

WHY I WRITE SHORT STORIES

Although I have a drawer-full of unpublished novels, I have a preference for writing short stories; this feels like an inborn inclination. My first writing success was with a story called “Sugar House” about a dedicated aid in a juvenile detention center who rocks and sings to a very young offender the songs and hymns my grandparents sang to me. This story must have come out of my experience interning in the children’s division of the New Hampshire State Hospital. I was continually irritated by the doctors who second-guessed the morning reports by the aides who had spent the night on the ward with the teenage patients. “Sugar House” seemed too short for its weighty subject, and I feared it was un-publishable though to my great delight it was taken by *Virginia Quarterly Review*. But this brief expression of a personal experience, especially one that had nagged at me, produces my best stories. This has something to do with compression.

A possible explanation for this inclination for the short form has two feeder systems. The first was my mother who had been trained as a child to give dramatic readings. After she was married my father discouraged her from performing as an adult, so she poured the passion and drive of her impoverished childhood into being a mother.

At bedtime she read aloud to my little sister Phoebe and me, and this may have tipped me toward a form of writing that can be fitted in between pajamas and goodnight kisses. Mother read such books as *Heidi*, *The Singing Tree*, and *Hans Brinker and the Silver*

Skates. Drama. Suspense. Menace. Phoebe wept. And I wept, and so did Mother. She knew where to bring us to a pause in the story, however sad.

Perhaps even more influential was my position as the oldest child. Once my little sister and brother were born, I had a tiny herd for which I believed I was responsible. I also had the grandiose opinion that I was responsible for the happiness of the whole family, my parents' marriage included.

With a child's hyper-radar, I always knew when there was trouble between my theater-major mother and my engineer father although I rarely understood the causes. This invisible tension steered me into fantasizing, making up stories to tell myself in the dark as I struggled to get to sleep. These stories, for instance, involved Mother's thwarted dreams and Daddy's practical issues with her projects. Lying in bed, age eight or nine, I would try different scenes, imagine peaceful, logical dialogue, and move onto the scene fresh, helpful characters—my mother's best friend for instance—all in the service of a happy ending.

This rehearsing of a literary form, though devoid of conflict, was the beginning of my schooling myself in the short story. I couldn't use a long form, I had to make up a story as fast as I could to relieve myself of the fear that the bedrock of our home, the marriage, was shaking.

To me as a writer it feels like the shorter the better. Editing irrelevancies, tightening dialogue, shunning adjective and adverbs, I've published short short stories, flash fiction, storybytes, and a six-word novel.

After years of my placing stories in literary journals, Upper Hand Press published *One Hundred Years of Marriage* which tells the stories of one family's marriage choices over four generations. In each case a child is the narrator, observing the marriage and wondering why the parents chose each other in the first place. *One Hundred Years of Marriage* was a novel-in-stories. My second book, *Cadillac, Oklahoma*, is a story collection.

The book I've just finished, *The Woman Without a Voice*, non-fiction, continues my focus on marriage in the form of family history. I have used the published diaries of 19th Century women who feared leaving home for the trek west as a background for telling my own family's pioneer story and the tragedy of my great grandmother's incarceration.

Helpful in making this were a 19th century newspaper report of a wedding, the memoirs of my grandfather who lived with my family for ten years, and the auction flyer used to dispose of the family farm. I also have the asylum records of my great grandmother to use as I work and rework the cruel alternatives these pioneers faced. These desperate people come into my imagination like actors onto a stage ready for the brief episodes I write from their few tattered documents and family lore. History or biography are long forms the surviving evidence does not support. This is a very short book about the wives.

The issues of marriage continue to be intertwined in my writing. I learned to love short stories as a teenager and later taught them in high schools and colleges. Whether I weave them into books or not, I will always treasure the story as the fastest path to satisfaction, but whatever they are, they are what I write. I have walked away from childhood with the story's shortened form in my bones.

The End