

## What is a short story?

### (QWF Magazine Checklist)

- A short story illustrates ONE ASPECT of human nature.
- A short story concerns ONE CHARACTER and his or her environment. Don't let other characters take over. If they do then perhaps they should be the central character.
- A short story illustrates a moment of CHANGE. This could also be a change in the readers' perception.
- The essence of a short story is CONFLICT. (Not necessarily physical.) It could be a man's conflict with his religion, his environment, his family.
- There must be a DIRECT LINK between the conflict and the moment of change.
- A Short Story is NOT an anecdote, nor a slice of autobiography. Real life is a launching pad for fiction, not fiction itself.
- Remember - A short story is as much a construction as a painting or a sculpture. It has shape and substance, like a sculpture.

### Characterisation

- Characters are your story. Make sure they're THREE-DIMENSIONAL.
- You should KNOW your character through and through (more than you need to show) - if you can't picture them, neither will your reader.
- Don't give names to BIT-PART PLAYERS, and keep them to a minimum. Don't introduce irrelevant characters.
- Don't overdo PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION - pick out one or two features, and make them memorable. Use MOVEMENT, MANNERISMS, CLOTHES & SPEECH PATTERNS to establish character.

### Plot

- Plot springs from CHARACTER. Things happen because a person makes it so. They must be pro-active, not reactive. No writer needs to ask where to find ideas. (TV, radio, films, books, dreams, on the street. Cut out news, etc from newspapers and magazines. Keep a notebook to jot down anything, overheard conversation, a memorable character, something viewed from a train window.)
- Keep plots SIMPLE (multiple plot-strands are for novels.) But avoid being superficial and bland.

## Viewpoint

- Decide who is the main character (i.e. the person undergoing a change).
- Decide whether you want this person to tell his or her own story or whether you wish to use an overall viewpoint, noting things he or she might not be aware of. First person narrative is more immediate, but more limiting.
- Keep to a single VIEWPOINT throughout the story. (If you must have more than one, then signal changes clearly.)
- Don't be afraid to break these rules - but be sure you know not only how to do it but that you are doing it.

## Structure

- Start your story at the MOMENT OF CONFLICT or as near to it as possible and keep going.
- Avoid unnecessary preamble.
- GRAB your reader's attention in the opening paragraph - better still, the first line.
- Don't allow your story to SAG in the middle - keep up the pace and tension. Keep readers turning the pages.
- SIGNPOST by planting clues about what might happen, but don't be too obvious.
- Use FLASHBACK carefully and don't overdo it.
- Always SHOW. Never tell.
- Don't try to be too clever. Be clear, but don't, on the other hand, patronise readers by stating the obvious.
- When the problem, conflict, or whatever is ended, so has the story. Don't take forever to wind things up. Never point out the moral. Not only is it Victorian, it's patronising. If you haven't already made the point clear, then re-write the story.

## Dialogue

- Use dialogue whenever possible, to help your SHOW, DON'T TELL approach.
- But keep it SHARP. Leave out unnecessary chit-chat. It has to sound real, not be real.
- You can use abbreviations, colloquialisms, poor grammar or slang - if it is RIGHT for the speaker and the tone of the story. Keep your ear tuned. Read dialogue out loud to yourself.
- People do not make long speeches in real life. Think about the emotional state they are in. Reflect mood in speech. This again is SHOW, not TELL.