

Anatomy of a (Regal) Short Story

By Sarah Nell Summers, Contributing Editor

I have always loved short stories. Well, good ones. When I was young, “ladies’ magazines” were full of stories—cookie cutter stories of sad women redeemed by romance. I hated them!

No, the stories I loved had full-blooded characters in realistic situations. Best of all were the stories with a twist. The great ones carried me on a slow ride up the arc to an unpredictable climax followed by a swift run to the surprising ending. Thoroughly satisfying. Perhaps that’s why I love Guy de Maupassant’s “The Diamond Necklace” and O. Henry’s “Ransom of Red Chief” so much. But I don’t require irony. The sentimental or fantastic story with a gentle conclusion is just as great. To this day Christmas just isn’t Christmas without rereading Truman Capote’s “A Christmas Memory”. For the fantastic category I have a new favorite.

Recently my ‘brother from another mother’ introduced me to a masterful short story by a famous contemporary writer. And it’s a lesson in how to craft a short story. A Stephen King story that won’t keep you up all night or trouble your dreams with gory images. “Cookie Jar” balances the sentimental with the fantastic and has a twist. Several in fact.

A middle school boy visits his great-grandfather to fulfill a homework assignment. The boy needs details of the differences between their generations. Sound boring? Not in King’s deft hands.

There was a certain accord between them, right from the beginning. The boy thought the old man looked pretty good for ninety, and the old man thought the boy, whose name was Dale, looked pretty good for thirteen.

When an editor or judge says, “show, don’t tell,” this is what he means. As Rhett tells his great-grandson, Dale, about the technology of his youth, the two find more in common than they expected. Then Rhett tells Dale to turn off his phone’s recording feature. He has a family tale to tell only for Dale’s ears. We begin the steady climb up and down the story arc to a magical, poignant climax.

“Cookie Jar” is a must-read (pardon the cliché, please) for anyone who hopes to master the art of short story writing. You will have your own list of lessons learned. Here are a few of mine.

Story Arc: The arc—the backbone of any storyline—seems to mystify novice writers. Yet it isn’t all that difficult to understand. It’s merely a way to express the rise and fall of emotions, frequency of events, and their impact on the protagonist and reader. In

fact, my freshman composition instructor drew a story-arc chart on our assignments, telling us, “If your chart looks like the Dow Jones at the end of a good week, you’ve done well. Woe to the student whose chart has flat-lined.” Mrs. Miller expected to meet the characters, learn of conflicts, discover crises right up to an exciting (or at least intriguing) climax, and relax quickly at the dénouement. She’d say, “The dénouement may not affect the characters; it *must* affect the reader.”

Lesson: Read “Cookie Jar” with arc in mind. Draw a chart of the emotional rise and fall of the narrative. When I charted the story, I found a line of hills of varying heights depending on how intense or surprising each segment of the story was. Taken as a whole, each peak was a bit higher than the previous one. The closer I got to the end of the story the shorter the distance between peaks, until finally I had drawn a sharply pointed mountain higher than all the rest—a mountain whose far side plunged almost to the level of the start. After that the line levelled off briefly and stopped. Emphasis on briefly.

Try charting your latest story. And, if you have the nerve, get a fellow-writer to chart the same story and compare peaks.

Characters: King reveals a great deal about Dale and his great-grandfather and virtually nothing physical about the other characters. For these he confines his details to personality traits, motives. But only the essentials.

Lesson: Reserve detailed description for the main actors. Even then, a rigorous self-editing may eliminate the mundane ID info—eye color, hair color. In most stories such detail merely drags down the pace of the plot.

Descriptive Language: You will find no awkward over-writing in King’s story. Where lesser writers use prepositional phrases, King chooses exact, vibrant adjectives.

Lesson: Avoid metaphor if it doesn’t come naturally. Don’t force imagery. If your phrase sounds like, “Lachrymose March sloshed into a soggy April,” delete it. Quick! If your phrase sounds like King’s “a sleet-thickened wind slapped at the house”, smile and continue.

Switch Conventions: In “Cookie Jar” King begins with narrative and conversation followed by narrative within a conversation. It can be tricky to keep all the quote marks in order for a long quoted tale. Especially if there are additional quotes within quotes. That can be a quagmire for typos.

Cleverly King breaks from the quoted conversation. We no longer hear the old man’s voice. An omniscient third-party narrator tells us the family’s history. When the events reach the present, we rejoin the conversation.

Lesson: Don't be afraid to switch narrative conventions in order to be clear. King draws a line before and after his third-party narration. The reader knows just where he is.

Last word: Forget Word Count. CWN's contest limits authors to 3000 words. "Cookie Jar" has 8367!

Lesson: Write your story to say what you want to say. Let it simmer in your brain for a while. Return to the manuscript and proof, edit, crop vigorously, read aloud. Only when it sounds right, check the word count in the bottom left corner of the monitor. Longer than 3000 words? So be it. When you reach absolute zero "fluff", regardless of the total, type ###. Find a competition or magazine that accepts your story length. I can't imagine "Cookie Jar" with 5367 words chopped out. Can you?

You can read "Cookie Jar" here:

<http://www.forreadingaddicts.co.uk/new-releases/stephen-king-cookie-jar/12308>

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