them, what do they want, why do they want it? And how do they go about getting (or not getting, or losing) it?

The answer to such questions is a novel or a story.

There are exceptions. Think of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, or Jacob Horner in John Barth's *The End of the Road*—a character so paralyzed with indecision he can't get up from a bus terminal bench. We tend to think of such passive characters as ciphers, blank outlines waiting to be filled in. Yes, effective and even great stories have been written about characters with so little willpower that the winds of fate blow them hither and yon with little resistance. Such stories we call existential (Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*; Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*). In them the antihero's decision to do nothing amounts to a philosophy or stance: an antidecision. But then you must know that this is your theme, and know how hard it is to pull off.

Motivation depends on desire and—like everything else in fiction—is most vividly conveyed through action. If a charac-

ter's desires are vague and abstract, the first part of your job will be to render them concrete and specific. Witness (and I use that word purposefully, since in dramatizing your material, you turn readers into witnesses) the following example of motivation revealed through action:

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.

"They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

On a purely abstract level, Gatsby wishes to impress Daisy and thus win her affection. More concretely, he does so by becoming fabulously wealthy by whatever means are possible—namely, by aligning himself with certain underworld elements. But we are still dealing with abstractions. Dramatically, specifically, what does Jay Gatsby *do* with his dubiously achieved wealth in order to achieve his goal? For one thing, he buys a plethora of silk shirts and waves them—like flags—in front of Daisy's susceptible eyes.

As a fiction writer your task isn't to tell us what characters want and therefore who they are, but to show us how far they are willing to go to get it, and by what means.

3. BUILDING CHARACTERS

To write about people effectively you need to know who they are. You can't feel sympathy for someone you don't know. That doesn't mean you have to love or even to like a character. You need only be interested, curious. Having already made up your mind that the man living alone in a fishing shack by the river—the one who walks with a limp and wears green coveralls—is evil, why write about him? Writing is, after all, an act of exploration through which we learn answers to questions raised by our raw material, by our characters and their situations. If you already feel you know the answers, why bother writing?

When writing about someone, it's not a bad thing to start with a question you'd like answered. Why, for instance, does an educated, cultured, and worldly man kidnap a pubescent girl and drive her across America, from motel room to motel room? In answer to that question Nabokov gives us *Lolita*. Why does a man live underground amid 1,369 light bulbs? To find out, read *Invisible Man*. Why does the captain of a whaling ship risk life and limb, his own and his crew's, in pursuit of a white whale? Answer: *Moby-Dick*, or *The Whale*.

To answer the questions raised by your characters and their desires it helps to know as much about them as possible, starting with basic, vital statistics. How old are they? Where were they born? Family background, level of education, employment and medical history, likes and dislikes: determining factors, all. How do you learn these things? By writing them down. When a character fails to live in your pages, try this: Write a one-page biography summarizing her life history. No need for poetry, just the facts.

Where do these facts come from? From the imagination, which doesn't lie. Through the sublime power of the declarative sentence, the moment we state them in writing the seeds of our imaginative instincts sprout into facts.

In one class of mine, a student wrote an imaginary biography of a woman, Sally Schmidt, who had been a Navy scuba diver in Vietnam. Were there Navy scuba divers in Vietnam, let alone female Navy scuba divers? The author had no idea. Yet none of the fourteen other students in the class questioned the authority of this bold and specific claim. Later, we learned that there had indeed been women Navy divers in Vietnam. Chalk one up for the truth of imagination.

As you dredge up facts from your imagination, you will learn Sally's background. And knowing that background, you will know how she responds when a strange man pinches her in a Neapolitan bus station (given that she was a Navy diver in Vietnam, I doubt she'd take to it kindly).

Your reader doesn't need to know all this background; you do. In fact it's better if you don't tell too much about your characters, just what the reader needs to know to get the most out of your plot. Don't paint every leaf on the tree. The same applies to physical descriptions. A few telling details: Jasper combs his hair like Hitler and lives to spit between the gap in his front teeth. The rest the reader will supply with her imagination, which writes better than you or I or any of us can.

In your notebooks, record subtle nuances of character based upon observation: how people dress, their gestures and voices, the things they say and do. Notice how your father-in-

law cups his fingers around a stingy dollar bill to hide it as he hands it to the parking valet? That young woman yammering on her cell phone at a cafe? Notice how she flips back her hair while talking (could she be talking to the guy she slept with last night?). Observe closely and carefully and you'll learn a lot about human nature. Pay special attention to those moments in life when stereotypes collapse, or are dismayingly upheld.

Note, too, the things people do when they feel they're not being noticed. Like the man who, walking ahead of you down the sidewalk in his spiffy suit, glances at every shop window he passes, intent not on the goods on display, but on his own natty reflection.

The expected ways in which people behave are as important to note as the unexpected ways. People *do* cross their arms defiantly, and scratch themselves where they have no itches. They look to the floor when embarrassed or shy, and to the sky in search of release. Ever seen someone smile with their eyes? Sure you have. Ever seen someone smile with their lips only, while their eyes remain sad and dead? You have, but maybe you haven't noticed.