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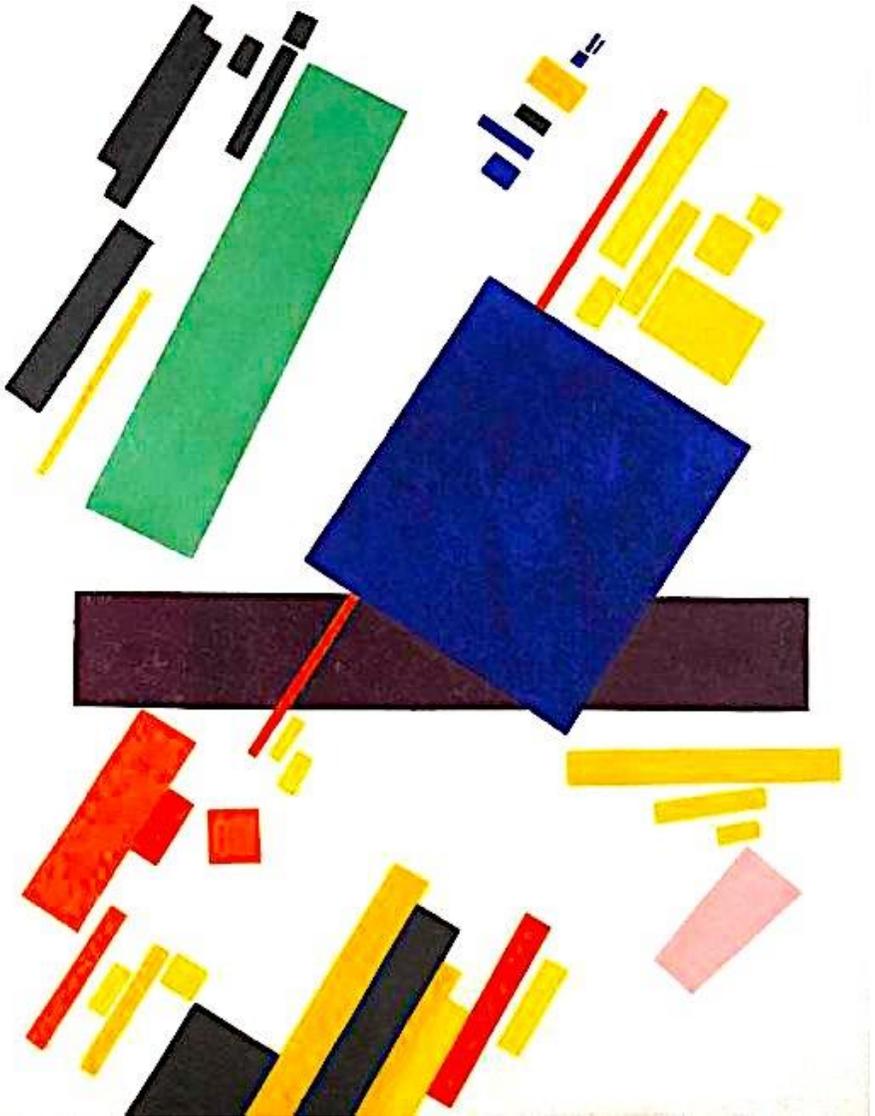
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FLASH FICTION:  
A PRIMER

ASSOCIATE EDITOR  
PAMELYN CASTO



2020 O:JA&L CHAPBOOK SERIES



FLASH FICTION: A PRIMER

Essays on craft by

PAMELYN CASTO



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AN ESSENTIAL READING LIST:  
FLASH FICTION ANTHOLOGIES, COLLECTIONS,  
AND ANALYSIS/ INSTRUCTION BOOKS

*This is a selection of anthologies, collections, instruction books that I have picked up during my in-depth studies of flash literature. All of them are interesting and worth reading and a couple of them also contain articles and essays I've written on the topic of flash fiction.*

FLASH FICTION ANTHOLOGIES

***Best Microfiction 2019***

Meg Pokrass and Gary Fincke, series editors  
Dan Chaon, guest editor  
Pelekinesis, Claremont, CA, 2019.

A few of the writers of these ultra shorties include Matt Bell, Roberta Beary, Myfanwy Collins, Robert Lopez, Michael Martone, and many more.

***Best Small Fictions 2015***

Tara L. Masih, series editor  
Robert Olen Butler, guest editor  
Queen's Ferry Press, 2015.

A few of the writers are Jeff Streeby, Dawn Raffel, Diane Williams, Hiromi Kawakami, and James Keegan.

***Best Small Fictions 2016***

Tara L. Masih, series editor  
Stuart Dybek, guest editor  
Queens Ferry Press, 2016.

Some of the writers are Etgar Keret, Kathy Fish, Eliel Lucero, Amelia Gray, and R.O. Kwon.

***Best Small Fictions 2017***

Tara L. Masih, series editor  
Amy Hempel, guest editor

Writers include Pamela Painter, Stuart Dybek, Brian Doyle, Ian Seed, Joy Williams and others.

***Best Small Fictions 2018***

Sherrie Flick, series editor  
Aimee Bender, guest editor

Braddock Avenue Books, Braddock, PA, 2019.

Among the many pieces is work by Katy Fish, Diane Williams, Deb Olin Unferth, Lydia Davis, Matt Bell, Steven Dunn, Desiree Cooper, Hala Alyan (and many more).

***Best Small Fictions 2019***

Nathan Leslie, series editor

Michelle Elvy, assistant editor

Rilla Askew, guest editor

Sonder Press, NY, 2019

Includes pieces by Lydia Davis, Michael Martone, Jolene McIlwain, Robert Vaughan, Diane Williams, Pedro Ponce, Lori Sambol Brody, Randall Brown (and many more).

***Crafting the Very Short Story:  
An Anthology of 100 Masterpieces***

Mark Mills, editor

Prentice Hall, 2003

A few of the many well-known writers included are Alice Walker, Ernest Hemingway, Anton Chekhov, Joyce Carol Oates, Yasunari Kawabata.

***Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction:  
Tips from Editors, Teachers, And Writers in the Field***

Tara Masih, editor

Rose Metal Press, 2009

A few of the featured writers are Robert Olen Butler, Ron Carlson, Pamelyn Casto, Stuart Dybek, Sherrie Flick, Pamela Painer, Michael Martone, and Robert Shapard. (The Field Guide contains essays on flash fiction along with example stories from some outstanding writers.)

***Flash Fiction:  
72 Very Short Stories***

James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazuka, editors

W. W. Norton, 1992

Some of the writers are Francine Prose, Raymond Carver, Brett Lott, Lon Otto, Russell Edson, Julio Cortazar, Tim O'Brien, Mark Strand, Gordon Lish, and Pamela Painter.

***Flash Fiction Forward:  
80 Very Short Stories***

Robert Shapard, James Thomas, editors

W. W. Norton & Co., 2006

A few of the many writers are Robert Coover, Steve Almond, Grace Paley, Ray Gonzalez, Lydia Davis, Dave Eggers, John Updike, and Donald Hall.

***Flash Fiction International:  
Very Short Stories from Around the World***

Robert Shapard, Christopher Merrill, editors

W. W. Norton, 2015

Some of the outstanding writers include Etgar Keret, Petina Gappah, Kim Young-ha, Czeslaw Milosz, and Ana María Shua.

***Four Minute Fictions:***

***50 Short-Short Stories from The North American Review***

Robley Wilson, Jr., Editor

Word Beat Press, 1987

A few of the writers are T. Coraghessan Boyle, Raymond Carver, Stephen Dixon, Stuart Dybek, Thaisa Frank, Edward Hirsch, Barry Lopez, Janey Anne Phillips, and Allan Woodman.

***Microcosmic Tales:***

***100 Wondrous Science Fiction Short-Short Stories***

Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, Joseph D. Olander, editors

Daw Books, 1992

Some of the authors include Isaac Asimov, Lester del Rey, Arthur C. Clark, Fritz Leiber, Mack Reynolds, Larry Niven, Alice Laurance, Harry Harrison, Joanna Russ, Robert Silverberg, Harlan Ellison, and Frederic Brown (along with many others).

***Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories***

Jerome Stern, Editor

W. W. Norton, 1996

A few of the writers are Virgil Suarez, Jesse Lee Kercheval, Antonya Nelson, Amy Hempel, and George Garrett.

***New Sudden Fiction:***

***Short-Short Stories from America And Beyond***

Robert Shapard, James Thomas, editors

New York: W. W. Norton, 2007

A few of the writers are Tobias Wolff, Aimee Bender, Sam Shepard, Ian Frazier, Jorge Luis Arzola, and Teolinda Gersao.

***100 Great Fantasy Short-Short Stories***

Asimov, Isaac, Terry Carr, Martin H. Greenberg, editors

Doubleday, 1984

The anthology includes short-short stories by Harlan Ellison, Marion Zimmer Bradley, H.P. Lovecraft, Damon Knight, Bruce Boston, Jane Yolen, Lawrence C. Connolly, Andre Maurois, Edgar Pangborn, Barry Malzberg, Roger Zelazny (and many others).

***PP/FF:***

***An Anthology***

Peter Connors, editor

Starcherone Books, 2006

Some of the writers included are Stuart Dybek, Kim Addonizio, Lydia Davis, Brian Evenson, Harold Jaffee, and Jessica Treat.

***Short:***

***An International Anthology of Five Centuries of Short-Short Stories, Prose Poems, Brief Essays, and Other Short Prose Forms***

Alan Ziegler, editor

Persea Books, 2014

Some of the writers included are Paul Celan, Fernando Pessoa, Franz Kafka, Henri Michaux, Czeslaw Milosz, W. S. Merwin, Luisa Valenzuela, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Joy Harjo, and Aimee Bender.

***Short Shorts:***

***An Anthology of the Shortest Stories***

Irving Howe, Ilana Wiener Howe, editors

Bantam Books, 1982

A few of the writers are Jorge Luis Borges, Grace Paley, Augusto Monterroso, Paula Fox, Octavio Paz, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, and Doris Lessing.

***Sudden Fiction:***

***American Short-Short Stories***

Robert Shapard, James Thomas, editors

Peregrine Smith Books, 1986

Some of the writers are Raymond Carver, Leonard Michaels, John Updike, Ernest Hemingway, and John Cheever.

***Sudden Fiction (Continued):***

***60 New Short-Short Stories***

Robert Shapard, James Thomas, editors

New York: W. W. Norton, 1996

A few of the writers include Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, William Maxwell, Mark Richard, Molly Giles, Andrew Lam, and Judy Troy.

***Sudden Fiction International:***

***60 Short-Short Stories***

Robert Shapard, James Thomas, editors

New York: W. W. Norton, 1989

Some of the contributors include Colette, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Margaret Atwood, Joyce Carol Oates, Jorge Luis Borges, Slawomir Mrozek, and Krishnan Varna.

***Sudden Fiction Latino:***

***Short-Short Stories from The United States and Latin America***

Robert Shapard, Robert, James Thomas, Ray Gonzales, editors

W. W. Norton, 2010

Some of the writers included are Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, Roberto Bolano, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges, Andrea Saenz, Daniel Alarcón, Alicita Rodriguez, Julio Ortega and Hilma Contreras.

***Sudden Stories:***

***The Mammoth Book of Miniscule Fiction***

Dinty W. Moore, editor

Mammoth Press, 2003

Among the many fine writers are Virgil Suarez, Melanie Rae Thon, Molly Giles, and Aimee Bender.

***You Have Time for This:  
Contemporary American Short-Short Stories***

Mark Budman, Tom Hazuka, editors  
Ooligan Press, 2007

Some of the forty-four writers from all around the globe are Aimee Bender, Steve Almond, Katharine Weber, Alex Irvine, Robert Boswell, Justine Musk, and Susan O'Neill.

COLLECTIONS

*These are various collections I've purchased and often recommend to other writers.*

***40 Stories***

Donald Barthelme  
Penguin Books: New York, 1989

A few pieces are a bit longer than flash fiction, but all are interesting reading.

***60 Stories***

Donald Barthelme  
Penguin Books: New York, 1993

Not all the stories in the collection are short-short length but many are and Barthelme's one who's gifted in pushing boundaries, in experimental writing, in mixing genres.

***A Man Jumps Out of An Airplane***

Barry Yourgrau.  
Arcade Publishing: New York, 1984

***Almost No Memory***

Lydia Davis  
Picador: New York, 1997

***Black Tickets***

Jayne Anne Phillips  
Vintage Contemporaries: New York, 2001

***Paris Spleen***

Charles Baudelaire (Translated from the French by Louise Varèse)  
New Directions Books: New York, 1970

***Can't and Won't:***

***Stories by Lydia Davis***  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

***Children of the Days:***

***A Calendar of Human History***  
Eduardo Galeano (Translated by Mark Fried)  
Nation Books, 2013

***Einstein's Dreams:***

***A Novel by Alan Lightman***

Vintage Contemporaries: New York, 2004.

***Ficciones***

Jorge Luis Borges

Grove Press, NY., 1962

***Invisible Cities***

Italo Calvino (Translated by William Weaver)

Harcourt Brace & Co.: San Diego, 1972

This is a novel done with short-short pieces. It's a very different sort of beast.)

***Labyrinths:***

***Selected Stories & Other Writings***

Jorge Luis Borges

New Directions, 1964.

***Mr. Agreeable:***

***Stories***

Kirk Nisset

Mammoth Books, DuBois, Pennsylvania, 2009

***Palm-of-the-Hand Stories***

Yasunari Kawabata (Translated from the Japanese by Lane Dunlap & J. Martin Holman)

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.

***Revenge of The Lawn***

***The Abortion***

***So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away***

Richard Brautigan

Omnibus Edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1995

***Samuel Johnson Is Indignant: Stories***

Lydia Davis

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

***Sum:***

***Forty Tales from the Afterlives***

David Eagleman

Vintage Books: New York, 2009

***The Book of Embraces***

Eduardo Galeano (Translated by Cedric Belfrage)

W.W. Norton., 1991

***The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God & Other Stories***

Etgar Keret

The Toby Press: London, England, 2004

***They Could No Longer Contain Themselves:***

***A Collection of Five Flash Chapbooks***

Elizabeth Colen, John Jodzio, Tim Jones-Yelvington, Sean Lovelace, Mary Miller.

Rose Metal Press: Brookline, MA, 2011

FLASH CREATIVE NONFICTION

***In Brief:***

***Short Takes on the Personal***

Judith Kitchen & Mary Paumier Jones, editors

1999

Some of the writers are Andre Dubus, Charles Baxter, Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Mary Oliver, and Robert Shapard.

***In Short:***

***A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction***

Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones, editors

1996

A few of the writers are Maxine Kumin, Naomi Shihab Nye, Tobias Wolff, Joy Harjo, Rita Dove, Ted Kooser, Charles Simic, Sherman Alexie, and Lee Gutkind.

***Short Takes:***

***Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction***

Judith Kitchen, editor

2005

Some of the many writers included are Amy Tan, Ron Carlson, Michael Martone, Dinty W. Moore, Salman Rushdie, Gerald Stern, Marvin Bell, Albert Goldbarth, and Terry Tempest Williams.

***Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction:***

***Advice and Essential Exercises from Respected Writers, Editors, and Teachers***

Edited by Dinty Moore

Rose Metal Press, Brookline, MA, 2012

Some of the essay authors are Rigoberto Gonzalez, Carol Guess, Robin Hemley, Judith Kitchen, Brett Lott, Brenda Miller, and Aimee Nezhukumatathil.

INSTRUCTION/ ANALYSIS/ HISTORY OF THE SHORT-SHORT

***Books and Beyond:***

***The Greenwood Encyclopedia of New American Reading***

Ken Womack, editor

Greenwood Press, Westport, CT 2008

Includes my 8,000-word essay on flash fiction.

***Creating Fiction in Five Minutes***

Robert Allen

Story Press, 1997

***Critical Insight: Flash Fiction***

Michael Cocchiarale and Scott Emmert, editors

Grey House Publishers, 2017

Essays included are 2,500 to 5,000 words in length and each has a “Works Cited” section along with end notes. My essay is “Flash Fiction: From Text to Audio to Music, Stage and Film Adaptations”

***Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction:***

***Tips from Editors, Teachers, And Writers in The Field.***

Tara Masih, editor

Rose Metal Press, 2009

A few of the featured writers are Robert Olen Butler, Ron Carlson, Pamelyn Casto, Stuart Dybek, Sherrie Flick, Pamela Painter, Michael Martone, and Robert Shapard. (*The Field Guide* contains essays on flash fiction along with example stories by some fine writers.)

***Flash!***

***Writing the Very Short Story***

John Dufresne

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.: New York, NY, 2018.

Good instruction on writing short-shorts through explanations of various writer terms and writing strategies and through some fine example stories.

***The Art of Brevity:***

***Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis***

Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, Hans H. Skei, editors

University of South Carolina Press, 2004

Several in-depth analysis essays.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROSE POETRY ANTHOLOGIES, COLLECTIONS, AND INSTRUCTION BOOKS

*This is a selection of some of the many anthologies, collections, and instruction books I have explored during my years of exploring prose poetry. All of these are interesting, and all are certainly worth reading and studying.*

### PROSE POETRY ANTHOLOGIES

#### ***A Cast-Iron Aeroplane That Can Actually Fly***

Peter Johnson, editor

Mad Hat Press: Cheshire, Massachusetts, 2019.

This anthology has many prose poems and each one has an essay by the author of the prose poem. Some of the many writers included are Kim Addonizio, Nin Andrews, Michael Benedikt, Robert Bly, Maxine Chernoff, Michel Delville, Denise Duhamel, Stuart Dybek, Russell Edson, Ray Gonzales, Holly Iglesias, Louis Jenkins, Mary A. Koncel, Robert Hill Long, Peter Markus, Mary Ruefle, Rosemarie Waldrop (and many others).

#### **The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry**

Robert Alexander, Mark Vinz, and C.W. Truesdale, Eds.

New Rivers Press

Minneapolis, MN, 1996.

Contains prose poems by Lafcadio Hearn, Jean Toomer, Kay Boyle, Nelson Algren, Lorna Crozier, Diane de Prima, Stuart Dybek, Carolyn Forché, Diane Glancy, Donald Hall, David Ignatow, Mary A. Koncel, Ira Sadoff, Karl Shapiro, Alison Townsend, and many more.

#### **Models of The Universe: An Anthology of the Prose Poem**

Stuart Friebert and David Young, Eds.

Oberlin College Press

Oberlin, Ohio, 1995.

A few of the many writers included are Gertrude Stein, Aloysius Bertrand, Ivan Turgenev, Arthur Rimbaud, Sherwood Anderson, Max Jacob, Franz Kafka, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Hans Arp, Pierre Reverdy, Jorge Luis Borges, Francis Ponge, Julio Cortázar, James Wright, Zbigniew Herbert, Italo Calvino, and Tomas Tranströmer.

#### **The Best of the Prose Poem: An International Journal**

Peter Johnson, Ed.

White Pine Press

Buffalo, NY, 2000.

Some of the many writers include Holly Iglesias, Gray Jacobik, Robert Hill Long,

Peter Markus, Michael Martone, Henri Michaux, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Pierre Reverdy, John Yau, C. D. Wright, and Barry Silesky.

**No Boundaries: Prose Poems by 24 American Poets**

Ray Gonzales, Ed.

Tupelo Press

Dorset, Vermont, 2003.

Authors are Nin Andrews, Robert Bly, John Bradley, Killarney Clary, John Davis, Linda Dyer, Russell Edson, Amy Gerstler, Ray Gonzalez, Maurice Kilwein, Guevara, Juan Felipe Herrera, Louis Jenkins, Peter Johnson, George Kalamaras, Christine Boyka Kluge, Mary Koncel, Morton Marcus, Campbell McGrath, Harryette Mullen, Naomi Shihab Nye, Charles Simic, Karen Volkman, Liz Waldner, and Gary Young.

**PP/FF: An Anthology**

Peter Connors, Ed.

Starcherone Books, 2006.

Some of the many writers included are Stuart Dybek, Kim Addonizio, Lydia Davis, Brian Evenson, Diane Williams, Laird Hunt, Joyelle McSweeney, Christina Milletti, Harold Jaffee, Jessica Treat, Darryl Scroggins, Kent Johnson, Harold Jaffee, Kenneth Bernard, and Eleni Sikelianos.

**The Modern Japanese Prose Poem: An Anthology of Six Poets**

Dennis Keene, Ed. (and translator)

Princeton University Press

Princeton, NJ, 1980.

The writers are Miyoshi Tatsuji, Anzai Fuyue, Tamura Ryuichi, Yoshioka Minoru, Tanikawa Shuntaro, and Inoue Yasushi. This anthology has been out of print, but The Princeton Legacy Library makes it available again.

**Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present**

David Lehman, Ed.

Scribner Poetry

New York, NY, 2003.

Provides fine essays on object poems, fables, flash poems, aphorisms, list poems, essayistic works, and epistolary poems, hybrid poems, and more. Just a few of the many writers included are Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings, Ernest Hemingway, Czeslaw Milosz, Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Koch, James Merrill, John Ashbery, W. S. Merwin, Michael Benedikt, Mark Strand, Rosmarie Waldrop, Charles Simic, Robert Hass, James Tate, Alice Notly, Andrei Codrescu, Lydia Davis, Anne Carson, Maxine Chernoff, Sarah Manguso (and many others).

**An Introduction to the Prose Poem**

Brian Clements and Jamey Dunham, Eds.

Firewheel Editions

Danbury, CT, 2009.

Includes the work of Daryl Scroggins, Campbell McGrath, James Merrill, W. S. Merwin, Francis Ponge, Margaret Atwood, Rachel Loden, Marvin Bell, Christian Bok,

Russell Edson, Mark Halperin, Max Jacob, Tateo Imamura, Jess Lee Kercheval, N. Scott Momaday, and Frank O'Hara (and many others).

**A Cast-Iron Aeroplane That Can Actually Fly**

Peter Johnson, Ed.

MadHat Press

Cheshire, Massachusetts, 2019.

Filled with prose poems and mini-essays written by the authors of the prose poems. A few of the numerous writers included are Kim Addonizio, Nin Andrews, Michael Benedikt, Robert Bly, Maxine Chernoff, Kim Chinquee, Brian Clements, Peter Connors, Michel Delville, Denise Duhamel, Stuart Dybek, Russell Edson, Ray Gonzales, Daniel Grandbois, Louis Jenkins, Peter Markus, Robert Hill Long, Mary Ruefle, Rosmarie Waldrop, and Gary Young.

COLLECTIONS

**Paris Spleen**

Charles Baudelaire. Translated from the French by Louise Varèse.

New Directions Books: New York, 1970.

**Tender Buttons: Objects Food Rooms**

Gertrude Stein.

Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York, 1997.

**Short Talks**

Anne Carson.

Brick Books, London, Ontario, 1992.

**A Book of Fables**

W. S. Merwin.

Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 2007.

This wonderful collection combines Merwin's two collections: THE MINER'S PALE CHILDREN and HOUSES AND TRAVELLERS. These pieces blur the distinction between poetry, essays, and fiction and manage to blur the distinction between genres as well.

**The World Doesn't End**

Charles Simic.

A Harvest Book: Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, New York, London, 1989.

Simic won a Pulitzer Prize for this in 1990. Most of the prose poems are less than a half page long.

**Dome of the Hidden Pavilion: New Poems**

James Tate.

Ecco (an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers), New York, 2016.

## INSTRUCTION/ WRITING THEORY

### **The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre**

Michel Delville

University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 1998.

Peter Johnson says about this book: "Excellent . . . the only critical book on prose poetry that not only provides a historical background for the prose poem in English, but also focuses on contemporary American prose poets." Some of the many writers and movements Delville looks at include Gertrude Stein and the Expatriate Avant-Garde, Popular Modernism and the American Prose Poem: From Sherwood Anderson to Kenneth Patchen, Contemporary Trajectories, and The Prose Poem and the New Avant-Garde.

### **The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice.**

Gary L. McDowell and F. Daniel Rzicznek, Eds.

This book is filled with essays on prose poetry from such writers as Maxine Chernoff, Nin Andrews, Ray Gonzalez, Bob Hicok, Denise Duhamel, Christopher Kennedy, and many others. It contains many example prose poems as well.

### **A Tradition of Subversion:**

#### **The Prose Poem in English From Wilde To Ashbery**

Marguerite S. Murphy.

University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

Murphy takes a look at the prose poem as a decadent and subversive genre and pays particularly close attention to some of the work of William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and John Ashbery.

### **History Matters:**

#### **Contemporary Poetry on the Margins of American Culture**

Ira Sadoff

University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2009.

Sadoff's chapter on prose poems is outstanding (the entire book is interesting). Some of the prose poets he mentions include Claudia Rankin, Jean Day, Russell Edson, Gertrude Stein, Zbigniew Herbert, Anne Waldman, Lyn Hejinian, and Diane Williams.

## FLASH FICTION: BRIEF AND (LIKELY) NECESSARY LITERATURE

Alfred Polgar, a noted Viennese intellectual and master of the short form, makes a good case for the rising popularity and even necessity of modern-day flash fiction when he said during his own lifetime (1873-1955) that “Life is too short for long literature, too transitory for lingering description and observation, too psychopathic for psychology, too fictitious for novels, the fermentation and decomposition too swift to be preserved in long expensive books lengthily and expansively.” Our busy lives offer distractions like never before. Today there are many more than Alfred Polgar likely could have even imagined. With too much data and information coming at us from every direction and with untold numbers of attractive or even habitual diversions wherever we turn, finding time to read for understanding or insight is becoming more and more difficult. But because of its short length (usually 250-1,500 words) flash fiction can be read in those precious few moments we do occasionally find. That reading time is important and perhaps even necessary in this fast-paced, data-filled, distracting, and cacophonous world.

### FLASH FICTION PUSHES FAMILIAR BOUNDARIES

The art of literary flash fiction often halts us in our tracks and insists that we pay close attention. It urges us to think or meditate on the brief and fleeting story before us. These tiny stories can deliver insight or wisdom or new perspectives and they can deliver quickly, with speed being what is often needed in our fast-paced and time-constrained world. But quick delivery does not necessarily mean quick understanding. Many such pieces require work on the part of the reader.

While there are some straightforward flash fiction pieces with a clear beginning, middle, and end plot strategy, and some that pay attention to character development and literary continuity, there are also many fascinating literary flash fiction pieces that work against various expectations for stories. The field of flash fiction is fertile and protean and many of the more unusual literary short-shorts take unpredictable and sometimes even unprecedented paths.

The writers of these challenging pieces often work to elude or escape confining definition and as a result many of these stories do not fit established categories or genres. The complex and challenging types of flash fiction often depend more on implication, suggestion, voice, and/ or situation for their effects. As a result of this interesting experimentation and hybridization there are intriguing and unusual flash fiction pieces available in magazines, anthologies, and collections throughout the world.

These unusual stories present a large variety of strategies. There are plotless pieces that make use of mood or tone instead of plot or character development. There are meta-fiction stories and pieces done in Q & A style. Some highly unusual stories include a story told through footnotes only, a story told through clichés alone, a story told through an acknowledgement page, a story where the narrator is both “I” and

“You,” a story with one character name shared by several people, a story where the protagonist and antagonist cannot be differentiated, and story that combines five stories into one. There are stories written in imperative mode and stories done in dialogue only. There are monologues and stories done in second person point of view. There are stories one to five pages long that use just one sentence (or sometimes just two or three sentences). There are stories that are all telling and no showing, stories done as stage presentations, stories that offer a choice of endings, stories where the metaphor becomes literal, and stories that combine prose and poetry.

### LITERARY FLASH FICTION LINGERS

Pablo Neruda says, “The hardest way of learning is that of easy reading . . .” Many flash fiction stories provide quite a challenge to the reader and refuse to be easy reading. They take the more difficult and riskier route by insisting the reader’s efforts also be out of the ordinary.

While brief flash fiction does deliver quickly, that does not mean it also delivers quick or easy understanding. The types of flash fiction focused on in this essay often involve work on the part of the reader. Sometimes that work pays off later rather than immediately, many times even after the story is put away.

Exceptional and unconventional flash fiction also tends to linger in a reader’s mind and one reason for its memorability is because such stories require a reader’s creative collaboration. These stories insist on the reader’s effort in co-creating meaning. This active participation on the part of the reader in place of passive reading tends to linger because the reader is highly invested in the meaning derived. These stories are not, after all, static containers. They often require unusual and creative readings and interpretations that deeply involve the reader’s co-creation and imagination. Further, because they strive to be out of the ordinary these types of flash fiction can break the spell of habit and can disrupt conventional understanding. They often lead to new or expanded awareness. The more unusual or difficult pieces make demands on reader attention and imagination and keep us on our reading toes.

### PSYCHOLOGY, COGNITIVE SCIENCE, AND NEUROSCIENCE WEIGH IN

Accomplished writers are aware of the benefits of writing and reading non-traditional literary work. Several years ago, S. I. Hayakawa said a great writer is “one who has successfully integrated and given coherence to vast areas of human experience.” Literary greatness, he claims, requires “great extensional awareness of the range of human experience as well as great powers of ordering that experience meaningfully.” Hayakawa says this linguistic ordering of experiences and attitudes on the part of the writer helps the reader become more organized as well (133).

Studies of a scientific or objective nature suggest there is more to reading than we are yet able to understand. Reading might even be far more important than we now

know, and it seems to go far beyond being merely entertainment or escapism. Some recent studies suggest that the challenges presented by certain complex flash fiction pieces are good for people in our modern times. Following are some studies that seem to point in this direction.

While some flash fiction helps to create some small order from the chaos around us, some other flash fiction attempts to defamiliarize or disorder our usual thought habits and expectations. These challenges to reader definitions and expectations might help improve or sharpen overall intelligence. According to Viktor Shklovsky “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception. The “making strange” process “concentrates and intensifies the experience of reading.”(Bjordhovde).

According to Travis Proulx, UC Santa Barbara, "People feel uncomfortable when their expected associations are violated, and that creates an unconscious desire to make sense of their surroundings." That feeling of discomfort is something people want to get rid of, so they are “motivated to learn new patterns" (“Reading Kafka”)

In a study conducted at the University of Liverpool, electroencephalograms (EEGs) were used to monitor reader brain responses and the results show that when the brain is surprised or caught off guard while reading there is a sudden burst of activity (“Reading Shakespeare”). Hundreds of studies have suggested that meaning threats motivate readers to seek out meaning elsewhere and these threats enhance cognitive mechanisms responsible for implicit learning patterns (“Kafka Exposure”). Studies also suggest that readers who are challenged by fiction can also better cope with ambiguity (“Opening the Closed Mind”). Such readers are more comfortable with uncertainty and even chaos, and these are the attitudes that might allow for greater creativity and thinking on a higher level.

Annie Murphy Paul points out “the ability to read must be painstakingly acquired by each individual.” The reading circuits we construct, she says, make use of structures in the brain that evolved for other purposes and depending on how vigorously and how often we use these circuits, they “can be feeble or they can be robust.” Vigorous brain exercise keeps the reading circuits robust and in good shape. When engaged in challenging and complex types of literature, the deep reader, as opposed to a superficial or surface reader, appears to enter a state similar to a pleasurable trance and the slow and careful, fully engaged reading experience is different from that of merely decoding words. When a work is “rich in detail, allusion and metaphor” the brain creates “a mental representation that draws on the same brain regions that would be active if the scene were unfolding in real life” (“Reading Literature”).

It could be that need and necessity are what make brief, complex, and challenging flash fiction so popular today. Its short length fits with our limited reading time, its difficulty keeps us mentally flexible and open to different possibilities, and it keeps our minds exercised by working against habit and distraction. Challenging and unexpected flash fiction can lead to expanded awareness and can keep us alert to different and sometimes better ideas. New ideas, new perspectives are sorely needed in these troubled, anxious, and unsettling times.

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## FLASH FICTION: FROM FLASH TEXT TO FLASH FILM

Flash fiction is on the move. It refuses to remain in text form and is now spreading through the world of film and video. Flash fiction has made its way from the page to the screen and these short-shorts are getting more and more attention as new films are created and presented. With new technology available, not only can flash fiction be read in stand-alone stories, in collections, in anthologies, and in magazines, but can now also be a seen and heard experience as it travels beyond its original form and assumes a different shape when adapted to film or video.

### QUALITY RUNS THE GAMUT

Thanks to the Internet and to the availability of the necessary technology, almost anyone can make short-short films. There are now thousands from all over the world—some authorized and some not. Because almost anyone can make films now, the quality of such films runs the gamut. At one end of the quality spectrum are simple amateur efforts done for fun or to fulfill high school or college course requirements. At the other end are clearly professional and highly artistic productions, many of which are award winners. Films at either end are evidence of the strong interest in these tiny treasures and are an indication of their adaptability and versatility.

### VARIETY IN PRESENTATIONS

Some of these short-short adaptations take on a modern film appearance through the use of color and through the addition of sound and music. Others mimic black and white films of yesteryear and some even include subtitles. Some mini-films are animated and make use of both familiar animation techniques and of highly uncommon and unusual strategies. They also exhibit various interpretations of the originating texts. The one constant is that these modern-day mini films are usually accomplished shape-shifters. Part of their charm is the way they assume different forms, genres, and appearances and through this constant and exuberant adaptation and experimentation these mini films are helping to shape the future of storytelling.

### SHORT-SHORTS ADAPTED TO STAND-ALONE SHORT FILMS

In general, mini-films range from straightforward narratives to highly experimental methods for presenting a brief story or idea. Some adaptations closely follow the original text pieces while others are looser in their use of the texts that came before. Following is a sampling, listed by author, of flash fiction and short-short pieces that have been adapted to film or video (including some adapted to feature-length film). The selected films show various skill levels—from amateur to professional, from traditional to highly experimental. Brief as they are, many manage to cast some memorable spells.

**Sherwood Anderson’s “The Dumb Man”:**

This adaptation was nominated for two awards: Best Independent and Best Visual Design. The film makes use of the MACHINIMA technique, which creates cinematic productions through the use of real-time computer graphics engines. The story is read by Alex Wilson from Telltale Weekly and the Spoken Alexandria Project.

**Donald Barthelme’s “The School”:**

Directed by Jonathan Hayes, edited by Jason Deschamps, and produced by Jane Motz Hays. This humorous but disturbing modern fable makes a fascinating short-short film.

**Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”:**

Riley Solter **adapted this story to film**. Another, longer adaptation, produced by Marcel Ichac and Paul de Roubaix, and **adapted by Robert Enrico**, first aired on CBS February 28, 1964.

**Stace Budzko’s “How To Set A House On Fire”:**

This flash fiction piece was first published by the SOUTHEAST REVIEW and then re-published in FLASH FICTION FORWARD: 80 VERY SHORT STORIES. The screen adaptation is directed by Henry Zaballos. The film has gathered several awards in various film festivals.

**Charles Bukowski’s “Nirvana”:**

This adaptation makes a memorable and surreal film. It is presented by Lights Down Low, narrated by Tom Waits, and directed by Patrick Biesemans. For the film Biesemans wanted “a playful mix of practical effects and miniature elements (mainly using model railroad train elements.”

**Dino Buzatti’s “The Falling Girl”:**

This adaptation is a collaboration between interactive media artist Scott Snibbe and choreographer/ filmmaker Annie Loui. This short-short film has won several awards. **A behind-the-scenes adaptation explanation** is available, too.

**Italo Calvino’s “The Man Who Shouted Theresa”:**

This adaptation is directed by Zack Jones and uses English subtitles.

**Raymond Carver’s Many Flash Fiction Film Adaptations**

This selection shows many quality levels (from beginner to professional).

**“Why Don’t You Dance?”**

**“Everything Must Go”**

**“Popular Mechanics”**

**“A Small, Good Thing”**

**“Cathedral”**

**Lawrence C. Connolly’s “Echoes”:**

In its text form this short-short was featured in over a dozen publications worldwide. Then it began its other lives as two flash fiction film adaptations. The first adaptation, a film festival production, was filmed in Hollywood by Steve Muscarella. The second

adaptation was directed by Rodney Altman and it won Best Achievement in Cinematography at the Fusion Film Festival in New York City in March 2004.

**Geoffrey Forsyth’s “Mud”:**

Geoffrey Forsyth was the winner of the second annual chapbook contest at Rose Metal Press. His short-short, “Mud,” was published in Shapard/ Thomas’s *NEW SUDDEN FICTION* (2007) and also published in *OTHER VOICES*. The film adaptation is re-titled “Mired” and was written and directed by Tony Glazer and produced by Knife Edge Productions and Choice Films Ink. **View a teaser** and see some of the many awards the film has received.

**Eduardo Galeano’s “Los Nadies”** (translated “The Nobodies”):

The author and journalists from Uruguay’s classification-defying short-short “Los Nadies” (translated “The Nobodies”) is from his collection, *EL LIBRO DE LOS ABRAZOS* (*THE BOOK OF EMBRACES*).

One adaptation is by Spanish director Carlos Salgado for the NGO Africa Director. It makes use of 2D animation. Another adaptation was done by German animator Laura Saenger. A third adaptation was done by Caleb González with music by Spanish guitarist Paco de Lucia.

**Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants”:**

One adaptation is directed by **Yuriy Mikitchenko and Sean Brown**.

A second adaptation is directed by Steve Brabson. This film was done as a project for the LA Film School. (Brabson used an abandoned train station and painted the brick walls by hand.) **Part I. Part II.**

A third adaptation is **directed by Jack Politz and adapted by Conor Keelan**.

A fourth is **produced by Ben Hunter and directed by Alexandra Daniels**.

**Franz Kafka’s “The Guardian”:**

An animated short film directed by Alessandro Novelli (2015). The film is an interpretation of Kafka’s “Before the Law” parable from his book *THE TRIAL*. The film is animated, illustrated, and directed by Alessandro Novelli and is produced by N9ve.

**Franz Kafka’s “Up in the Gallery”:**

The animated film adaptation is by Tore Bahnson and uses a style of digital stop motion where the animation of the characters is done by hand and done frame by frame. Also available for viewing are **the interesting sketches and test renders for the film**.

**Etgar Keret’s Many Individual Flash Films**

**“Lieland”**

This film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013 and did a festival circuit run in the United States and Europe.

**“What About Me?”**

In collaboration with Shira Geffen, from *Stories on Human Rights*, 2008.

**“Crazy Glue”**

A four-minute adaptation by Tatia Rosenthal and which uses animated puppets.

**“A Buck’s Worth”**

Adapted by Tatia Rosenthal.

**“What Do We Have in Our Pockets?”**

Made its debut at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival.

**“Monkey Say, Monkey Do”**

Adapted and directed by Nava Berenshtin.

**“A Good-looking Couple”**

Adapted to film by Danna Feintuch.

**Peter Markus’s “Good, Brother”:**

This story comes from Markus’s collection of the same name. The film adaptation is produced and directed by Greg Fadell and Matt Zacharias and edited by Patrick Shaughnessy. The film adaptation was completed at the end of 2001 and then premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2002. There is a final version of **“Good, Brother.”**

**Tara L. Masih’s “Haunt of Memory”:**

This flash fiction piece is a collaboration between Masih and Michael Dickes (who wrote and produced the video adaptation). The story was adapted to video by Awkward Paper Cut and the adaptation “explores the visual and psychological impact of dreams and memory and pays tribute to the oral tradition of southern Gothic tales.”

**Saki’s (H. H. Munro’s) “The Open Window”:**

This short-short story has been adapted to film several times. One adaptation was **written, directed, and edited by Mathew Coleman and produced by Penny Thoughts Productions.** Another adaptation was **written and directed by James Rogan and titled “The Open Doors.”**

**Wayne Scheer’s “Zen and the Art of House Painting”:**

This flash fiction piece was first published in an anthology titled *AWKWARD TWO* and the editor of the anthology, Jeffrey Dinsmore, decided to arrange for films to be done on some of the anthology stories. Joel Maguen wrote the screenplay for the adaptation of Wayne Scheer’s story, and Maguen served as director as part of Awkward Press’s instant film adaptation project.

**Lynda Sexson’s “Turning”:**

For an anthology titled *BIRTHDAY STORIES*, Haruku Murakami translated Lynda Sexson’s story into Japanese. Then later the anthology was translated into English. The film team of Karni and Saul adapted the story to film and the producers are Kat Amour-Brown and Alison Sterling. The film was nominated for a BAFTA award and was also part of the BBC Film Network’s BBC Drama Shorts 2009 commission, in conjunction with Lighthouse Arts & Training Development Partner—BBC Writersroom.

**Fernando Sorrentino’s “There’s A Man In The Habit Of Hitting Me In The Head With An Umbrella”:**

This flash fiction piece has been adapted to film or video several times. The well-done adaptation linked above is by XXM (Xiaoming Xue) and Linus Rost.

**Paul Toth’s “Knotted” and “The Happiest Man in the World”:**

“Knotted” is adapted by Mad Dog Films and is directed by Tom Shell. “The Happiest Man in The World,” a highly amusing mixed-media film.

**Katharine Weber’s “Sleeping”:**

Weber’s story was originally published in VESTAL REVIEW and later republished in James Thomas and Robert Shapard’s FLASH FICTION FORWARD: 80 VERY SHORT STORIES. The winner of many awards is directed by Doug Conant and the screenplay is by George Dean IV and Doug Conant. Executive producers are Frank Metayer and Christina Nayve.

**William Carlos Williams “The Use of Force”:**

The film adaptation is directed and produced by Ben Claman.

FLASH FICTION FILMS CREATING LONGER FILMS

Italo Calvino brought together several short-short pieces to create his novel, INVISIBLE CITIES. Alan Lightman did likewise in his novel, EINSTEIN’S DREAM. In a similar vein, filmmakers are also going beyond the adaptation of single flash fiction pieces. Some filmmakers combine several short-short pieces to create longer or even feature-length films. Following are several such interesting films.

**SHORT CUTS: Raymond Carver’s Stories**

The award-winning 1993 film, SHORT CUTS, directed by Robert Altman, combines several of Carver’s short pieces, and even includes one of his poems. Some of the stars in the feature-length film are Anne Archer, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Tim Robbins, Lily Tomlin, Jack Lemmon, Robert Downey, Jr., Julianne Moore, Chris Penn, and Andie MacDowell. Not all of the stories included are flash fiction length, but they are close enough. One of the stories included in the film that does qualify in length is Carver’s “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” There is **a trailer for the film itself** can be viewed at and a trailer for the mini-film **“Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”**

**THE SADNESS OF SEX : Barry Yourgrau Stories**

Barry Yourgrau’s collection titled THE SADNESS OF SEX was made into a feature film of the same title. The 1995 postmodern comedy-romance montage stars Yourgrau himself and the film depicts many hilarious phases and types of love. To distinguish between the stories, the filmmakers used different types of music and interesting camera work.

Then click links below to view some of the individual mini films.

**“Poison”**

**“Silver Arrows”**

**“Udders”**

**“Domestic Intelligence”**

**“Demoiselle”**

**“Riddle”**

**“Fin de Siècle”**

### EXQUISITE CORPSE : **Michael Arnzen's Stories**

In 2006 several international and independent film directors, animators, and multimedia artists collaborated on turning Michal Arnzen's award-winning flash fiction collection, 100 JOLTS: SHOCKINGLY SHORT STORIES, into a highly experimental "Frankenstein" montage film titled EXQUISITE CORPSE. The 17-minute film was produced by Jim Minton. Not all of the stories that compose the entire film are available online but listed below are some individual segments of the film:

**"The Scab"**

**"Velcro"**

**"In The Balance"**

### **\$9.99 Etgar Keret's Stories**

As shown earlier, many of Etgar Keret's short-shorts have been adapted to film or video. In 2008, Keret and Tatia Rosenthal collaborated on the feature-length film, **\$9.99**. Rosenthal directed the film and it included several of Keret's short-short stories, woven together. Some of the many awards the film has gathered include a nomination for Best Animated Feature and Best Directing in an Animated Feature Production in the Annie Awards and a nomination for the Bronze Horse at the Stockholm Film Festival. The film also won the Audience Award in the Granada Film Festival Cines del Sur and Audience Award and won Best Female Director in the Mexico City International Contemporary Film Festival.

Flash fiction is most certainly playing an important part in the future of literature, in the future of storytelling, and in the future of film making too. For today's readers, many of whom do not have as much time available for reading as they once had, flash fiction and flash films still allow them to experience interesting and thought-provoking literature and film without the major time investment that novels or feature-length films require. To borrow words from sixteenth century writer John Heywood, the best short-short stories and the best short-short films provide "mucheychness in lytell space."

## THE MYTH-ING LINK OR LINKING UP TO MYTH

An updated version of the article that originally appeared in *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction: Tips from Editors, Teachers, and Writers in the Field*. Ed. Tara L. Masih. Rose Metal Press, Brookline, MA, 2009.

### DEFINITION OF FLASH FICTION

Flash fiction is difficult if not impossible to define—and should be allowed to remain so. Because this type of writing is protean, like Proteus of ancient myth, it takes on various shapes and uses different strategies to achieve its goals. These shapes and strategies are too dissimilar to confine flash fiction to a too narrow or too specific definition. Flash fiction should not be fitted to a simple procrustean bed (the method used by mythical Procrustes). These short-short stories are as endlessly metamorphosing as myths themselves. But I would tentatively define the best flash fiction as short-short stories that manage to reveal the hidden, accentuate the subtle, and highlight the seemingly insignificant. Such stories allow readers, as William Blake said in another context, “to see a world in a grain of sand.” The best offer insight and understanding of the human experience as they deepen and broaden reader awareness in a short space of text. While the stories as a whole often provide a quick flash of revelation they are also read by serious readers as slowly and carefully as they might read good poetry. These highly charged stories often go well beyond their surface details and manage to expand in the reading.

### NOTES ON FLASH FICTION FROM THE VIRTUAL FIELD

Due to my heavy involvement with flash fiction via the Internet, in many ways a modern-day labyrinth containing many hungry minotaurs, I have seen countless shapes and strategies for writing flash fiction. Flash fiction on the ‘net ranges from the simple, uncomplicated quick story—many times written by beginner writers to appeal to beginner editors—to highly complex and rich stories written by talented and experienced writers. For over fifteen years I ran a highly active online flash fiction critique group that focused on this type of writing only. We critiqued stories, discussed flash fiction writing theory, did story analyses, and wrote to story prompts. Thousands of stories from hundreds of writers have appeared on my computer screen over the years (some great stories and some that miss the mark). Further, for about six years or more, two or three times a year, I taught online interactive four-week courses in flash fiction). During the intense online courses, which always filled to capacity (which seems to indicate a strong interest in flash fiction) participants read stories written by some of the best writers of flash fiction, analyzed these stories, read

articles and ideas on flash fiction, discussed writing theory, tried various writing exercises, and critiqued resulting stories. One popular and highly productive segment of the course was the study of and writing from myths. Participants read several old myths, mostly Greek myths, and then looked at ways modern flash fiction writers continue to make use of these enduring stories in a variety of ways. Some of the most interesting and memorable flash fiction written by those who took my course came out of the myth segment and several participants went on to have their myth-inspired stories published as well.

### WRITERS WORKING WITH MYTH

Over time many fine artists, poets, novelists, and short story writers have drawn upon myth for their work. A few of those writers are Eudora Welty, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Barth, Christa Wolf, John Updike, Anne Carson, William Golding, Mary Renault, and C. S. Lewis. Beginning in 2005, Canongate Books' Myth Series launched the first of its series of reimagined myths in short novel forms, a major and ambitious project involving many publishers and writers worldwide. A few of the writers involved in this project (who rewrote Greek myths) include Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, Victor Pelevin, David Grossman, Salley Vickers, and Michel Faber. Many more such novels in this series, including novels based on myths from around the world, are now or will be available in the near future. Myths continue to intrigue writers and readers alike.

Many writers have also written outstanding flash fiction based on myth. Some of the best short-short pieces I've read include "Pygmalion" by John Updike, "Scheherazade" by Charles Baxter, "Silver Arrows" by Barry Yourgrau, "Orion" by Jeanette Winterson, "To Every Man His Chimera" by Charles Baudelaire, "Daedalus and Icarus" by Zbigniew Herbert, and "A Little Legend of the Dance" by Gottfried Keller. All these pieces are in the length range of flash fiction and all illustrate outstanding reuse of classical and well-known myths.

### RE-CREATION WITH MYTHS

Reworking myths allows writers to join in on the great conversations that have gone on through the ages. Through the study of mythology writers can also renew their own store of writing ideas. A good general mythology handbook or a 'net search on classical myth can yield all sorts of myths begging to be re-examined and reshaped. Re-creating myths can be done in many ways, of course, and those ways are limited only by a writer's imagination and willingness to try something out of the ordinary. But two highly productive strategies involve showing how a myth is still alive today (through a type of literary shorthand or condensation) and reshaping stories by defamiliarizing older myths.

STRATEGY: ALLOW AN OLD MYTH NEW LIFE  
(METHOD OF LITERARY SHORTHAND/ CONDENSATION)

“Myths are things that never happened, but always are.” This statement, from Sallustrius in the 4th century A.D., reminds modern writers that what is old can also take on new forms, can undergo new metamorphoses, can assume new transformations, and generate new and interesting perspectives. Such stories represent, in the words of Nicolai

Berdyaev, the “isness of the was.” Myths are never out of style, never lose their relevance—they merely metamorphose and serve different visions. Flash fiction writers can, to good effect, continue the long tradition of working with myths. These enduring stories can be freed from past confinement and undergo metamorphosis over and over again.

Ernest Hemingway compares an effective story to an iceberg, where the largest percentage of the iceberg is submerged beneath the surface. Drawing upon characters or archetypes from mythology provides a way of making use of underlying stories—an effective literary shorthand method of telling a story, a way of condensing or compressing a modern story by drawing upon an older story. This strategy can aid in creating good and expandable flash fiction since the older myth would also be at work beneath the surface details.

For instance, merely through the use of an appropriate name from myth, in a character’s name or in a story’s title, a writer can imply an iceberg of information without having to actually provide that information. In his short-short story, “Pygmalion,” John Updike did not have to tell readers that this story involves a man who tries to create the ideal woman. Instead Updike shows us how this well-known archetype from myth continues his pattern into modern times. In Charles Baxter’s “Scheherazade,” Baxter names the myth character in his title and shows her living in modern times and involved in a modern situation (and he also gives the traditional story an interesting twist). Through Baxter’s story, Scheherazade continues telling stories to prolong a life. Names drawn from myth, used in a character’s name or a story title, can be a way to deepen a story as when the part stands for the whole or the whole stands for the part, and which draws upon or is supported by a story or stories that came before—as the larger part of the iceberg beneath the surface details.

STRATEGY: DEFAMILIARIZATION

Karen Armstrong, in her *A SHORT HISTORY OF MYTH*, which serves as an introduction to the recent Canongate Books’ series of myths in novel form, says “Like science and technology, mythology... is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it.” Writers who study and become aware of the many myths that continue to inform our lives can create even more

interesting and meaningful stories by drawing upon this rich store of writing possibilities.

Defamiliarization, a concept developed by formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his *ART AS TECHNIQUE*, is a productive strategy for creating memorable flash fiction from myths. Shklovsky says “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.” The process of defamiliarization of a familiar myth disturbs readers’ normal perceptions and understandings and encourages them to read more attentively and carefully. Making the familiar unfamiliar helps renew perception and aids in breaking the deadening habit of easy interpretation and assumptions. A defamiliarized myth will not meet readers’ usual expectations and consequently pushes readers to see things as if they are new. It allows readers to perceive the myth or the specific situation in a new light and they are then put in the position of living/ reading more intensely—since their previous knowledge is called into question and they are outside their safely familiar assumptions and understandings. Such a strategy disturbs comfortable knowledge, unsettles usual perceptions, and of necessity prolongs reader contemplation. Such stories allow a reader and writer to live more intensely within the newly written defamiliarized myth.

Robert Hill Long’s story (below) serves as outstanding example of a writer drawing upon a familiar myth to create a new metamorphosis through the method of defamiliarization. The usual or common understanding of the myth of the Sphinx is that she destroyed herself when Oedipus answered her riddle. But Long subverts the known myth, makes it counter common knowledge and understanding, and achieves a new transformation of the myth. Long’s defamiliarized Sphinx continues to present her riddle to readers. As a result, the story makes a fascinating addition to the endlessly mutating, forever metamorphosing forms of myth.

### EXAMPLE STORY

Robert Hill Long

#### THE SPHINX

It is not true that the heroes died because the sphinx was terrifying to behold or her riddle too hard. When one sauntered up, full of youth bravado, she put away her knitting needles, folded the wings behind her back and asked in a demure voice where he had been so long and whether he wanted anything to drink. At the sight of milk dripping from her full breasts, he fell into a speechless baby-gurgle and in a day or two died of thirst at her feet. Oedipus already knew whom he was going to marry: he simply wanted lion-claws and eagle-wings to impress her.

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Nor is it true that the sphinx killed herself because Oedipus used her to perfect his habit of drop-dead retorts to every question. Yes, his indifference to what she might do

afterward, the way he averted his eyes when he answered, these things infuriated her. But not even a myth of guilt existed yet: destroying herself before his eyes would have been pointless. Instead she assumed the formlessness of the horizon. From this vantage point she could survey the whole course of Greek tragedy degenerating into barbaric romances, situation comedies, thirty-second ads for hair replenisher.

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She is still there, shawled in heat-shimmer or in a cold drizzle. Though her milk dried up centuries ago, it still gives her pleasure to watch the tiny hordes of question marks trying to approach her, like tourists. At sunset it is possible to imagine her faint, flushed smile as she savours the moment Oedipus raises the familiar knitting needles and plunges them into his eyes.



## LIST STORIES: LISTS OF THE LITERARY KIND

*Lists are important to human culture. Take a look around and you will find lists for almost everything—best-dressed lists, ten most wanted lists, to-do lists, grocery lists, guest lists, and plenty more. According to Umberto Eco, a noted literary critic, philosopher, and novelist, lists create culture. If that is so then it is a safe bet they can, and certainly do, create effective and memorable literature as well.*

### LISTS IN LITERARY HISTORY

A brief look at literary history shows lists play a large part in that history. Some famous ancient lists, which are still explored today, include the Bible's list of ten commandments and its genealogical lists, the list of the heroes of the Trojan War in Homer's *The Iliad*, the description of the genealogy and origin of the gods in Hesiod's *Theogony*, and in his *Catalogues of Women* (of which only fragments still exist). There are also the lists compiled by Sei Shōnagon in her *Pillow Book* (*Makura no Soshi*), the classic tenth century portrayal of Japanese court life.

### POETRY DONE IN LIST FORM

Lists play an important role in the world of poetry too. Some famous poems written as lists include the catalogue of Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno" about what his cat Geoffrey did each morning, and both Walt Whitman in his "Song of Myself" and Allen Ginsberg in his "Howl" make extensive use of lists.

Raymond Carver, renowned for his short-short fiction, also wrote poetry and his list poems frequently tell a story. "The Car" is most often classified as a poem but it can also be viewed as a prose poem or a short-short fiction monologue of forty-nine lines done in list form. Notice the surprise ending Carver gives his poem. Read it [here](#).

Another Raymond Carver list poem is titled "Fear." Each of the twenty-seven lines, except for the last line, begins "Fear of . . ." Notice that it too has an unexpected ending. Read it [here](#).

Shel Silverstein wrote wonderful children's poetry and two favorite list poems from his *Where The Sidewalk Ends* are "Sick" ([here](#)) and "Mr. Gumpeldump's Song" ([here](#)).

Artist and writer Joe Brainard, part of the New York School of poetry, wrote his cult classic lyrical prose poem, an autobiography titled *I Remember*, in the form of one long list. Each item listed begins with "I remember." See excerpts [here](#) and [here](#).

Another poem that makes use of a list in a powerful way is Kim Addonizio's "What Do Women Want?" from *Tell Me*. See it [here](#).

## FICTION DONE IN LIST FORM

Ryan O'Neill composed a series of touching and funny stories in his "The Lists: A Story" which is literally composed of several lists. O'Neill's work can be read [here](#).

Blake Butler's "Hair Loop" is a list of fifty statements about hair. The statements also manage to tell an interesting story. See that story [here](#).

Gregory Burnham's "Subtotals" is a list of all sorts of items by a narrator who most certainly keeps track of things. The catalogue provides an interesting character study. See it [here](#).

Donald Barthelme's "The Glass Mountain" is a numbered list of 100 segments. It tells quite an ironic and humorous story. See it [here](#).

Jamie Thunder's "The Central Line Has Severe Delays" originally appeared in *Spelk* and then was reprinted in *Best Micro Fiction 2019*. See that story [here](#).

Andy Brown's "Audubon Becomes Obsessed with Birds" begins each list segment with "because." See that piece [here](#).

Opal Palmer Adisa's "Fruit Series" tells nine micro stories using a list of nine different fruits. Each fruit presents a different single-paragraph micro story. See that unusual list piece [here](#).

Jennifer Egan's "To Do" piece is just that, a To Do list. The story was part of *The Guardian's* summer 2011 short story special which featured four established writers (including Egan) and the winner and runners up of their short story competition. See Egan's story [here](#).

Gwen E. Kirby's "Shit Cassandra Saw That She Didn't Tell the Trojans Because at that Point Fuck Them Anyway" makes great use of a list. Cassandra accepted the ability to see the future from Apollo. However, in revenge for spurning his amorous advances, Apollo made sure she would not be believed when she told what she saw. A few of the many things she foresaw (in Kirby's story) and withheld from the Trojans include lightbulbs, Twizzlers, Bud Lite, penguins, Chekhov, Tampons, mace, and more. See the story [here](#).

Another use of a list to structure a story is Shoshana Akabas' story "The Forgetting Diary." (see it [here](#).) The story is composed of thirty-three segments that begin with "I forget." Some of the things forgotten are "I forget my best friend's birthday," "I forget to write down all the times I forget," "I forget who I was talking to on the phone." Some segments are just a sentence long and some are much longer and put together they tell the disturbing story of a battle with Lyme disease.

## WORKS WHICH AT FIRST DON'T APPEAR TO BE LISTS

A flash fiction piece that is less clearly a list (in that it doesn't use numbered sentences or fragments as most of the above stories do) but which is a list nonetheless is Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl." This story is told through a series of imperatives and instructions given by a mother to her daughter. The piece, originally published in the June 26, 1978 issue of *The New Yorker*, is done as one large paragraph. Read Kincaid's story [here](#).

Another story which at first doesn't come across as a list is Gordon Lish's "The Merry Chase." New writers are often instructed to avoid using clichés, told to use fresh language to tell effective stories. But Lish's "The Merry Chase" uses nothing but clichés—from beginning to end and it tells a powerful story in monologue form. The clichés in Lish's piece are so thick that whoever the speaker is addressing (including the reader) would likely not be able to understand what the complaint might be in spite of the all-too-familiar words used to express the complaint. This story is from Lish's *Mourner at The Door: Stories*. See it [here](#) (it's the second story featured at the site)

## LONG LISTS

Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* is more clearly a long list and is an unusual way of telling a story of love, loss, and grief. While it can and is viewed by many as a short book or lengthy essay, it is composed of 240 brief prose poems, or, as Nelson calls them, propositions. They are done in list form, a list of 240 propositions. For this work Nelson was inspired by some pre-Socratic philosophical fragments and by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color*. See an excerpt of Nelson's story [here](#).

Wittgenstein was not the only philosopher who made an interesting use of a list format. Susan Sontag is another. In 1964 she published "Notes on "Camp"" in the *Partisan Review*, a renowned literary and political quarterly, and the essay that drew much outrage also made her famous. Sontag wrote, "Many things in the world have not been named, and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described." In her list of 58 items, she names and describes the concept of "camp." See that essay [here](#)

Works done in list format can arrest readers' attention by defamiliarizing their habitual ways of perceiving a story. When a story is presented in an uncommon manner, it can push readers to overcome their usual perceptions and lead them to activate their imaginations. From short to long, from simple to complex, it is clear that lists have an important role to play in both culture and in the literary world.

**About the writer:**

[Pamelyn Casto](#), twice a Pushcart Prize nominee, has published feature-length articles on flash fiction in *Writer's Digest* (and in their other publications), *Fiction Southeast*, and *Writing World* (and elsewhere). Her essay on flash fiction and myth appears in Rose Metal Press's *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction: Tips from Editors, Teachers, and Writers in the Field* and her 8,000-word essay on flash fiction is included in *Books and Beyond: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of New American Reading* (4 volumes). She also has a 5,000-word article on flash fiction as the lead article in the new book *Critical Insights: Flash Fiction*. Subscribe to her free online monthly [FlashFictionFlash newsletter](#) (first issue published in 2001) for markets, contests, and publishing news for flash literature writers. Casto is an Associate Editor at O:JA&L.



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