

Better Fiction

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Better Fiction

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Wade Ogletree, Editor



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Table of Contents

Grandmother's Road Trip

Fiction by Cat Rambo—page 3
First appeared in Chizine, Oct. 2005.

A Fiction Primer

Article by Michael Milliken—page 13
A Better Fiction original.

Fool's Ransom

Fiction by Karina Kantas—page 23
A Better Fiction original.

Road to Redemption

Fiction by Anthony Snodgrass—page 28
First appeared in Olla Podria, 2004.

So, You Want to be a Writer

Article by Babs Halton—page 36
A Better Fiction original.

The Black Cat

Story by Edgar Allan Poe—page 40
First appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, 1843.

Grandmother's Road Trip

by Cat Rambo

The sound of the car wheels whispering along the road meshes with Grandmother's snores and the faint noise of my mother's humming as she drives. She prefers not to have the radio on during long trips.

Inside the car it's cold as a mall in midsummer. Cold as a clinic, a hospital, a morgue. I can't quite see my breath, but I'm wearing a sweater, while outside it's 97 degrees. The air conditioner roars its displeasure as we roll down the highway.

We are traveling with my reluctant grandmother from Mullinville, Kiowa County, Kansas, where she has spent her life, to a West Coast nursing home near the neighborhood where my mother and I both live. Behind us are: her house, now up for sale; her Chrysler, also listed in the local paper; and her possessions, which my mother and I will return to sort through in a week.

The landscape spreads out with the pancake flatness of Kansas. Cottonwoods trace the edges of a meandering creek and its unseen waters. Irrigation sprinklers spread out green circles only visible from above, where a ribboned contrail shows a plane's progress. Shimmers of summer heat prelude our arrival, as though we chase an oasis that never manifests.

My mother glances over at me. "Can't sleep?"

"I thought you might want company."

"I appreciate it. Though I can't say that the silence hasn't been welcome." She rolls her eyes towards the back seat.

"I heard that," my grandmother says. It is unclear whether she is talking in her sleep or responding, so we wait. More faint snores come from the back seat, so we go back to talking quietly.

It is August, the worst possible month to be driving through Kansas. It is a cicada year as well, and every night at the motels we hear their music swelling. Last night we stayed in Garden City, Kansas, home of feedlot after feedlot; the room was full of flies. A cheap red flyswatter on top of the television said that this was not unexpected.

We all shared the same hotel room. It's cheaper to do it that way, and my grandmother insisted on paying all the motel bills as part of her martyrdom. She sleeps alone in one bed, while my mother and I share the other.

It's strange being with them on this trip. We all look alike—I can see myself twenty and forty years down the line, unless I take some drastic measure. We even smell the same, although my grandmother's scent is masked by perfume and cigarette smoke.

Waking, my grandmother leans forward, patting my shoulder. Her eyes are uncertain behind her thick glasses. "Shayla, you know what's always bothered me?" she asks.

"No, Grandma, what?"

"When you were eight, we went to the K-Mart, and there was a toy there, a stuffed black kitty doll. You wanted it so badly! But I didn't want to buy it for you because it was a little shop worn. You cried and cried."

"I don't remember that," I said. It's the truth. I remember trips to the K-Mart as a child. I bought my first album there, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass's "Talk to the Animals." I remember the bank of coin-operated vending machines dispensing gumballs, jawbreakers, and wonderful trinkets. I always asked my parents or, on occasion, my grandmother for nickels and dimes, knowing that they'd balk at a quarter. But although I remembered K-Mart's toy section had unfolded like a poinsettia blossom during the holidays,

I had no memories of the cat at all.

"You cried and cried."

Beside me, through the glass, row after row of wheat undulate, golden as Barbie doll hair.

"I really don't remember it, Grandma."

"Was that at Christmas?" my mother says.

"Yes."

"I remember that. You cried all evening."

I shrug. "I still don't remember it."

But looking back at my grandmother, I see it for a moment in the rear window: a small stuffed black cat, made with real fur, the eyes luminous green marbles. The retreating roadway framed in the glass behind it shimmers; I blink and the toy is gone.

My grandmother lapses into silence, and my mother begins to hum again. At the sound, Grandmother speaks.

"What do you girls plan on doing for dinner?"

"I don't know, Mother. Is there something you would like?"

"Oh, I don't know." She pauses. "Maybe some place we could all sit down and get a nice salad."

"How about the Outback?" I suggest.

There is silence from both of them. I sigh in admiration at the way I've been drawn into this game.

"There's a Roy Rogers just ahead," my mother counters.

"Oh, there," my grandmother says.

"They have salads."

"Not nice ones in bowls."

I watch the highway signs as we zip along. "There's a Chinese restaurant coming up," I cannot resist saying.

"That would be nice," my grandmother says, and I know, somehow that this has been her plan all along. She looks out the window. "Do you girls know, this is my first road trip? It's like a movie, just the three of us."

I can tell she's seriously jonesing for a cigarette.

*

We get in another hour of driving after dinner, but don't want to push on too long. Pulling in at a nondescript motel, \$39.95 for a night with privileges to a faded blue swimming pool, we check in

and conduct our evening rituals. My grandmother watches *Survivor* in her bathrobe and goes outside on the balcony to smoke during the commercials. My mother pages through a murder mystery, fingers flicking through it in a steady rhythm. She has a tote bag filled with paperbacks; she'll work her way through them methodically, like a sugar fiend devouring candy bars. The two of them ignore each other for the most part. They have never gotten along, although my mother does not hold the same childhood grudges that my aunt does. My aunt has refused to have any part of this trip besides funding it.

I love my mother, but I feel a great deal of fondness towards my grandmother as well. She is stubborn, and manipulative, but she's earned that right by living to a ripe 95. Even so, I had to agree, despite her protests, that a nursing home would be better for her than the solitary and sometimes fragile existence.

"She drives to Wal-Mart, out on the highway," my mother had said on the phone, recapping one argument. "I can't get her to see that it's dangerous. I can't imagine what the other drivers think."

"They're probably used to the occasional senior citizen," I said. "Can someone be paid to take her to the store twice a week, or something like that?"

"It's not just that," my mother said. "I'm worried she'll slip in the bath. Or on her front steps, or the basement steps. She's getting very frail."

"But she likes it there."

"I know."

"What does Aunt Rosie want to do?"

"Oh, she'd put her in a home tomorrow if she thought she could get away with it. Probably has one all picked out."

I would have laughed, but it was true.

"I'll come out and help you talk to her about it," I said.

"Thank you, that makes it bearable," my mother said. "I don't think you want to get too much in the way of all the discussions, but I know I could use you for moral support."

Now, together, half a state away from her home, we say our goodnights and go to sleep. Both my mother and my grandmother snore. Outside I hear mourning doves lamenting, the sigh of wind

through the telephone wires, and the whisper of tires, rolling down the darkened highway, moving through the pools of light that define the night's blackness.

*

I've always been a little freaked out by bathrooms at night. For one, I'm nearsighted, but don't usually take my glasses with me when stumbling there out of bed. For another, the thought of someone or something reaching up from the toilet to grab my crotch haunts me, even though I know it's silly. But as soon as I sit down, I think about avoiding thinking it, and then I'm done and standing up while reaching for the toilet paper, not looking at the bowl.

Which doesn't explain why, blearily sitting on the pot, I see the cat again in front of me.

It is, unlike the rest of the world, perfectly clear in detail. It is covered with rabbit fur, dyed black, and eight inches long. Its legs are well delineated from its body, giving it a crouching appearance. Its eyes gaze blankly at me. Neither of us move.

Yes, I would have wanted it as a child: the imitation of life, the softness of the fur, would have enchanted me. My allergies prevented us ever having pets, so I compensated with stuffed animals. I do not want it now, here in the bathroom, inexplicable and surreal.

I almost speak, but what would I ask this toy that sits here chilling me colder than any air conditioning?

Surely when I blink it'll vanish, but it remains, even when I stand and wipe and flush. My feet are cold, but a bead of sweat crawls its solitary way down my back. I step around it and to the door.

And this time, when I look behind me, it is indeed gone. But the hair on the nape of my neck keeps standing up, bristling hard and insistent.

I see it every night after that. Sometimes during the day. Once, sitting next to my grandmother in the back seat. She and my mother don't see it, but my grandmother keeps telling the same inconclusive story of her failure to buy it over and over. Most of the time I could laugh her off but this time I was near the boiling

point, subjected to the toy's blank but menacing stare, and I could tell my mother knew it.

"Don't let her get to you," she says as my grandmother moved off to the restaurant bathroom.

I sip from my coffee. "I think I'm stressed," I say.

"About what?"

I shrug, watching wisps of steam curl up from the surface of the drink.

I let her questions slide off me in that way that only a family member can and, as my grandmother returns to the table, she lets it go.

*

My mother and I try to infect each other with song memes. I start with Afternoon Delight, she counters with Benny and the Jets. I can feel my grandmother listening in the back, wanting to join in but unable to interject herself in the quick flow of banter.

It goes on and on. If I Had a Hammer. The Sesame Street Song. Silver Bells. The Wisconsin cheese jingle. YMCA. It's a Small World After All. The Lion Sleeps Tonight. Copacabana. Yellow Submarine. Kokomo. I Will Survive. Piano Man.

Finally I pull out the biggest gun I know and begin singing Emily Dickinson poems to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas".

"Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me.
..."

"Argh," my mother says. "You can stop right there."

"The Carriage held but just Ourselves - and Immortality."

"We used to sing that in choir," Grandmother said. "But with different words."

And with that the game is stopped, dead. I can tell my mother's fighting back a smart-ass reply that will spark a fight to last us the next hundred miles. I sink further down into my seat, and rest my cheek against the cold glass. In my head, the words flicker past: "Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet feels shorter than the Day, I first surmised the Horse's Heads were towards Eternity."

Without looking back, I know the stuffed cat is sitting on the seat behind me.

*

The nursing home brochures lie ignored on the backseat as my grandmother stares out the window, watching the sweep of wire from one telephone to the next and counting the road markers aloud. The home is on the outskirts of Seattle, in a small town that acts as a bedroom community for the city. Of all the choices, it offers the most freedom to its occupants. My grandmother can take advantage of daily bus trips to the mall and grocery store, and weekly ones to the library and church. She'll have a kitchenette and her own balcony.

Still, she's outraged, and all through the trip she needles both my mother and I, looking for weak spots. When she tries it on me, I become amiably stupid, letting all double meanings slide right past. With my mother, she has better luck; by the time we're in Idaho, my mother, tired and cranky, is ready to explode when my grandmother refuses the third restaurant with her usual timid demurrals.

With a wild swing of the wheel, my mother pulls over onto the side of the road. The landscape here is spotted with red grass; hills of shale rise up on either side, and a black and white magpie sits on a wire fence, flicking its tail back and forth as it watches us.

"We're doing this for you!" she shouts at my grandmother. "You might cut us a little slack. We're not serial killers carting you off to be cut up. We're your family, trying to do the best we can."

My grandmother blinks at her.

My mother leans her head on the wheel and takes a deep breath. I rub her shoulder.

"Long John Silver's would be fine then," my grandmother says.

"Okay."

*

I see the cat as soon as we walk in; a child over by the condiments counter is carrying it around by one front leg. I ignore it.

Both my mother and my grandmother pat my back as we stand in line. I shift my weight forward and focus on the menu.

The cat lies in the aisle, discarded, while its owner stuffs his

pockets with packets of tartar sauce. I give them a wide berth.

Before any of us have even unwrapped our food, my grandmother launches into a fresh barrage. "I have a lot of things I need to do, in my house," she tells my mother.

"We're selling your house."

"Before we can sell it, there are things I need to do."

"Like what?"

"Paint that front railing."

"I'll find someone to do it. What else? Shayla, write all this down." She flaps a hand at me in command and I make a face at her. Grandmother sinks back into her seat, flummoxed by the mocking cooperation. She eats her fish burger in silence under the fluorescent glare.

The drone of the lights is echoed behind her eyes, painful and dry. I'm ready for this trip to be over.

*

Every night, in every motel we stop in, it comes.

I will not touch it, but its presence buzzes like angry electricity in my head. It looks up at me, dirty and a little shopworn, as my grandmother described it.

Every morning she tells us the reasons why she cannot go to the nursing home. Last night I caught my mother crying in the bathroom; she waved me away with a broad, frantic swoop of her hand.

My grandmother sits playing solitaire on the table by the window. I stand behind her, watching her play. She builds up stacks of cards to win, meticulous and precise.

"Not too shabby for an old woman," she says, squinting at me.

"I'm sorry, Grandma. If you can think of any alternative, I'm willing to listen to it, but I can't think of anything and neither can Mom. You can't live in your house by yourself any more. You almost burned it down and then fell on the steps, all in the space of a day."

"You'd have been a little shaky too with all those firemen tramping through your yard!"

"I know." I wait, looking at her, but she doesn't speak to me again.

*

We come in up I-5, heading into Seattle and the hospital district. It's late evening, but there is still plenty of light in the sky, this Northwest endless summer day. The Space Needle is poised against the sky to our left.

"We could go eat dinner first," my grandmother says.

"Let's get you checked in, then we can worry about that."

"You could pick the place," my grandmother says, her voice pleading. A hard lump rises to the back of my throat, but my mother shakes her head, looking tired and old.

"No." My mother speaks gently, her hands firm on the steering wheel.

*

I see the cat on one side, then another. When I look in the back seat, my grandmother sits with it behind her. She catches my eye.

"Do you forgive me for the kitty?" she says.

I reach over the seat to take her hands. They are cold and brittle, so I rub them in mine.

"Of course I do," I say. Looking at her, I ask, "Do you forgive us?"

My mother stops humming as my grandmother releases my hands and leans back in the seat, looking out the window. The unanswered silence in the car is endless. It continues along Highway 520, and then our turn, and another turn.

"Here we are," my mother says.

When we pull in and my mother gets out of the car to fetch the suitcase from the trunk, my grandmother leans forward. I see the cat on every side, like shimmers of heat. Through the haze she grips my face, a hand framing it on either side, a touch as light as a phantasm.

"I forgive you," she says, her voice shaking. We lean our heads together, matching tears.

*

I do not know what I expected; it was not what happened. I did not expect to see the cat materialize under her feet, to see her trip, fall forward to lie crumpled like a sodden napkin. The cat

vanishes as I scramble from the curb towards her, but she is on the ground. She grabs my wrist, and then my mother's as well as she leans down.

"I forgive you!" she says loudly.

The life goes out of her with the suddenness of a stone sinking into water, and she is gone, along with the cat, and now I remember wanting it. Wanting it more than anything else in the world.

END

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A Fiction Primer

By Michael Milliken

You've started to write! Writing calls you. You need it. Your head's swimming with stories that yearn for escape.

Great! You've entered an exciting world. And it's easy, right? You only need a pen and paper and your gossamer mind. You wrote that first story in an hour and gave it to your friend. She's published. She'll recognize (and laud) your quality work.

Well, she gave it back to you, smeared with enough red ink that, at first, you thought she bled on the pages. What is all this stuff? What is she talking about? POV violations? Passive voice? Character arc? Restraint? Trite! How dare she call your language trite! And you called her a friend...

You've just learned that writing isn't as easy as it seemed. Just like learning a new job skill, you need to study, practice and assess. There are rules to follow and tricks of the trade. Who knew? I didn't. My first stories would make most editors cry (now, they certainly make me cry!). But over the years of practice and study, I picked up on a few of the rules and gimmicks. They're all elemental, of course.

Activate Your Verbs. One of the easiest (and so often neglected) tenets of good writing is to use active construction. Active sentences are stronger, tighter, and more powerful. Look at the differences in the following:

As Alan was walking by, the dog was licking its paws.

As Alan walked by, the dog licked its paws.

or

Alison marveled at what she was seeing. Her dead husband was standing in the hallway.

Alison marveled at what she saw. Her dead husband stood in the hallway.

You can see and hear the differences here. Not only are the word counts higher in the first examples, the writer (and reader) can see the tighter constructions below. More importantly, the second examples read faster and stronger. They're more alive and immediate. That's why active construction is win-win. All stories must earn precious little publishing space in a magazine and a stronger, shorter narrative always competes best.

Banish Bland Language. As writers and readers, we search for crisp, fresh language. Compare this line from the point-of-view of an emerging poet:

I came to the cabin in early spring, to the easternmost point of Maine, this place built on the ocean side of a mountain, in a valley that stretched from the mountain to the sea and was covered by spruce, pine, the erosion of wind and water, great stone fallen down to the beach.

with this line:

I came to the cabin in the sprawl of spring, to the eastern end of Maine, this place built in the dusk shadow of a mountain, in a valley slung from peak to sea and pleated by spruce, pine, the tumble down of wind and water, great stone thrown to the edge of ocean.

Each sentence relays the same basic information, but, certainly, the latter lives in the reader's mind. *Sprawl*, *dusk shadow* and *pleated* all serve as new and interesting descriptions. Note the strong use of alliteration (*sprawl of spring, eastern end, wind and water*) and assonance (*sea and pleated, great stone thrown*) and how that language pops. You want that pop. After all, if this emerging poet's narrative is like that first paragraph, she's not going to emerge very far.

Create Compelling Characters. We read (and write) to experience different lives through different eyes. We want funky, interesting characters. Bring on people with power or trauma or steadfast conviction. Bring on people without them. Most of all, make your

characters believable with real, defined conflicts. Make your readers care.

And always remember the importance of character arc – the growth of a character over the course of a narrative. A story's main character is more than a camera for your story, he's a *living* camera. He acts and feels and develops as a person. He encounters conflicts and reacts in ways that redefine and change him. He is story.

Determine Risk. What is at stake for your character? Always ask this question when writing or revising. Readers seek tension and intrigue not only from action and overt conflict, but also from internal character conflict. In fact, many readers and editors find such personal conflict to be more important than action. Place your characters in situations where they must make important decisions, decisions which define their personal growth (for better or worse). Back your characters into far corners and see how they break out, how far they stretch their arc.

Erase the Erudite. Avoid polysyllabic, esoteric words. Readers want to enter a seamless dream, a long underwater swim. Keep them in your world without a need to come up for air, to digest or look up or silently pronounce a six-syllable word. The best writers use ordinary words in extraordinary ways. That's how they show their talent. Plain and simple.

Find Five Senses. When readers say they feel like they're *in* a story, they're reacting to the living environment of a story. Nurture that environment by adding sensory details. Imbue your stories with sights, smells and sounds, textures and tastes – generally, with a frequency in that order. Don't overdue it – we all use different senses to different degrees everyday – but look for them in your writing.

Grip with Emotion. Effective fiction is emotional fiction. Even a mundane, stereotypical character (though we'd never have one, right?) can grip a reader when he breaks through the page with emotion. When your characters feel, your readers feel. And once your readers care, you've got them for the long haul.

Hold One Point of View. I could write pages about this rule and how modern fiction has evolved to demand it of beginning writers. Some editors won't consider anything else – you'll find such statements in print. Yes, the big names in the business disregard this rule all the time, but

while you're still small, consider it golden. Particularly in short stories, stick to one POV. Let the reader hold on to one narrator, one person who acts as guide, the camera of the movie of the mind. In longer pieces, make certain that definitive breaks (chapters, preferably) separate a jump in POV.

And always remember the restraints of POV. Recently, I read a story narrated by a seven-year-old girl who described the color of her neighbor's home as *obsidian*. I stopped reading right there. I came up for air. Why? Such language was outside of her point-of-view. She simply didn't know such a word. A simple thing like this one word dissipated the dream. The author's hand (voice, really) reached down into the story and shook me awake. Your narrative is told *through* your narrator, *through* your narrator's point-of-view. So, hold to it – what's real, within character, within vocabulary, etc. Create a real world for both the character and reader.

Intrigue with Titles. Any wrapped present looks better if it has a big, fat bow. You see that bow and somehow the present seems greater, more important. The same is true of a story. Top it off with a beautiful or intriguing title. Take time – lots if necessary – to create an apt and tempting title.

Join a Writing Group. They're indispensable. Writing groups pick up errors and make suggestions that you wouldn't ever consider. You know your writing, but often you know it too well, so well that you glance over errors and tangents. You know the motivations of your characters, but have you effectively and clearly relayed them? Does a certain description work? What can you cut? Expand? Writing groups will answer these questions and more.

As a writer, you're part of an intimate and exciting community. Join that community actively. Make it a regular part of your life. If you can't locate a writing group in your area, then start your own. Pin up posters at the neighborhood library or grocery store. Take out an ad in your local, art-focused newspaper. And if that doesn't work, join an online writing community.

Kill your Darlings. If you're at all like me, you finish the first draft of a story and there are certain parts, certain jokes that you love. You read the same paragraph over and over. You swim in the soup of your own language. Oh, you are brilliant!

But sometimes the soup spoils. As you revise and your story shifts, you realize that a certain scene, a certain description just doesn't work for the story. But, oh, you love that section! Readers will love it, too! You love the names of your characters, even though they all begin with the letter Q and your writing group can't get everyone straight.

What do you do? Kill your darlings. Story trumps all. Dive in and edit them out, change them. Stay true to your story, a narrative that's tight and clean and strong. Your darlings won't matter if nobody gets to read them. And if it's too painful to kill them off, write them in a separate journal and save them for another story, or just an afternoon swim.

Love that First Line. We all know how important that first line is. It needs to hook the reader and pull him in. Research shows that most browsers in bookstores look at the cover of a book, read the inside jacket cover and *the first line*. Then they decide to purchase or not. You can help them decide (and editors, too) in your favor.

Make 'Em Laugh. When asked in interviews, magazine editors ask for two things. One of them is more humor. I read (and hear it) all the time. So throw that funny bone into your work. Humor is its own hook. If you get a laugh, then readers will stick with you looking for another.

Nail Your Ending. Your ending is the last impression that you leave with the reader. Make it a good one. Generally, the most effective endings demonstrate two qualities. Firstly, they address (usually, though not always, resolve) character conflict, internal or external. They stretch the character arc, and sometimes pull it into a complete circle. Secondly, a good ending gives the reader a sense of where the lives of the major characters will go.

Open a Book. It's a direct and indisputable relationship – the more you read, the better you write. Every story is its own teacher – some better than others – so educate yourself. Dive into craft, characterization, syntax and diction that's at its best. You'll see how it transfers to your own pages and how those pages improve.

Plot. Plot. Plot. Are you still wondering what the second thing is that editors want? I didn't tell you, but hopefully you kept reading in hopes of finding out. It's plot. Time after time, editors state in interviews that

otherwise good (or great) stories are rejected due to weak plot. Make sure that your plot stands strong. And remember, plot and action are not synonyms. Character arc is just as important, if not more.

Make certain to use 'hooks' in your writing, too. Hooks are tidbits of information that keep a reader turning the page in search of better understanding. A great first line is its own hook. My deliberate omission of the second thing for which editors ask – stronger plot – was a hook. Humor can act as a hook, too.

Question Your Story. After the first draft of a story, the fun can really begin. Start to question your story and look at it from different angles. Think macro – Is there risk? How can I boost that risk? Does my main character arc in a meaningful way? How can I better my character's development? – and micro – Can I find a better verb? Do I use passive construction?

And best of all, play the "What if..." Game. What if the main character didn't succeed? What if my two principle characters met the day after it all happened? What if they never met? Question your story hard. Interrogate it. Make changes that break your story apart, then see if it pulls itself together. It may arise stronger.

Restrain Your Writing. All writers rely upon their readers' imaginations. When you set a stage, you don't describe every last object, angle and dust mite in that environment. Why would you want to? And, more importantly, who would want to read it? Instead, you provide a few key details and rely upon your readers' imaginations and experiences to flesh out the setting. Great writing is a place for the imagination to breathe.

The same can (and often should) be done with violence in writing. Let's look at this scene:

The boy ducked into the night of the park, running fast, around the light of the lampposts. He heard the sound of his heart, frantic in his ears and the man's footsteps, closer. The man ran faster. He could not run and escape this man. The boy felt him so close, ready to reach out and snatch his neck.

Tears swelled, stung. He turned his head around and saw the frenzy of the man's face, the wild glare of his eyes. The boy's foot turned over – a rock or a branch – and he fell backward, the tears fell, down as the man slowed, stood above him and grinned.

What's next? What's going to close this scene? We're in for something gruesome, right? We're in for violence. As a writer, you can choose to bring that violence or you can choose something entirely different. My suggestion: stop right there. Let the readers' imaginations take over. Leave this scene where it has gone – with the man standing over the boy and this man in complete control – and let your readers' imaginations stretch out to the limitless possibilities that follow. Naturally, they'll think of scenarios that grip them emotionally. In essence, they'll do much of the work for you. Often, that's most effective, more ominous and one hell of a good hook (of course you'll turn that page – you need to find out what happened and if your guess was right!). That's the power of writer's restraint.

Steal, Pillage & Rob. Don't be afraid. The best authors are the best thieves. Take language, conflicts, even characters in new and fresh directions. Allow yourself to be inspired by the media that surrounds you – books and movies and t-shirt logos – then steal their hard work and make it your own. My favorite thing to steal: poets' verbs.

Think All the Time. So, you don't have time to question your writing? You don't have a few spare minutes to think hard on that opening line or find a chance to stick in some humor? Your title is a wilted flower and that's how it's staying?

You have more time than you think. Keep a pen and paper in your purse or pocket and save such head-scratchers for your morning or afternoon commute. Save them for the lines at the grocery store or the post office. Keep a voice recorder in your car. Soon, you'll look forward to traffic jams!

It's your precious time. Work with the many non-productive moments of your life.

Use Secondary Action. "I've never even heard of it," he says.

she says.

"No? I use it in my writing all the time,"

"I haven't seen it," he says.

"Well, you should look closer," she says.

"I'll try," he says.

Ugh! If one of these characters says one more thing, I'm going to stop reading all together. The structure of this writing is stagnant and

uninteresting. So what can you do with long conversation? Sure, you can change the verb – he asks, states, proselytes – but does that change the structure? Does that make this interaction more lively? No. Instead, use secondary action (description that is secondary to the conversation) to liven and break it up.

“I’ve never even heard of it,” he says.
“No?” She shakes her head. “I use it in
my writing all the time.”

“I haven’t seen it.”

“Well, you should look closer.” She

winks, laughs.

“I’ll try.”

In the revised example, you can hear and see the difference. It’s more active and the language takes on a more personal tone as actions stem from it. Note how the “he says” tag is completely removed in lines three and five. That, too, can be an effective way to change up dialogue – just make certain your reader knows who’s talking.

Vocalize. As a writer, you imbue your narrative with your own voice.

Voice is your presence, your stamp of authenticity. You know Shakespeare’s work immediately, without seeing his name. You know his style, his voice. Stay true to your own voice and the innumerable elements of which it is composed – syntax and diction, cadence and emotion.

Write What You Know. This expression is nothing new to you, and there’s good reason for that. Don’t, though, take it at face value. As a beginning writer, you’re venturing in new and exciting territory. Sometimes that territory is too new. Suddenly, you’re balancing plot and characters, craft and voice, point of view, hooks, arc and the infinite breakdown of these, and many other, aspects of storytelling.

So make your new job a bit easier. Set down your stories in familiar landscapes, in homes and apartments that you know well. Steal traits and quirks from your friends and acquaintances. Steal their stories (though ask permission). If you’re comfortable, your reader will be comfortable and you’ll set your creative energy free to focus in on other areas.

XXX. You may have wondered how I’d handle the letter X. I did, too.

When I got here, I couldn't think of a header like the others – you know, witty and insightful – and so I wrote down XXX and moved on. That, in itself, is a valuable tool. When you're writing well, when the words and actions flow and you feel more like of a conduit of language than a writer, don't bog yourself down. If a new character sticks her head into one of your stories, but she won't give her name, then give her the Brand X ("Um, excuse me," XXX said.) and keep going. Do the same for the names of places, stores, food, whatever it is that has the potential to slow you down. You'll have plenty of time later (Think All the Time) to fill in these blanks.

You're Not Alone. As writers, we face a tremendous amount of rejection, whole mountains of mail telling us that we're not good enough. Expect it, accept it and write on. For every story that will publish in print (and not all will), you need to expect 25-35 rejection letters. Think of it as the hazing of each story. But don't worry, you'll get through.

There are countless support and information sites online about rejection. Check them out if you're interested. Invariably, you'll find 25-35 stories of rejection much worse than your own.

A few tips to top up your chances:

Follow every instruction for submission given by a magazine's editors. They exist for a reason.

Look for themes. Publications soliciting work on a certain theme – stories of the ocean, foreign travel, illnesses, etc. present a great opportunity for beginning writers. By narrowing the focus of a particular magazine run, they narrow the number of submissions. Find open calls for particular stories – find them early on – and write specifically for that market. Check out anthologies, too. You'll improve your chances greatly.

Zoom In. Nothing matters more than your writing. Sit down and do it. Find the time, schedule the time, snatch the time out of your hectic days. Make this time your own, your time to focus, to push aside everything else. The person who improves your writing is you. Trust me, you won't remember that late-afternoon sitcom re-run a week or two weeks down the road. And if you absolutely have to watch it, keep a pen and paper and write during the commercials. Great fiction is about talent, but it's also about tenacity.

I'd be surprised if you read through this entire list and didn't scoff or roll your eyes or declare my incompetence, repeatedly, when you came across certain rules. Remember that they are only rules, guidelines and suggestions. For the beginning writer, however, they matter. Learn them and love them and show editors that you're dedicated to your craft. After your list of publications stretches on for pages (and it can, and will), start to play. They are, after all, only rules. Writers break them every day. The difference, though, is that we break them in meaningful ways.

END

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Fool's Ransom

by Karina Kantas

“There is only enough money for payment of one ransom, the other dies,” the gypsy declared.

Both husband and wife were blindfolded and tied to a large tree in the forest where the ambush took place.

They can keep her, the husband thought bitterly. *I will not pay a single sovereign to have that unfaithful slut back.* But he would not stoop so low as to beg for his own life, and so decided to leave the decision to the gypsies.

His wife’s gentle voice shattered the deadly silence.

“Allow my husband to live, take my life.”

Her announcement surprised him.

One of the gypsies removed the couple’s blindfolds so that they could look to one another before making a decision. The others surrounded the pair.

One stood beside the wife, brandishing a large dagger. He moved closer towards her. Fear shadowed her young face. Her eyes pleaded to her husband.

“Very well,” the gypsy answered and signaled for the husband to be untied.

The blade was inches from her throat. One slice and it would all be over.

“No wait,” the husband suddenly called. Of his wife, he asked, “Why would you do this?”

Tears flowed down her face. “Your life is worth more than mine. I could not bear to go on without you by my side. I would rather die.”

Had he made a mistake? He worried. *Perhaps the rumors of her affair with my brother were untrue.* “Allow us both to live, and you will be rewarded well.”

“How well?” the gypsy asked.

The husband’s binds were cut and he was escorted away from his wife. When an agreement had been reached, the husband and head gypsy shook hands. The husband was allowed his freedom. However, his captive wife would remain until the payment was made.

“I will return,” he told her, then turned and faced the gypsies. “If you harm her, you will be sorry.”

The gypsies laughed, and watched the man mount his black stallion and gallop off.

One of the gypsies opened a bottle of wine and poured it into glasses.

The husband's horse trotted out of sight, and the head gypsy untied the woman.

“Well, that went better than I expected,” she announced, rubbing her sore, aching wrists. “How much did he go to?”

The gypsy told her and then laughed. “I believe he was willing to part with his entire fortune.”

The woman smiled, and then took the glass of wine the gypsy offered. “It is the first interest he has shown for my welfare in a very long time,”

“Salute,” they toasted.

She sat down beside a newly built fire and smiled gratefully at them. “Very well, we have agreed on a price and now I shall double it.”

The gypsies looked up at her in surprise.

“All I wanted was a way out, my freedom, and you have given

me this. What do I care for riches? I have my love waiting for me, and now enough money to start afresh.”

“Why is it you have no money of your own?” a gypsy asked.

She took a sip of the warm, bitter, red wine, before replying. “My marriage was arranged. He married me for the dowry. Every coin has been hidden away and I have been forced to live in his pocket for too long.”

“And what of your lover? What of his wealth?” The head gypsy asked.

“Fredrick is the youngest. His father’s wealth was passed to my husband, who questions Fredrick every time he requests money. We have a rendezvous here, midday tomorrow. We depart by ship that afternoon.”

“Then we wish you the very best in your new life. And may you and Fredrick live a long and happy life together,” the gypsy toasted.

“To keep up appearances you will need to be bound once more. Your husband should return shortly. I doubt he would linger.” She thought of Fredrick as the gypsies bound her to the tree again.

END

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Running to Redemption

By Anthony Snodgrass

Corporal Jessup approached the edge of the forest tentatively, not knowing whether or not his defection from his squad had been yet reported. Not knowing if a host of former allies now sought him as a deserter.

The setting sun shown brightly in his eyes casting a red-orange hue onto his conflicted, sober face. He knelt by a small stream to drink; looking into its water, he recalled with sadness his previous day.

When the tain had attacked Jeb, a soldier in his patrol, all Jessup could do was stare at the beast numb with fear. Its strength and agility allowed it to slash Jeb's throat and snatch him from High Pass Bridge in a single motion, dropping his body to the rocky streambed far below. Without a pause, it leapt into the rest of the patrol, battering them ferociously with the sharp, dagger-like spines on its forearms and vicious claws on each hand. It easily tore into the flesh of any opponent. Against metal armor, the impact of its blows was sufficient to topple even strong men and, once on the ground, it could leap on them with deadly strength.

Facing the tain with his patrol, after seeing it slay Jeb, Jessup succumb to his terror. As his men rallied around Sergeant Idryan, Jessup had fallen back and then fled into the nearby woods.

Unbelievable, Jessup thought. *I have never seen such a*

creature.

He splashed his face with the cool water and rubbed his eyes. He considered the fate of his patrol, but hardly dared ponder the outcome.

At least Idryan was there. If anyone could have led them to victory, it would have been him. Certainly, not me.

He wondered what he could tell people if, in fact, none of his patrol had lived. No product of his mind satisfied him.

I just had to get away, Jessup thought with a shake of his head.

From High Pass Bridge, he had run cross-country in the direction he believed would take him to the small mining community known as Silver Lode. He ran, not to find Silver Lode, but instead, to lose what was behind him. He ran hard, and did not stop until well into the night, letting his steps carry him away from the tain, his patrol, Sergeant Idryan, and their barracks in Fox Hollow.

When his fatigue was too great to overcome the struggle of traveling the dark woods, he made camp and ate the few rations that he had packed for the seemingly easy mission up to the High Pass Bridge. After finishing, he slept until the rays of sun through the trees forced him awake.

He made his way through the last few miles of forest, nagged ever by his conscience. Weighed down by sorrow for abandoning his troops, he finally stopped for a rest at the stream.

"Yeah, my liege, I am sure I saw them," a rough miner declared. He stood in the center of the town market with the sergeant of the guard.

"You are certain?"

"As sure as I am standin' here," the miner replied.

His report sundered the calm normality that had become a part of daily life in the small mining town of Silver Lode. Before the words barely passed his mouth, Sergeant Daylon was signaling to men by the gate, and then hurried off to tell the Magistrate.

"Are you sure there are baines?" asked the keeper of the company store.

"Baines, yeah," the miner replied. "I'd think I'd know. I did my time in the militia, same as everyone, but I was actually in a tiff or two with baines. Big heads. Gray leathery skin. Stocky torso. Long arms. As for all that, all you have to do is look at the black eyes. They were baines, no doubt."

Although a small community, Silver Lode enjoyed a town wall. Built of wood with a gate of like make, it was better designed to keep out unwanted animals and dampen the curiosity of passing goblins and kobolds than to repel a serious attack by determined baines.

"Twenty you say?" asked the smith pulling off his apron and wiping sweat from his brow.

"Well, now, I didn't stick around and count, but about two dozen,

I'd say. I was late leaving my shift at the mine and coming back to town alone when I spied smoke rising. It was coming from way up the hill, where no smoke should be. I crept up there about two miles and saw their camp. It's up in a grove of woods on the ridge, back to the north."

"What were they doing?" asked one of the ten trained soldiers who, with the three elite guards of the magistrate, were assigned to protect Silver Lode's fifty families.

"Well, they had a right large cache of food put up. More by far than they could eat. They looked to be drying venison into jerky, if you ask me."

Magistrate Norant, the three men of his high guard, and the sergeant arrived and had the miner repeat his story. They picked over his facts and concluded that the baines seemed to be stocking supplies for a larger company.

"Whether they intend to pass us by or attack, I cannot guess," Norant declared. "But I dare not risk the latter."

"No, we can't sit back and wait to see what happens," agreed the sergeant.

"We should set a watch on the walls with our people, then send out our soldiers and strongest men to engage them," Magistrate Norant concluded. "Prepare the soldiers and muster the town. Open the armory and arm our men. Baine blood shall not run through our town except to flow through its streets," the magistrate exclaimed.

Older boys and men hurried to the armory in response to the Magistrate's orders. The most able boys were given bows, and the strongest men were given short swords. Once armed, they all met the sergeant in the town center.

"Alright, men, let's get going." Sergeant Daylon scanned the crowd around him. "You lads there with the bows... fall in with the soldiers. You fellows, too."

The sergeant directed half dozen of the most able men to join his platoon.

"The rest of you, take a spot on the stockade and be ready."

"Be ready for what?" one of the men declared. "It's just a hunting party, right?"

"Well, be ready, just in case," Sergeant Daylon answered. "We should have no trouble with a hunting party, but no need to be unprepared."

Thus, the defense of Silver Lode was set. The sergeant led the thirteen trained soldiers, four boys with bows, and six men with short swords toward the camp of the baines. With grave determination, they set out up the trail, toward the ridge beyond the Silver Lode mines.

They had climbed just over the nearest rise, no more than a mile from town, when, descending towards a small stream, they saw a soldier of the realm slumped down, resting against the bank. Hearing them

approach, he looked up. The look in his eyes yielded nothing to explain his presence there.

This is it. I am done for. They have found me, Jessup thought. Something about the feeling was calming.

“You there, who are you?” Sergeant Daylon demanded as Jessup rose to face the approaching squad.

Jessup was surprised. Surprised both that the sergeant apparently did not know him, and more surprised that the sergeant's lack of knowledge did not comfort him.

“I am Corporal Jessup, of the Fox Hollow Second Squad, First Platoon, Third Company,” he replied.

“Why do you travel alone?” the commander replied. “Where is your squad?”

Jessup paused, searching for words.

I can tell him and be free. I can face my consequences and be done with it. But that won't change anything... and I'd end up in a dungeon, or worse.

“It's a long story...” Jessup began, uncertain what to say.

“We haven't time for long stories,” declared one of the magistrate's elite guards.

“Right you are,” Sergeant Daylon agreed. “Corporal Jessup, fall in. We are off to investigate a report of baines to the north and we need every sword we can get.”

Baines! Jessup thought. He looked about and noted the size of the company he was joining. *There must be a lot of them. This could be as bad as a tain. A tain is just one creature. Baines are intelligent and have armies.*

“Corporal, fall in,” Sergeant Daylon repeated.

Jessup clambered into ranks, stumbling over his feet in his hurry to not make the gruff sergeant more impatient, hoping that if it came to blows, the archers would be able to protect him.

Jessup followed the sergeant as he led the patrol toward danger. As they marched along, Jessup's thoughts turned again to the men he had left to die at the bridge. *I wish there were some way to make amends for what I did.* Into his thoughts intruded images of the tain slaying them as he hurried away saving his own life.

I cannot live the rest of my life haunted by this, he thought. *I must find a way to make amends. After this, I'll turn myself in to the sergeant, and he can haul me off to Fox Hollow to face the consequences.*

His thoughts were captured by the voice of the sergeant.

“Be alert!” the sergeant said suddenly. “We draw close, now. I don't see the smoke anymore, but the ridge is right there.”

The sergeant sent out a scout to see what could be found in the woods up on the ridge before them.

"Be careful," he urged.

The rest of the company took a seat on the ground to wait and rest. Jessup moved off to the side, away from the others to avoid being drawn into a conversation about his past.

When the scout returned about twenty minutes later, he was running and out of breath. His hasty approach sprang the company to their feet.

"Sir, there are at least seventy-five baines out there. The way they are sorting rations into piles, I'd bet they are expecting more."

"Seventy-five?" Sergeant Daylon replied. "Far more than two dozen. Did they see you?"

"I fear they did," the scout replied. "I think they put a patrol on my trail."

"This is not good," the sergeant replied. "They can outrun us over the miles back to town. We are going to have to take a stand."

The men from Silver Lode hurried to get into a defensive position. They scrambled down the trail, looking for ground they could defend and cover for their archers. They were still far from organized when the baines arrived.

Over the clambering of the Silver Lode troops, the sound of arrows shrieked.

"Cover! Take cover!" shouted Sergeant Daylon as the men around him whirled to bring shields to bear.

When Jessup looked up after the volley of arrows, he saw that the sergeant had been struck with an arrow through the back of the neck. By the time the corporal reached him, the sergeant was dead. His effort to warn the others had been his downfall.

At that moment, Jessup arose and took a few steps towards the back of the group preparing to flee. The eyes of the patrol turned to him, the second highest in rank as a corporal. Though the magistrate had sent his elite guards, they were not in truth part of the army of the realm. Command fell to Jessup, who shrunk back, nearly paralyzed by fear.

At that point, Jessup heard his own thoughts repeating in his head. He recollected the promise he had made earlier and knew that to flee would most likely mean the doom of the men now looking to him for leadership. The failing of the soldiers would mean certain death to the unwarned people of Silver Lode.

"Shields up!" he called, picking up the shield of the sergeant off the ground and making his way back to the front of the group. "Make a circle, archers in the middle. Shields up around the perimeter."

The men did as he ordered and made ready for combat. Another volley from the baines was released. Only a few arrows made it through the wall of wood that surrounded the men, with only one injury to a man's

hand.

“Who’s the fastest runner among you?” Jessup said to the boys with bows.

They all pointed to one young man.

“Give your bow to him,” Jessup ordered pointing to the injured man, “and you run fast as you can back to town to warn them. They’ll have to evacuate. There is no way they can hold out against a platoon of baine soldiers.”

The boy nodded and ran off between flights of baine arrows.

When the baines had emptied their quivers, they took up swords, axes, and spears, and charged Jessup and the patrol with guttural jeers in their native tongue. As the men from Silver Lode stood ground, faces set with determination, a score of angry baine soldiers rushed forward.

Jessup looked around, and called, “Archers, fire at will! Warriors, bear arms, and let no baine live to tell this tale to his kin! We shall show them that we humans are not weaklings!”

The fighting was fierce; the attacking baine squad was determined to win, but the humans were desperate to survive. The fighters from Silver Lode, though outnumbered, fought hard to save themselves and the town they loved.

As a squad leader, Jessup had above average skill with weapons, and had no trouble defeating the baines one at a time. However, he struggled to overcome the attack of three baines who had been freed by eliminating their foes. Jessup watched as his force began to fragment while he fell back hard against the attacks of the three.

He came by chance to a tree and hurried to put it at his back. From that position and redoubling his effort, he managed to kill one, but in doing so, took a blow on his leg, causing him grave pain.

As he struggled to keep his shield, now cracked and splintering, between himself and his aggressors he heard a slight “twang” and then the thud of one of his attackers falling to the ground.

He silently thanked the archer who saved him, and unleashed a new fury of attacks on his last remaining target. He severed the baine’s blade about halfway from the hilt, making it little more than a dagger with no point, then gouged his sword into his target.

Free from the melee, Jessup turned and assessed the situation. Of the thirty that had attacked, only two baines continued in the battle, each engaged by two warriors, each destined to be overwhelmed. As he watched his men prevail, he rushed back to join the patrol and counted his losses.

“Eight dead and most of the rest wounded,” Jessup said to himself as he looked at his own wound.

“Back to the stockade of the city. As fast as we can! Let’s go!”

The patrol reached the safety of the stockade, but took little

comfort knowing that no less than a full platoon of baine soldiers was nearby. The magistrate decided they would make a stand and hope for troops from Iron Creek.

"Perhaps," Jessup offered, "I could use a fast horse and ride to Crossroads. The company commander there should be alerted."

The magistrate agreed and Jessup rushed away. He rode the horse to the town of Crossroads, to the command post of the Third Company, dismounted, and went to the barracks. He ran into the building shouting "Baines, near Silver Lode!"

The captain of the Third Company reacted quickly, sending orders for the Second and Third Platoons to move out at once.

"I need to send a messenger to the Fourth Platoon in Iron Creek," the captain added, "and another to the First Platoon in Fox Hollow."

Jessup knew the task would fall to him before the captain gave the order. Supplied a fresh horse, he set out at once to make the near twenty mile ride.

He pushed the horse as hard as he could as far as it could go, but after about twelve miles it gave out on him and would not go any further. He limped the last of the way to Fox hollow, reaching it a few hours later.

He entered into the gates of the town and went immediately to where his commander, Idryan was living.

"Sir, I know you have no reason to trust a deserter, but you must hear me out," he began "After I left High Pass, I ran to Silver Lode. As I was about to enter, the soldiers there were just leaving to go fight baines that were on the ridge."

He told of the battle in which the commander had been killed, and humbly told of how he led the men to victory. He told of his ride to The Crossroads, then on to Fox Hollow.

Upon hearing his story, Idryan thanked Jessup for his part at Silver Lode.

"Though you have done well, Corporal" Idryan stated. "I cannot risk your presence in the squad. I am going to send you with a reservist back to Crossroads to wait at the company garrison. When this is all over, I'll come there and we will deal with your desertion."

Jessup nodded his understanding. His sergeant's decision was no less than he had expected.

"Though you seem to have had a change of heart, there are still consequences you must face," Idryan concluded.

Jessup nodded again. Though he could only watch as the Third Platoon marched out of Fox Hollow towards Silver Lode and the advancing baine soldiers, in his heart he had peace. His road had not been straight, but in the end knew it had come to the right end.

END

*Based on the world of Siliar
created by Bill Snodgrass and Cameron Walker*

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SO - YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER?

By Babs Halton

It was a winter's evening. I lay sprawled on the sheepskin rug in front of a log fire.

"I want to be a writer," I said.

My husband sat in his leather armchair, pen poised over a crossword, "Do you know another word for 'spiny ant-eater?'"

Our youngest piped up "I know, Daddy, its echinacea," she replied, her eyes never leaving the television. Her sister looked up from the book she was reading and laughed. "That's a herb – it's not an ant-eater."

"Well, I know its something like that and I *know* it's not enchilada 'cos that's a real hot food," she said smugly."

"It's an echidna," I replied, "native to Oz; belongs to the porcupine family."

"Wow! How did you know that?" Eyes still glued to the television.

"Because I did last week's crossword and I looked it up."

My voice raised an octave, "Anyway, to get back to what I was saying, I want to be a writer."

"Oh! That's interesting," he said.

"Don't humour me," I snapped. "You don't think I'm serious do you?"

Now I had his attention. "Why, of course, I know you're serious, but..."

"But what?"

"Well, it's not like writing a letter you know, it takes determination, stamina and a thick skin because you'll have enough rejections to paper a very large room."

"So you're saying my work will be rejected," my voice sounded like cracked ice.

"Of course, bound to be – it happens to all writers." He warmed to the subject.

"Do you know how many books Louis L'Amour had rejected before he had an acceptance?"

"I don't want to write cowboy stories," I said, miserably.

"Okay! So, you don't want to write Westerns. I was just making a point."

I never realised how much wanting to be a writer was about to change my life.

I threw myself into learning like a dervish. I devoured books, classics and trash at an alarming rate, hoping the more books I read the more words would emerge. I'm sure I became the fastest reader in the South Pacific, unfortunately, when I began writing, both my stories and style left a lot to be desired (oops – cliché.)

I also used too many exclamation marks to emphasise a point (sometimes up to three - I was so carried away.)

I read that one famous author mentioned that if he felt like putting an exclamation mark after a word he would lie down until the phase passed.

And so, days, weeks and months passed, and I diligently attended workshops, courses, seminars and lectures by professional writers, teachers and rip-off merchants. I used masses of exercise books to report what each one suggested. Something I did learn was that with all the time (valuable) and money spent (ouch!) Every one of the 'experts' seemed to be at loggerheads.

"Forget the adjectives," said one, a teacher of English Literature at Auckland University .

"In my opinion," said another (this time an author with 100 short stories and seven novels published.) "It's foolish to forget adjectives – if you pare it down too much you'll have nothing left."

And yet another "You can only break the rules of writing when you know them well enough to know which rules can be broken successfully." (*Huh?*)

"Write only what you know – write from experience," said a very, successful fantasy and SF writer (Alrighty!)

Confused, weary and a teeny, weeny bit irritated, I pondered. Did Agatha Christie *really* commit all those murders? Did H.G. Wells *really* step into a time machine? Was Ian Fleming *really* James Bond, and did he *really* make love to all those women? Wow! Is there something here that I am missing?

"I like your story very much, your style is emerging beautifully (beautifully?) I blinked, smiled agreeably (no one can say I lack a sense of humor) "but, do take out the fat man. I don't like him, no, not at all. Ruined it, darling. He spoils the entire story."

(The fat man was a 'walk on' and uttered two sentences.) A budding Hemmingway *loved* my fat man, and if I threw him in the wastepaper basket one of my most colorful characters would be lost to the world forever.

Tottering to bed at night my ears rang with "flesh out the

characters, use body language, create tension, show-don't tell, talking heads are a no-no," and my very favourite, "don't dangle those participles."

I showed my teeth – but I wasn't smiling.

Researching is supposed to be very interesting and the sense of achievement that one gets from it can be almost therapeutic (*they* say) so, away I went to research. You name it, I researched it. I became bogged down in history, religion, murder, love and comedy. Thousands of pieces of paper surrounded me and to relieve tension I sometimes laughed out loud which sounded oddly like a demented parrot. My eyes crossed and swiveled alarmingly (oops, sorry. It's not politically correct to make fun of eyes – even if they are your own.) My back ached from hours slouched in front of my computer. My neck stiffened and I needed my neck in good working order because it supported my head that housed masterpieces (which still hadn't emerged.)

And while all this was going on my husband was commissioned to write a manual on Airport Security and sailed through it as if he was out yachting on the Hauraki Gulf. My smile felt glued to my face (no one can say I lack a sense of humor.)

If this is what happened when you wanted to write... Stuff it (I thought) I've had enough, I'm not playing anymore!

I stayed away from writing for about a month, seeking new interests. I tried to bring out hidden talents (there had to be some.) I would be a great artist - have an exhibition of my paintings. Unfortunately, my painting of a thrush looked like a cross between an eagle and Quasimodo. Eventually, I surrendered to the truth. I could only draw stick-men.

My flower arrangements looked as if they had been tossed into a vase. Plants withered the minute I touched them. The last straw was my attempt to create tiny rosebuds for an iced cake. I really think my husband went too far suggesting I used concrete mix.

Enthusiasm died. So, sulking or glancing longingly at the hideous metal monster that stared back at me (you've guessed it) I crept back.

This time I did things at a more leisurely pace. I wrote, enjoying it more and more. Everything became easier and I realised that I must have absorbed a lot of the teaching, retaining what was useful and discarding the useless. I relaxed, became less tense about my writing. Sensitivity was a thing of the past. I had acquired skin like a rhinoceros.

I enjoy the camaraderie that writers give to each other. Why, only the other day I listened attentively while another writer went on about how her characters had a life of their own and did what they wanted to do.

"I can't do anything with them, my deah," she gushed, "they refuse to listen to me. Do you get the same problem with yours?"

I thought about the years of learning, of trying to understand everything that had been thrown at me. The struggle, trying to remember everything. Writer's block. Tears.

Critiques that stung like a sharp slap. Critiques that winded me.

And then I thought about the help, kindness, support and best of all – praise.

"No – I get very little trouble with my characters. They do exactly what I want them to do."

I smiled. (No one can say I lack a sense of humour.)

END

Babs Halton is the author of two children's books and has published a book of poetry.

Now writing a novel (thriller) she hopes to have it

completed in 2007.

The Black Cat

by Edgar Allan Poe

FOR the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not -- and very surely do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified -- have tortured -- have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but Horror -- to many they will seem less terrible than barroques. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the common-place -- some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects.

From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one

of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man.

I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind. We had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a cat.

This latter was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever *serious* upon this point -- and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.

Pluto -- this was the cat's name -- was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character -- through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance -- had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. For Pluto, however, I still

retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I made no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when by accident, or through affection, they came in my way. But my disease grew upon me -- for what disease is like Alcohol ! -- and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish -- even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper.

One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket ! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.

When reason returned with the morning -- when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch -- I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.

In the meantime the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented, it is true, a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness

is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart -- one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not*? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself -- to offer violence to its own nature -- to do wrong for the wrong's sake only -- that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; -- hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; -- hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence; -- hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin -- a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it -- if such a thing were possible -- even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

On the night of the day on which this cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair.

I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts -- and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect. On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. The plastering had here, in great measure, resisted the action

of the fire -- a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread. About this wall a dense crowd were collected, and many persons seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with very minute and eager attention. The words "strange!" "singular!" and other similar expressions, excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in *bas relief* upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal's neck.

When I first beheld this apparition -- for I could scarcely regard it as less -- my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd -- by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.

Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place.

One night as I sat, half stupified, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of Gin, or of Rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and

what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat -- a very large one -- fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast.

Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it of the landlord; but this person made no claim to it -- knew nothing of it -- had never seen it before.

I continued my caresses, and, when I prepared to go home, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so; occasionally stooping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite with my wife.

For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but -- I know not how or why it was -- its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed. By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently ill use it; but gradually -- very gradually -- I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence.

What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife, who, as I have already said, possessed, in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had

once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures.

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly -- let me confess it at once -- by absolute *dread* of the beast.

This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil -- and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to own -- yes, even in this felon's cell, I am almost ashamed to own -- that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened by one of the merest chimæras it would be possible to conceive. My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the character of the mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite; but, by slow degrees -- degrees nearly imperceptible, and which for a long time my Reason struggled to reject as fanciful -- it had, at length, assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name -- and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared -- it was now, I say, the image of a hideous -- of a ghastly thing -- of the GALLOWS ! -- oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime -- of Agony and of Death !

And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity. And *a brute beast* -- whose fellow I had

contemptuously destroyed -- *a brute beast* to work out for me -- for me a man, fashioned in the image of the High God -- so much of insufferable wo! Alas! neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of Rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone; and, in the latter, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight -- an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off -- incumbent eternally upon my heart !

Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates -- the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind; while, from the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas! was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.

One day she accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan.

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I

deliberated about casting it in the well in the yard -- about packing it in a box, as if merchandize, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar -- as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims.

For a purpose such as this the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection, caused by a false chimney, or fireplace, that had been filled up, and made to resemble the rest of the cellar. I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect any thing suspicious.

And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crow-bar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while, with little trouble, I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brick-work. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself -- "Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain."

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it, at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forebore to present itself in my present mood. It is impossible to describe, or to imagine, the deep, the blissful sense

of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom. It did not make its appearance during the night -- and thus for one night at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul!

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a freeman. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted -- but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured.

Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises. Secure, however, in the inscrutability of my place of concealment, I felt no embarrassment whatever. The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar. I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to depart. The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, "I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health, and a little more courtesy. By the bye, gentlemen, this -- this is a very well constructed house." (In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.) -- "I may say an *excellently* well constructed house. These walls -- are you going, gentlemen? -- these walls are solidly put together;" and here,

through the mere phrenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend ! No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb! -- by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman -- a howl -- a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party upon the stairs remained motionless, through extremity of terror and of awe. In the next, a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb!

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