Seeing Your Way to Better Stories.

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The first time I met Kelly Freas, the renowned science fiction artist, he had lust published a series of posters to promote interest in and support for the space program. The entire series was displayed on walls throughout the house, and Kelly was asking all the guests at a party which posters they thought most effective. He found a fascinating pattern in the results. "Verbally oriented" people always picked the one showing a moon rocket, three ghostly sailing ships, and the phrase, "Suppose Isabella had said no..." "Visually oriented" people always picked the one with no words, just a picture of a rocket "hatching" from an Earthlike egg.

Writers, by the nature of their work, tend to be "verbally oriented." But they would do well to realize that many of their readers are less so. Most readers do not pick up a novel or short story to admire the author's cleverness in turning a phrase, but to experience vicariously something they cannot experience directly. Your job as a writer is to make your reader forget that he or she is reading and give him or her the illusion of being in the story, seeing and hearing and smelling and feeling what's happening to your characters. Hence the oft-repeated dictum: "Show, don't tell."

What, exactly, does that mean? I've found that the most important key to making a reader see a scene vividly is that the author must see it clearly to be able to convey the illusion to someone else. And one of the best pieces of advice I can give a writer suffering from a tendency to tell rather than show is this: try telling it as a play.

All the World's a Stage.

Telling rather than showing breaks down into several specific types of faults: describing character rather than showing it through dialogue and action; directly disclosing thoughts of non-viewpoint characters; summarizing dialogue as indirect discourse instead of quoting it directly; speaking in generalities rather than specifics. All of these things tend to distance the reader from the scene and reduce the illusion of being a part of it.

In a play you can't do those things. Except for a few special cases of unusual structure, like the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's Our Town or Sakini in John Patrick's The Teahouse of the August Moon, there is nobody on a stage to tell you what kinds of people the characters are. The only way you can find out is by watching what they do and listening to what they say to one another. And they say and do specific things, which the playwright must spell out. So if you've written a scene for a story in which you have told too much that you could have shown, a good way to force yourself to find specific ways to solve the problem is to recast the scene as a play--and then translate the result back into story form.

Let's see how it works in a hypothetical snippet of a badly written story:

Ralph stepped nervously into Commissioner Reed's office. It was clearly the office of a career bureaucrat, and Ralph could see at a glance that Reed was the kind of bureaucrat who did everything by the book and disliked anything that threatened to deviate from it. But the fate of California depended on Ralph's convincing him in the next few minutes that he had to deviate from the book.

Reed already had Ralph's dossier in front of him and seemed to be reading the crucial article. He looked up and greeted Ralph with a few words of perfunctory small talk. Then he said, "So what you're saying in your paper is that you're sure the Big One is coming in six months, but you know a way to make it less destructive?"

"That's right," Ralph replied nervously, trying to collect his thoughts and brace his confidence for the confrontation to come.

"But your cure," Reed grated, "is going to cost the taxpayers a lot of money. Right?"

"I'm afraid so," Ralph admitted as apologetically as if it were his fault. He drew himself up and said firmly, "But if we let the earthquake go its own way, it will cost a lot more."

"How much money7" the bureaucrat demanded.

How does this go wrong? Let me count the ways. We are told that Ralph is nervous, but we are left on our own to picture how this affects his behavior. It would be better to do it the other way around: show us how he acts and let us conclude for ourselves that he is nervous. We are told that Reed is marked by his office and his personal appearance as a career bureaucrat who can't stand things that don't fit standard procedure, but we're not shown a single piece of evidence to justify Ralph's sizing him up that way. Their conversation begins with "a few words of perfunctory small talk," but again we're left to guess what they are--whereas if they were quoted, they themselves could provide some of the character clues that we haven't been given in any other way. Once Ralph and Reed get down to business, every speech is described by an adverb or worse, and the author seems determined to find a new synonym for "said" every time anybody opens his mouth.

Now try it as a scene of a play:

(We see an office lined with glass-fronted bookcases, locked and filled with leather-bound volumes. A single desk sits in the middle of the room, its top empty except for a telephone and a folder containing several papers.

REED, a slightly built, tight-dipped man of fifty or so, with a few strands of greasy black hair combed haphazardly across his pate, is frowning through thick, rimless glasses at the top paper in the folder.

RALPH enters through the door and walks to the desk, checking his belt buckle and smoothing his hair down with quick little motions as he goes. When he reaches the desk he stops, shifting his weight back and forth from one foot to the other. Reed looks up at him, not lifting his head but simply peering over the tops of his lenses. Ralph avoids meeting his eyes directly.)

REED: Hmph. So you're Tambori. RALPH: Yes, sir.

REED: And what you're saying here (he taps the paper) is that you're sure the Big One is coming in six months, but you know a way to make it less destructive? RALPH: That's right.

REED: But your cure is going to cost the taxpayers a lot of money.
Right?

RALPH: I'm afraid so. (He straightens up and looks Reed in the eye.) But if we let the earthquake go its own way, it will cost a lot more.

REED: How much money?

A few things still have to be described, of course. Furniture and other fixed features of the physical setting can't speak for themselves; human beings can and should. The theater audience will see what the scene looks like by looking at it, but the stage manager has to be told how to set it up for them. The actors need some suggestions--such as Ralph's avoiding Reed's eyes and Reed's peering over the top of his glasses while keeping the rest of himself aimed at his desk--of how to convey their personalities and states of mind. But the way people talk is conveyed simply by what they say and bow they say it. The adverbs and "said-bookisms" are gone. There is no place for them on the stage--and there's seldom a need to put them back in when you translate it back to a story:

There was nothing in the room except some cases of musty books and a single wooden desk, and the desk was bare except for a telephone and a folder containing a few papers. Reed, a slightly built, tight-lipped man of fifty or so with a few strands of greasy black hair combed haphazardly across his pate, seemed to be studying the top paper intently through thick, rimless glasses. He was frowning, and Ralph shifted his weight back and forth from one foot to the other as he waited for the commissioner to speak.

When he finally looked up, he didn't lift his head but simply peered at Ralph over the tops of his lenses. "Hmph. So you're Tambori."
"Yes, sir."

"And what you're saying here"--he tapped the paper--"is that you're sure the Big One is coming in six months, but you know a way to make it less destructive?"

"That's right."

"But your cure is going to cost the taxpayers a lot of money. Right?"

'Tm afraid so." Ralph drew himself up and looked Reed in the eye. "But if we let the earthquake go its own way, it will cost a lot more."
Reed scowled. "How much money?"

Notice that not only are the adverbs and strained synonyms for "said" gone, but even the word said itself is seldom necessary. As on the stage, once the audience or readers have been given a picture of the characters and setting, they can fill in for themselves such details as who's speaking and in what tone of voice. On the printed page, where they

can't physically see and hear who's speaking, they may need an occasional reminder--but with only two characters "onstage," this can be provided easily and unobtrusively by an occasional reference to something else one of the speakers is doing, like, "Reed scowled."

There is still room on the printed page for an occasional direct reference to the viewpoint character's thoughts, but even those can often be avoided. The original reference to how important this meeting is seemed unnecessary in the revision because that would have already been hinted at in earlier scenes, and the reason for its importance quickly becomes apparent in the dialogue of this one. The very existence of a viewpoint character is perhaps the most essential difference between a story and a play, but it's not as big a difference as it first seems. In a play, everybody is revealed only through his words and deeds. In a story, one character is known more directly--but even he, and through him the reader, remains an audience for everyone else.

As the writer, you, too, see much of the action from an audience's viewpoint. But this can work to your advantage: if you visualize your characters and their doings clearly enough, all you have to do is watch what they do and write it down.

Setting the Stage.

There are, of course, a number of important differences between a play and a story. One is that the reader does not actually see the stage, so you as storyteller have to create it in his mind-and you want him to feel as if he's in the scene, not looking at it from section 6, row 5, seat 2. I've been talking about "seeing" and "watching" and "visualizing," but those are really a metaphorical shorthand for "perceiving and experiencing." Seeing is perhaps our most vivid and detailed sense, but much of the fullness of the world comes from the fact that it is only one of several. Poul Anderson, probably best known as a science fiction writer but highly regarded in several other genres as well, has said that in setting a scene, he consciously tries to appeal to at least three of the reader's senses. Consider the following, for example, the fourth paragraph of a scene in Anderson's novel The People of the Wind:

By then they were strolling in the garden. Rosebushes and cherry trees might almost have been growing on Terra; Esperance was a prize among colony planets. The sun Pax was still above the horizon, now at midsummer, but leveled mellow beams across an old brick wall. The air was warm, blithe with birdsong, sweet with green odors that drifted in from the countryside. A car or two caught the light, high above; but Fleurville was not big enough for its traffic noise to be heard this far from the centrum.

This brief paragraph plants not only visual images, but sounds, smells, the feeling of warmth, and even tactile sensations in the mind of the reader, with just a few words each. The phrase "old brick wall" alone tickles at least three senses for any reader who has ever seen and smelled and felt one. When your story is set in a place similar to ones the reader has experienced, a word or two like rosebushes can trigger a great deal of imagery. If the setting is not likely to be familiar to the reader, as often happens in science fiction, fantasy, and historical novels, the writer can take less for granted and may have to work harder, and even use more words, to give the scene enough depth to draw the reader in.

Even then, though, careful choice of the words is often preferable to using vast numbers of them. Anderson has a special knack for bringing alien worlds to life by giving things found there the sorts of instantly evocative names that human colonists might coin for them:

Further down a slope lay sheds, barns, and mews. The whole could not be seen at once from the ground, because Ythrian trees grew among the buildings: braidbark, copperwood, gaunt lightningrod, iewelleaf which sheened beneath the moon and by day would shimmer iridescent.

No reader of The People of the Wind has ever seen a braidbark, copper wood, or jewel leaf--but every reader gets an instant picture from each one-word name, complete with overtones like suggestions of texture. No reader gets exactly the same picture that the author had, but that's not important. What is important is that each gets a picture, suitable as a setting for the action and substantial enough for verisimilitude.

The Viewpoint Character.

These days, most successful fiction is told as if seen through the eyes (and other senses) of a single character, called the viewpoint character. The viewpoint character may not be the same through an entire story, particularly a long and complex one; but each scene, at least, is experienced by the reader as it is experienced by one of the participants. This means, for example, that a passage like this one won't work:

Astonished, Elmer looked at Esmerelda standing in the doorway. He'd never expected to see her again, and he didn't know whether he should invite her in or throw her out. There was no doubt in her mind, though. She'd come back for revenge, and she could hardly wait.

It's true that people used to write that way, but most readers and writers have become so used to the greater vividness and immediacy of narration from a single clearly defined viewpoint that "omniscient" storytelling now seems remote, artificial, and confusing. The word astonished, and the description of Elmer's thoughts and feelings, solidly establish him as the viewpoint character. Telling what is in Esmerelda's thoughts seems to do the same for her. The reader is left disoriented, unable to feel a part of the scene because his or her perceptions seem to keep jumping randomly around the room. If Elmer is the viewpoint character, with whom the reader is to identify for the duration, he has no way of knowing what's in Esmerelda's mind-except as it's suggested by her external appearance and actions. The last two sentences, for example, might be replaced by:

She smiled, but there was an odd quirk to her lips, and she looked more directly into his eyes than she had ever done before. "Aren't you going to invite me in?" she asked.

"Uh . . . sure." Only as she stepped across the threshold did he notice the slight bulge under her jacket that could only be a shoulder holster. tell it that way and the reader never leaves Elmer's head-and may feel a shiver along with him, without being told to.

Beyond the simple technical requirement of consistency within your chosen viewpoint, you need to understand how your viewpoint character thinks and feels. If your heroine

has been a private detective for ten years, she's not going to react to things in the same way as if she's been a nun for ten years. A nun who became one out of deep religious conviction may be very different from one who entered an order to hide from the secular world. This is why you're often advised to construct biographies for your important characters: because what happened to them before the story will profoundly influence how they see and react to events during the story. One important thing to remember, though, is that hardly anybody is either a villain or an idiot in his or her own eyes. Everybody's actions make sense--from his or her own point of view. As a writer, you must understand that point of view and convey it sympathetically, no matter how much you may personally disagree with it. In fact, a good exercise for broadening your range of characters is to set out deliberately to write sympathetically about a character you personally find distasteful.

The Rest of the Cast

At first glance, it may seem self-contradictory to talk about seeing the story through the eyes of characters other than the viewpoint character. The reader normally doesn't--but the author should.

The reason is simple: if you don't, your other characters will tend to act in the way most convenient for you, rather than in the way that makes the most sense for them. Since the driving force of a story is conflict, often among characters, the critical points in a plot are likely to involve two or more characters flung together in a situation in which each of them has to make a decision. (Should Elmer try to throw Esmerelda out, or should he scream, or should he try to reason with her? Does she really want to do something as drastic as killing him, or will that mess her life up even more than it already is?) In the real world, if the decision is about something that matters to both parties, they're both likely to invest a good deal of mental and/ or emotional energy in deciding what to do--and upon reflection, it often happens that the best course a person can choose is not the first one that might spring to mind. In fiction, all too often a writer is determined to have the hero or heroine's life go a certain way, and so has the other characters do things that will steer it in that direction. The result often bears an uncomfortable resemblance to cardboard puppets--with the strings showing.

Negative examples are easy to find; we've all read or watched too many war stories and westerns in which the bad guys were just plain bad, with never a thought for whether they would actually have any reason to do the specific things they did. For a positive example, you might look at Forest of the Night, a first novel by Marti Steussy, about human colonists on a harsh planet whose native inhabitants include creatures called "tigers" for their superficial resemblance to their terrestrial namesakes. In the early part of the book, the resemblance seems to go even deeper, as several incidents occur in which tigers are seen to attack humans, sometimes killing or injuring them, sometimes leaving them unharmed. In the hands of a less careful writer, this could easily have been another of those tedious tales of humans under siege by alien predators who are nothing more than mindless killing machines. But Steussy's tigers are actually highly intelligent, and there's a very specific reason for every one of the mysterious features of the "attacks." You don't find out what those reasons are until much later in the book--but the reason the book makes sense is that she thought those incidents through from the tigers' point of

view before writing them, even though she first described them only as seen by the humans.

Occasionally a writer will explicitly show an incident from more than one viewpoint in the finished story. This happens repeatedly in T. Coraghessan Boyle's recent novel World's End, chronicling the interwoven histories of two families living in the Hudson Valley between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries and retelling many key incidents from the viewpoint of everybody involved. Unless you have a very special reason for doing this, though, it's usually better to think each part of the story through from each important character's viewpoint, but then tell it only once, from that viewpoint which is most effective for that scene. To minimize the risk of reader confusion, it's also best not to change viewpoint even when you change scene unless there is a particularly good reason to do so--and virtually never within a scene.

Epilogue.

Several of the most useful skills you can have as a fiction writer are nothing more than looking at the substance of the story in the right ways: through the eyes of an imagined audience; through more than one sense; from inside the viewpoint character; and through the eyes of characters other than the viewpoint character. All but the first of these may be thought of as secondary skills for the act of translating the play back to story form. But the basis of the whole process is that initial step of visualizing the action in dramatic form.

When I first mentioned this idea to an actor and playwright friend, he said, "Good idea--but I'd take it a little further. Tell them to write it not only as a play, but as a play without parenthetical instructions to the actors on how to say their lines." That may sound extreme to a fiction writer used to relying heavily on adjectives and adverbs--but if you think about it, that's how Shakespeare did it.
And look where it got him.