

How to Write Short: Word Craft for Fast Times

For SXSW 2015

By Roy Peter Clark

I. Power of Story

Facebook page: "Humans of New York" (sent to me via Twitter)

When I was 22, I fell off a fishing boat in the middle of the night. We were about 200 miles from shore, fishing for swordfish. I was trying to bend a pipe into place when it gave way and dumped me in the ocean. They didn't notice I was gone for about 20 minutes. The waves were about twelve feet high, and between the waves I could see the boat going further and further and further until it completely disappeared. You know how they say that when you're dying, you're supposed to go toward the light? Well, when I thought I was dying, the light was moving further and further away. (112 words)

Moment in time (By RPC)

Shirley had fallen again, nothing serious at the age of 95, just a couple of days in the hospital – and then rehab. When she woke in a hospital bed, having already forgotten the fall, she wondered why she was there. Loopy on medication, she told her youngest son that she had just had a baby. "Have you seen the baby?" It was 1943, she thought, 70 years ago, the year of her first pregnancy and her miscarriage. My older brother – who was never born. (84 words)

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-35)

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell in with robbers, who after both stripping him and beating him went their way, leaving him half-dead. But, as it happened, a certain priest was going down the same way, and when he saw him, he passed by. And likewise a Levite also, when he was near the place and saw him, passed by. But a certain Samaritan as he journeyed came upon him, and seeing him, was moved with compassion. And he went up to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. And setting him on his own beast, he brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the inn-keeper and said, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I, on my way back, will repay you." (152 words)

Twitter: Joanna Smith covering earthquake in Haiti for Toronto Star

- Fugitive from prison caught looting, taken from police, beaten, dragged thru street, died slowly and set on fire in pile of garbage.
- Woman shrieking, piercing screams, "Maman! Papa! Jesus!" as dressing on her wounded heel is changed outside clinic. No painkillers.
- Little boys playing with neat little cars constructed from juice bottles, caps. Fill with rocks and pull with string. Fun!

II. Emphatic Word Order

From Macbeth by William Shakespeare:

The Queen, my lord, is dead.

Not:

The Queen is dead, my lord.

My lord, the Queen is dead.

(Yoda's version) Dead the Queen is, my lord.

From the book "Zoo Story" by Thomas French on violent death of chimp named Herman:

Altogether he lived at Lowry Park Zoo for 35 years. He lasted there longer than any other creature and longer than any of the humans. Each of the 1,800 animals at the zoo is assigned a number. His was 00001.

III. Juke-Joint Juxtapositions

- Movie and series title by Joss Whedon: Buffy the Vampire Slayer
- Novel title by Thomas Mann: Tonio Kröger
- Poem title by T.S. Eliot: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
- Catch phrase by Muhammad Ali: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee."

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He writes essays on writing, editing, language, and journalism for Poynter.org, and teaches webinars and courses for Poynter News University: NewsU.org. He writes on Twitter @RoyPeterClark. His podcasts "Roy's Writing Tools" are available at iTunesU. He can be reached by email: rclark@poynter.org.

His favorite food is pizza, and his idea of a perfect date is eating pizza with his wife.

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