Description

Writers have been creating virtual realities since before computers were even dreamed of. Good fiction conjures an alternative world, gives you a window into someone else's life, takes you somewhere other. Above all, it's convincing. Effective description is fundamental to this process. The aim is to entrance your reader by the cunningly set stage to the extent that they don't notice the ropes and pulleys supporting it all. The craft is in judging what is salient and what is boring, when to zoom in and when to draw back, when to show and when to leave intriguing gaps, when to elongate and when to contract.

While these considerations apply to all prose narratives, they are particularly, urgently important in short fiction, where we don't have time to elaborate. A larger text, like a novel, may be able to carry a little extra weight. But a short story offers no hiding place – it must be lean and built for speed. As Alice Munro puts it, "You're much more thinly clothed. You're like somebody out in a little shirt." [i] So if we have to travel light, we must choose very carefully what to pack in the case marked 'Description'.

Less is more

Narrative drive is paramount, a lesson I learned the hard way after wasting a lot of time and effort on pages and pages of beautiful (to me) but pointless (to everyone else) description. As Stephen King says,

> In many cases when a reader puts a story aside because it 'got boring,' the boredom arose because the writer grew enchanted

with his powers of description and lost sight of his priority,

which is to keep the ball rolling.[ii]

Just because you can doesn't mean that you should. When it comes to setting the scene, the bare minimum can be more than enough. To illustrate this, I'm going to use a very short piece of flash fiction by Fred Leebron, called "Water". The piece is so short that we can read it in full to understand how description contributes to the functioning of the narrative:

She touches his hair by the river.

I am in our apartment, working. Her hand moves down his back.

I empty the trash and unclog the kitchen sink. His former girlfriends have turned into lesbians.

I take the key to his apartment, which he gave me so I could water his plants during the summer. He bends his kissing face to hers.

I walk over to his apartment, just two blocks away. Their legs dangle in the river.

I unlock the door and bolt it behind me. The room smells of feet and stale ashtrays. In the kitchen is a gas stove. I turn it on without lighting it.

Down by the river is a flock of geese, which they admire while holding hands. Soon he will take her back to his apartment. Soon they will lie there, readying cigarettes.

I relock the apartment and slip into the street. The air smells of autumn, burnt. In the sky, birds are leading each other south.

I know there is nothing left between us, that she looks at me each morning as if I were interrupting her life. [iii]

In this ambiguous and troubling narrative, we deduce that the narrator intends to harm the woman who no longer loves him and the man with whom she is now having a relationship. The narrator contrives a gas leak while the lovers enjoy a romantic interlude by the river. In true short fiction style, we are not shown what happens as a result of these actions, but we are led to conclude that there is likely to be a catastrophic explosion. It is description which establishes this expectation, both practically and thematically. “The room smells of feet and stale ashtrays”. In such a short narrative, we might wonder why the narrator chooses to include these descriptive details. But it is the smell of feet which establishes that the room contains the aftermath of physical intimacy, distasteful to the embittered narrator, who intrudes into this space in the guise of a helpful holiday plant-waterer, dismissed as a bit-part player in the lives of the lovers. The use of the word 'stale' intensifies this interpretation. However, it is 'ashtrays' in the plural which establishes an entrenched smoking habit, and it is this fact which is crucial to our understanding of what is likely to happen. The gas being left on and the certainty that the two lovers will light post-coital cigarettes leads us to predict a violent explosion, both literal and metaphorical.

The literary quality of this flash fiction is also enhanced by the use of description. There is a contrast between the rejected narrator, working in the domestic space with clogged sinks, trash and overflowing ashtrays, and the lovers, who inhabit the fresh outdoor space of the river, dynamic and filled with life. The brief brushstrokes of description establish these contrasting environments, so that an ironic reversal is achieved when the narrator, having set the murderous plan in motion, leaves the domestic space for the freedom of the outside world, while the lovers will perish when

they leave the river and return to the stale interior of the apartment. This is why we are told that there is a flock of geese by the river – a detail that may, at first glance, seem irrelevant. It contributes to the thematic resonance through the shift from stasis to flight: "In the sky, birds are leading each other south", mirroring the change and movement in the narrator's life, physically and mentally, as the would-be arsonist leaves the apartment and looks forward to exacting revenge.

The most powerful descriptive detail, however, relies again on the sense of smell. When the narrator emerges from the apartment, the first thing they note is that "The air smells of autumn, burnt". The burnt smell obviously foreshadows and confirms the fire that is to follow. More subtly, the mention of autumn ties in with the migrating birds, and resonates richly with notions of endings, decay and darkness, as well as contrasting associations of change, travel and starting afresh.

It is such small and precisely-chosen descriptive details that achieve big contributions to the depth and power of even the shortest stories. As Rust Hills tells us, when writing short fiction, "Everything must work with everything else." And description, when used skilfully, can be a vital component in a form where "Everything enhances everything else, interrelates with everything else, is inseparable from everything else." The key to succeeding in this aim is, as demonstrated so ably by Leebron, to incorporate description with "a necessary and perfect economy." [iv]

Writing Exercise: Using Description To Achieve Depth and Resonance

Take a draft story (even a first paragraph will do). Look for a moment when a character performs an action. Immediately following that action, introduce a sensory detail. What is the first, and most important thing that they notice? If you can, locate a detail in their environment that comes from touch, taste, sound or smell. Sight is fine, but it's sometimes more obvious and therefore less interesting. Have your narrator or point of view character note or perceive this detail in a way which resonates with the theme or plot of your story. If you aren't yet sure of plot or theme, great! Consider this detail and think about what it might contain. The character's own perceptions of the world around them could tell you what the theme really is. Rewrite or tweak in light of these insights.

Then ask someone to read your work. Ask them to explain the effect that your description has on them. What does it look like in their imagination? What themes are present?What have they surmised/understood/anticipated from your writing? How do their impressions differ from your intentions? What would you change in the light of their comments?

Try asking someone else to read your paragraphs and compare their responses with those of your first reader. Are they similar or different? Why might this be?

Multi-tasking and multi-layering

As we have seen, description is the consummate multi-tasker. Amongst other things, it can:

- Create atmosphere/suspense
- Introduce something the reader needs to know
- Help the drama
- Show character/build voice
- Contribute to the plot
- Work on symbolic, allegoric and prosaic levels

One of the most memorable and unsettling short fictions that I have ever read is "Four Institutional Monologues" by George Saunders. This unconventional narrative uses four different forms, narrated by four different voices, to achieve a sinister implication that is never stated outright, but which builds in and across the voices so that what is unsaid is sometimes more powerful than what is voiced. In each case, the voice of the narrator and the unsettling implications are created by effective use of description.

The first section is a memo from a middle manager. The voice and status of this character are established via a deliberate imprecision in his ability to describe feelings: "we got sort of excited". We deduce from his enthusiastic but incompetent expression that his team has been criticised for attitude and performance by those more senior in the organisation. What the organisation is, its purpose, and the work that they do, are all carefully withheld. We get references to "the tasks that we must sometimes do around here that maybe aren't on the surface all that pleasant". One employee is praised for his

productivity in terms that suggest violence: “God he was really pounding down and you could see the energetic joy on his face each time he rushed by us to get additional clean-up towels”. Disturbing possibilities lurk under the surface of what is being described, and these intensify as the story progresses. What it is that he's pounding, why the work may be morally suspect, and what goes on in Room 6 (“no-one is walking out of Room 6 feeling perfectly okay”) is never actually revealed. [v]

The second monologue is a “Design Proposal”, which makes deliberate use of impenetrable jargon, including a chilling reference to the “Forward-Anticipating Temporary Community”(19). Just who this community contains and the reason for its temporary nature (which is emphasised repeatedly) is never revealed. Following this is a third monologue, written in mistake-ridden English by a worker who is clearly considered to be of the lowest status. This section is a pitiable plea for other departments to cease their mockery of the narrator and his co-workers:

> And also you don't have to say Ouch whenever one of our throwed Knuckles goes too far and hits the wall, it is not like the Knuckle could feel that and say Ow, because it is dead dumbass, it cannot feel its leg part hitting the wall, so we know you are being sarcasmic (24).

Again, it is inarticulacy, and a withholding of what is actually going on, that give this description its power.

The final, and most disturbing section, is titled “(93990)” and is written in the language of a scientific experiment. Through the jargon and technical terminology, an affecting narrative about a 'diminutive male' monkey emerges. The monkey survives all of the toxic substances which kill the other subjects of the experiment. The horrific deaths of the other monkeys are recorded in cold, objective language, while the

sentience and humanity of the 'diminutive male' are there for us to see, if we read attentively:

> Also at times it seemed to implore. This imploring was judged to be, possibly, a mild hallucinogenic effect. This imploring resulted in involuntary laughter on the part of the handlers, which resulted in the animal discontinuing the imploring behaviour and retreating to the NW corner where it sat for quite some time with its back to the handlers. It was decided that, in future, handlers would refrain from laughing at the imploring, so as to be able to obtain a more objective idea of the duration of the (unimpeded) imploring. (30)

Through the sparse and 'objective' description, the reader understands that the narrator has completely missed the point. This 'diminutive male' monkey (his small stature described repeatedly in order to establish him as deserving of our sympathy) is pleading for his life while the handlers dismiss entirely the possibility that the monkey understands what is happening and is trying to communicate with them. The narrator's description of their decision to stop laughing relies on the basis of scientific observation and excludes any sympathy with another living creature. The reader sees through the narrator's description, to the real point of the narrative, which remains unspoken. The unflinchingly scientific voice is sustained to the end, where they mindlessly 'sacrifice' the monkey, having failed to recognise or investigate the far more interesting finding, which is the great intelligence of the creature they have killed. The intended outcome of the experiment is not explained. While the four narratives are never linked explicitly, we are left with a sense that they are all connected via descriptions of institutional blindness and immorality.

The most useful lesson that we can draw from Saunders' story is that description works best when it reflects the voice and world-view of the character who is perceiving or narrating the events. What's important to them? What would they notice first? How do they understand and respond to the world around them? In some cases it may be more effective to create inarticulate or even misguided descriptions of feelings, events and settings because that is more accurately the experience of the characters involved.

Maintaining the integrity of the fictional world that you are creating means never describing things just for the reader's benefit. All the characters in the sinister world of the "Institutional Monologues" know exactly what is going on and what they are all involved with. For the narrator to state, "As you know, we are all working on X in order to achieve Y" would be clunky in the extreme. Avoiding this requires self-confidence – the temptation when we are drafting work is to make clear what is happening because we are so keen for our readers to understand our message, and anxious that they may not "get it". However, as Saunders demonstrates, the unspoken is often a more powerful tool of communication. Using description to hint, suggest or even mislead can be very effective, offering the reader the space to read between the lines. As Sara Maitland reassures us, "A powerful piece of writing is always teamwork: respect your readers, and you will find there is nothing to be self-conscious about." [vi]

Writing Exercise: Description Is Character

Write about an everyday process, such as making a cup of tea, getting dressed or switching on a computer, using the techniques and strategies that we have covered in this chapter. Make sure that you describe the events from within the world-view of your

character. If they are bored, angry, or inarticulate, make sure that your description supports and intensifies this feature of their personality. Think about what could be left implied or unsaid. Consider gaps that could build intrigue and suspense. Try to make space for your reader's imagination to work. Above all, make it a gripping read.

---

[i] "Go Ask Alice." Alice Munro interviewed by Alice Quinn in *The New Yorker*, February 19 2001 <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/02/19/go-ask-alice>

[ii] Stephen King, *On Writing* (New English Library, London, 2000), p.207

[iii] Fred Leebron,"Water" pp. 157 – 158 in *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories* eds. James Thomas, Denise Thomas and Tom Hazuka (W.W. Norton, New York and London, 1992)

[iv] Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* (Houghton Mifflin,Boston, 2000), p.4

[v] George Saunders, "Four Institutional Monologues" pp. 13 – 33 in *The Best of McSweeney's* ed. Dave Eggers (Penguin, London, 2005), pp. 14 - 16

[vi] Sara Maitland, *The Writer's Way* (Capella, London, 2005), p.119.