



ON CRAFT: HAVING GRAVITY AND HAVING WEIGHT, BY ROBERT BOSWELL

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This month marks the paperback release of Robert Boswell's brilliant, funny, bighearted novel, *Tumbledown*, which was published to widespread acclaim last fall. In addition to being a well-respected novelist and short story writer, Boswell is also a beloved teacher of creative writing. Here's your chance for a crash course in fiction from one of the masters of the trade—read on for an excerpt from a craft talk that Boswell delivered at the Warren Wilson MFA Program and the 2013 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

From **“Having Gravity and Having Weight: On Meaning in Fiction”**

Stories are preserved on paper or in computer files much the way we imagine the cryogenic preservation of humans. Stories hibernate in pages, and some age better than others. To come to life, they have to be read. Author and reader together create the story, which becomes a living entity in the reader's mind. This means that a single story may have millions of slightly different iterations in the minds of its readers—sibling stories sharing the same DNA but with demonstrably different lives.

How much effort should an author make to control what's goes on in the reader's mind, to limit the reader's side of the creative act and insist on one's own vision? On the one hand, the typical reader is not going to be the creative equal of the author concerning her narrative, and one does not want to permit faulty, lazy readings of one's story. On the other hand, one does not want to deny the kind of active engagement with the story that is the essence of a great reading experience. These are issues of authorial custody, which I'll define as follows: the extent to which the author retains control over a story after it has been put into the hands of the reader.

Some authors are known for their low custody. Chekhov provides the minimal context necessary, shows a consequential act, and the story ends. He demands that the reader does her part, and often, a first-time reader is left scratching her head. At the other end of the scale, we find another Russian, Tolstoy (especially the late stories), who threatens to tip over into didacticism in his articulation of events and in his nudges toward the meaning he intends. In one of his most celebrated stories, Tolstoy includes the following line: “Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.” One cannot imagine Chekhov writing such a line. Ivan Ilych is hurt while decorating his apartment, and 15,000 words later, after specific kinds of torment and suffering, he understands not only that he has wasted his life but also how he should have lived, and he then reinvents himself and dies. Chekhov, who was a doctor and witnessed many deaths, writes his story “Gusev” in response to “The Death of Ivan Ilych”; the whole story is only 5000-some words, and here is the death of the title character: “Gusev went back to the ward and got into his hammock. He was again tormented by a vague craving, and he could not make out what he wanted. There was an oppression on his chest, a throbbing in his head, his mouth was so dry that it was difficult for him to move his tongue. He dozed, and murmured in his sleep, and, worn out with nightmares, his cough, and the stifling heat, towards

morning he fell into a sound sleep. He dreamed that they were just taking the bread out of the oven in the barracks and he climbed into the stove and had a steam bath in it, lashing himself with a bunch of birch twigs. He slept for two days, and at midday on the third two sailors came down and carried him out.”

If the danger of a low-custody story is bewilderment of the reader, the danger of a high-custody story is that it will be over-controlled, telling the reader not only what happens but also how the reader should feel about it. In such stories, the reader is passive and essentially redundant.

Authorial custody is the first piece of yard work I’d like you to ponder, and not only as it applies to existing works, but as it applies to your own fiction. I’m not suggesting that one end of the scale is preferable to the other; rather, I’m suggesting that there are decisions to make, decisions that you have made without realizing it. And it has an effect; there is a difference that one can hear.

Listen to the following three novel passages from a low custody author:

1—Nights of marriage, conjugal nights, the house still at last, the cushions indented where people had sat, the ashes warm. Nights that ended at two o’clock, the snow falling, the last guest gone. The dinner plates were left unwashed, the bed icy cold.

2—The book was in her lap; she had read no further. The power to change one’s life comes from a paragraph, a lone remark. The lines that penetrate us are slender, like the flukes that live in river water and enter the bodies of swimmers. She was excited, filled with strength. The polished sentences had arrived, it seemed, like so many other things, at just the right time. How can we imagine what our lives should be without the illumination of the lives of others?

3—She did not understand the play, but it did not disappoint her. Whatever its meaning—it was all repetition, anger, cries—she was won by it, she wanted to see it again. When the lights came up and the audience clapped, she rose almost without realizing it, applauding with her hands held high. In her unashamedness, her fervor, she was clearly a convert. Backstage was like a grocery that stays open all night. The lights were ancient and fluorescent; a number of badly dressed people who seemed to have no connection with the acting company were wandering back and forth.

These passages are from James Salter’s *Light Years*.

Now listen to a single, lengthier passage from a high custody writer and hear the difference:

Franklin H. Wheeler was among the few who bucked the current. He did so with apologetic slowness and with what he hoped was dignity, making his way in sidling steps down the aisle toward the stage door, saying “Excuse me...Excuse me,” nodding and smiling to several faces he knew, carrying one hand in his pocket to conceal and dry the knuckles he had sucked and bitten throughout the play.

He was neat and solid, a few days less than thirty years old, with closely cut black hair and the kind of unemphatic good looks that an advertising photographer might use to portray the discerning consumer of well-made but inexpensive merchandise (*Why Pay More?*). But for all its lack of structural distinction, his face did have an unusual mobility: it was able to suggest wholly

different personalities with each flickering change of expression. Smiling, he was a man who knew perfectly well that the failure of an amateur play was nothing much to worry about, a kindly, witty man who would have exactly the right words of comfort for his wife backstage; but in the intervals between his smiles, when he shouldered ahead through the crowd and you could see the faint chronic fever of bewilderment in his eyes, it seemed more that he himself was in need of comforting.

The trouble was that all afternoon in the city, stultified at what he liked to call “the dullest job you can possibly imagine,” he had drawn strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight: himself rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand (“If only I weren’t so nervous, Frank!”); himself sitting spellbound in pride and then rising to join a thunderous ovation as the curtain fell; himself glowing and disheveled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss (“Was it really good, darling? Was it really good?”); and then the two of them, stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell, holding hands under the table while they talked it all out. Nowhere in these plans had he foreseen the weight and shock of reality; nothing had warned him that he might be overwhelmed by the swaying, shining vision of a girl he hadn’t seen in years, a girl whose every glance and gesture could make his throat fill up with longing (“Wouldn’t you like to be loved by me?”), and that then before his very eyes she would dissolve and change into the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny but whom he knew as well and as painfully as he knew himself, a gaunt constricted woman whose red eyes flashed reproach, whose false smile in the curtain call was as homely as his own sore feet, his own damp climbing underwear and his own sour smell.

At the door he paused to withdraw and examine the pink-blotched hand from his pocket, half expecting to find it torn to a pulp of blood and gristle.

This passage is from *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates.

Excerpted from a craft talk delivered at Warren Wilson MFA Program and at Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, 2013.