

Creating Short Stories

## BROADENING YOUR STORY'S SCOPE

BY NOELLE STERNE

**M**ost short stories illumine a single dark corner, narrowly circumscribed. They follow the time-revered rule: Limit your short story to a specific time, place, event, interaction or character's evolution. But the short story can be a more versatile genre than your high school English teacher sermonized. If we stick to too narrow a view, we may restrict or dilute our subjects or abandon potentially powerful ideas.

Many wonderful stories remain small in conception and scale, yet others maintain the short-story essence but introduce an outlook that's much broader than we've been taught to expect. This is the *sweep* of the story.

*Understanding the sweep frees you from limiting your stories to single circumscribed subjects and extends your repertoire of narrative techniques.*

### UNDERSTANDING THE SWEEP

You may never have heard of the sweep; it's not discussed in texts or fiction seminars and may sound a lot like background, setting, exposition or backstory. The sweep certainly incorporates elements of these (and, like them, can be used for effective foreshadowing), but it's also more. The sweep encompasses grand events—physical, historical, generational, psychological, emotional—and involves a sense of time and distance, stretching the reader's mind beyond the expected confines of the short story. A sweep may synopsise a cataclysmic climate change, the long years of a religious war, a king's rule, a civilization's demise and regeneration, a terrible pattern resounding through family generations, and so on.

Look at these two passages. The first is conventional:

Jason's father was always hard on him. From earliest childhood, Jason knew this was what to expect. It was almost a family tradition.

The second is a sweep:

Patriarchal discipline was ingrained into the very fabric of the family. It had gone on for generations and didn't

break for holidays, births, funerals or world wars. It always got transmitted in torturous exactness from father to son to son—and even to sons-in-law (by some bonded osmotic process) as men married into the family. None of the children could escape, and this oppressive mantle was now being passed to Jason.

You can see from these examples how the sweep differs from typical exposition. They both establish necessary grounding, but the sweep's dimension is wider (in Jason's family, no child can escape) and its design larger (the discipline is passed down through the generations).

The range of the sweep is also more courageous than the normal background. It asks you to push beyond the accepted rules of the short story and lands you at the precipice of a novel—in the second example, following the sweep, an entire chapter could easily be devoted to Jason's great-grandfather's mode of discipline and its influence on each family member, another chapter to Jason's grandfather as father, and a third to Jason's father, finally introducing Jason. But in a short story, you don't have the luxury of chapters for each scenario.

On the other hand, the sweep isn't mere rambling or lazy writing. Let's say that in the above sweep, instead of continuing with Jason, you talked about his two sisters and how they were (or weren't) disciplined. This would be straying from the promised focus—Jason. If your train of thought starts running away, don't forget to apply the brakes of conscious writing and thinking.

### CHOOSING TO EMPLOY THE SWEEP

Not many short stories make use of the sweep, and often to their detriment. A sweep is appropriate when you want to give your story—or your main character's struggles or conflicts—a context larger than what readers (and editors and agents) generally expect from short fiction. In our example, I wanted to show that Jason was up against not only his father's habitual actions but the strength of successive generations of disciplinarians. As the story unfolds and Jason begins to question his father's authority and power, the sweep makes us realize that Jason's victory is that much more profound.

Of course, many sweep-less short stories succeed in gripping us from the first word, but with a sweep, some

supreme stories captivate our interest and draw us into their mesmerizing, expansive environment without losing the heart of the form. They show us a compelling picture, present many clues about the story and protagonist, pull us in and entice us.

Here, we'll consider four steps you can take to discover, create, manage and integrate a sweep into an effective short story.

**1 ESTABLISH YOUR SWEEP.**

The sweep can begin either at the opening of your story or several paragraphs into it. In "The Rocking Horse Winner," D.H. Lawrence opens with the sweep, covering at least 30 years as he recounts the wife's psychological history, from her adult beginnings to the present and her marriage and children, whom she somehow cannot love. Lawrence compounds this void by portraying the family's chronic lack of money, their expensive tastes and the necessity of keeping up their London social position. This is how he begins:

There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them. ... This troubled her, and in her manner she was all the more gentle and anxious for her children, as if she loved them very much. Only she herself knew that at the centre of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody. ... Although they lived in style, they felt always an anxiety in the house. ... There must be more money, there must be more money.

This sweep is successful because it narrates not simply one or two events in the mother's life but sums up her entire past, including motivation (married for love) and results (love turned to dust, children thrust on her). Added to this past is the family's chronic anxiety about money, an ironic outcome since she "started with all the advantages." This lack, as we shall see, governs many of her responses to her son.

The passage also brings us to the verge of the present action, telling how she now always attempts to compensate for the hardness of her heart (acting all the more gently toward her children). In this passage, we're given both a history of physical events that cover many years and their accumulated psychological and emotional effects on the mother. The sweep thus fills in a larger,

more complex and multidimensional picture than the customary backstory.

**2 RELATE YOUR SWEEP TO THE STORY.**

As you can see from the previous example, the successful sweep must relate precisely to the center of your story. It's easy to get carried away with something as grand as, say, a lush description of war-torn years, but readers will recognize the self-indulgence of a sweep that doesn't specifically connect to your protagonist and the main conflict. They'll sense you're overly enamored with brilliant descriptions and will likely lose interest.

In our example, Lawrence's initial psychological and social history frames the motivation for the son's compulsive and desperate actions and his inevitable destruction. Lawrence chooses every word wisely. His use of the thematic "luck" in the first sentence foreshadows the son's tragic obsession with it.

In another example, Shirley Jackson starts her classic and bone-chilling story "The Lottery" with immediate action. On a balmy summer day, the citizens of a typically pleasant small town gather as if at a county fair. We're introduced to the townsfolk by name as the men exchange sage words about the crops and weather, the women gossip and the boys collect smooth stones, as boys will, and play boisterously.

But then, in the fourth paragraph, we're given the first real indication of the day's sinister nature. The townsfolk aren't preparing for a county fair, after all, but instead for a macabre ritual—involving those apparently innocent stones—as old as the village. Now Jackson turns to her sweep with the history of the lottery's focal point, the "black box":

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done. The black box grew shabbier each year: By now it was no

longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

This precise and detailed account emphasizes the centrality of the black box to the ancient, outdated rite that is still mandatory and very much alive. With this background established as context for the events of the story, Jackson quickly refocuses on the present as the citizens take their turns drawing slips of paper from the box, to the story's final horrific end.

### 3 TRANSITION SMOOTHLY TO YOUR SWEEP.

The sweep requires a smooth introduction—and later will also need a graceful exit.

When your story starts with a sweep, obviously a transition to introduce it isn't needed. Lawrence's opening sweep recounts the wife's sad history and at the same time plants the story's themes—lack of luck, lack of love, lack of money.

But when the sweep takes place a few paragraphs into the story, we must watch its entry and departure. If the transition is too abrupt, the sweep will seem artificial. In "The Lottery," Jackson positions the sweep artfully, setting the scene with the day's action and slowly, with carefully planted descriptions (about the smooth stones and Mr. Summers, keeper of the box), segues into the sweep. Here's the sentence immediately before the sweep and its first sentence, as quoted earlier:

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it.

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Just as skillfully, in a kind of sandwich with the same characters, after the box's history Jackson picks up the story's action. Notice her almost exact repetition of the words introducing the sweep. Here's the last line of the sweep and the next of the story:

The black box grew shabbier each year: By now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the papers thoroughly with his hand.

Jackson uses the sweep here and the minute, repetitive detail before and after it to elongate the action, heighten the tension and rivet our attention.

So, we can think of the transition into and out of the sweep as a contraction-expansion-contraction. From the narrower action or narrative, the movie screen-scene expands, embedding aspects of the action, allowing the sweep in naturally and then narrowing again back to the main focus, resuming the story's forward motion.

*A sweep asks you to push beyond the accepted rules of the short story and lands you at the precipice of a novel.*

### 4 DETERMINE THE SCOPE OF YOUR SWEEP.

Once you've established your sweep and worked out your transitions, decide how long to stay. Test it by expanding or reigning it in. My story "Casey" is about an adolescent boy who's sure he's a loser. At the start of an earlier draft, I described how the teachers ignored Casey and lavished attention on his nemesis, Clive, the perfect student. In the process, I got fired up about why the teachers responded so strongly to Clive. This is some of the original passage:

Clive was the student they were sure would still appear, even after years of slogging through grade books and writing parents never-delivered notes. Clive was the student who made worthwhile their initial desire to become a teacher, even when they were all but drowning in mountains of paperwork and endless staff meetings and seriously considering quitting two years before retirement, not caring any more about sacrificing their pension.

After several drafts, in which I kept going on about the teachers, I saw that this story could easily veer off into their plight and a diatribe about the educational system. So, bracing for the surgery, I cut out a thousand words and reduced the passage to two paragraphs that centered on Clive. As in the earlier examples, the sweep should always focus on a character, so cut away exposition that digresses—like my paragraph above—in favor of character development. Here's my revised version:

Like his mother, Casey's teachers seemed to look on Clive as almost a religious figure. Through the dark years of blank-faced children, their faces blurred with stupid sameness, Clive appeared, a comet in the black. Casey saw how the teachers' faces lit up when Clive raised his hand, how they called on him too quickly, knowing they'd be saved from the class' incipient noisy rebellion and embarrassing visit from the principal.

Even a brief sweep, done well, can evoke just the scope and range of the story you envision. Science-fiction and fantasy writers are known for their opening sweeps—time continuums, light years, far galaxies, alien species—as in Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day":

It had been raining for seven years; thousands upon thousands of days compounded and filled from one end to the other with rain, with the drum and gush of water, with the sweet crystal fall of showers and the concussion of storms so heavy they were tidal waves coming over the islands. A thousand forests had been crushed under the rain and grown up a thousand times to be crushed again. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a raining world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

Such sweeps instantly involve us, intrigue us and convey the flavor of the story. More concise sweeps can be as effective as longer ones, but of course they must be twined like tendons into the body of the story.

Deciding how long to make your sweep is largely a matter of aesthetic judgment and distance. Often only trial and error will reveal the right length. First, write your heart out in the sweep, as I did in "Casey." Then obey an essential rule of good writing: Let it sit. You'll need some distance to gain perspective on how well your story is working—and what might be done so it can become even more effective. Walk away, forget it, bury it under your novel-in-progress, go clean out the garage.

Later, inch up on your story again and reread it. If the sweep now seems too short, you may not have given enough context for the main character's later actions. If the sweep is too long and tangential, readers lose patience or become confused about your point, as in my pre-excised "Casey" draft. Listen to your writerly intuition, and you'll probably spot immediately where the sweep is too scant or drawn out.

### QUICK TIPS: *Sweeping Successfully*

Follow these steps. They will help reduce any lingering fears and guide you into sweeping adventures.

1. Decide firmly that you don't have to be bound by the standard limitations or confines imposed on the short story.
2. Give yourself permission to think and visualize on a broader scale.
3. Think about the "history" of your characters—their family, their living situation, the events that surround them, their country, era, planet, personal growth (or lack of it), etc.
4. Ask yourself, *Why do I want to place my characters in a larger context?* (If the answer is that you don't, you have no need for a sweep in this particular story.)
5. How will the sweeping context make more dramatic, poignant or meaningful the story's theme, conflict or resolution?
6. Visualize a movie camera panning toward the main action of your story. As the director, where will you first focus your lens?
7. Now, write what comes to you, censoring nothing, whatever the length.
8. Let it sit, go back to it and start editing.

You can also test the sweep by showing your story to someone you trust and watching for responses. If you see a suddenly furrowed brow (too short) or hear suppressed sighs or outright yawns (too long), you'll have your answer.

Understanding the sweep frees you from limiting your stories to single circumscribed subjects and extends your repertoire of narrative techniques. Observe how other writers use the sweep and experiment with your own. With better acquaintance, you won't rule out any subject, scene or setting as too big or broad. Your work will gain breadth and richness you may not have thought possible in the short-story form. **WD**

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# 40 50 Simple Ways to Build Your Platform in 5 Minutes a Day

These days, getting your writing noticed is all up to you. Make the overwhelming task an easy one by taking it one step at a time.

BY CHRISTINA KATZ

# 46 Finding the Upside

Like confronting a dark past, publishing your own book can be daunting. Weldon Long found one bold way to do both—and earned top honors in WD's Self-Published Book Awards.

**PLUS:** The winners and honorable mentions in every category.

BY MELISSA WUSKE

## WRITER'S WORKBOOK

### *Crafting Short Stories*

#### 56 LETTING PLOT GUIDE YOUR NARRATIVE

BY JOHN DUFRESNE

#### 60 BROADENING YOUR STORY'S SCOPE

BY NOELLE STERNE

**PLUS:** 4 online exclusives 5 editor's letter 6 contributors 7 reader mail

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## INKWELL

### 8 THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

You've got a great idea—but how can you tell if it's weighty enough for a novel, or would work best as a short story? Here are five key factors to consider.

BY ELIZABETH SIMS

**PLUS:** Top Shelf • Poetic Asides: Rondeau • 5-Minute Memoir: Hidden in Plain Sight • Read for Pictures • 3 Strategies for Ending Your Chapters

## COLUMNS

16 **ASK THE AGENT:** Kelly Gottuso Mortimer  
BY JANE FRIEDMAN

18 **BREAKING IN:** Debut Author Spotlight  
BY CHUCK SAMBUCHINO

52 **QUESTIONS & QUANDARIES:** *Can vs. May*; Using Real People in Fiction; Online Pseudonyms  
BY BRIAN A. KLEMS

54 **YOUR STORY:** Sanguineous  
BY ANNA KITTRELL

64 **STANDOUT MARKETS:** *YES!*; *cream city review*; Holiday House Inc.  
BY VANESSA WIELAND

66 **CONFERENCE SCENE:** Travel-Writing Events  
BY LINDA FORMICHELLI

80 **REJECT A HIT:** *Fun With Dick and Jane*  
SPOOF-REJECTED BY CHUCK REDMAN



## ON THE COVER

- 56 Secrets for Crafting Short Stories That Sell
- 20 Writer for Hire
- 31 Grants & Fellowships
- 26 Copy Editing
- 20 Ghostwriting
- 40 50 Ways to Boost Your Career
- 46 Winners of the WD Self-Published Book Awards
- 36 WD Interview: Emma Donoghue

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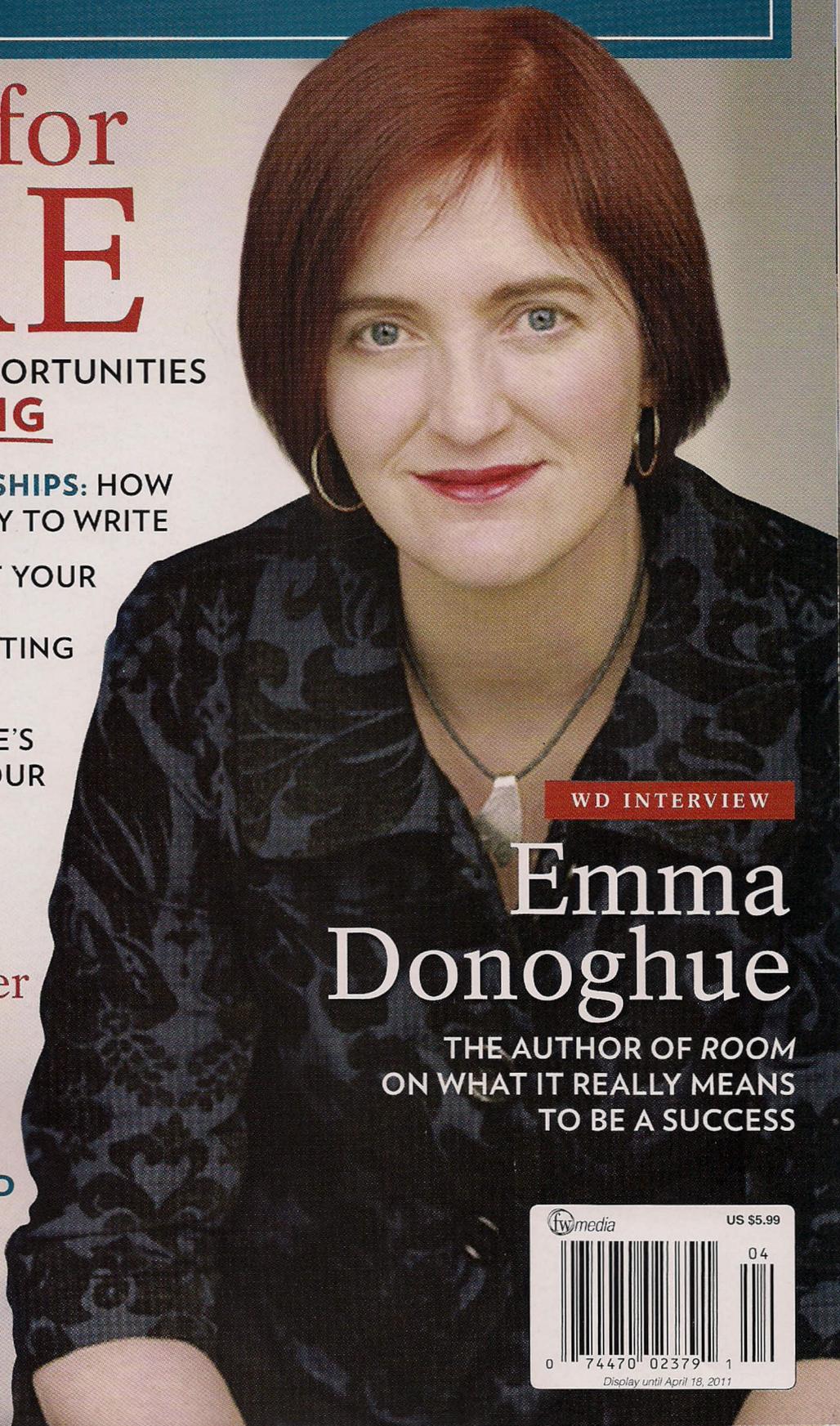
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## Emma Donoghue

THE AUTHOR OF *ROOM*  
ON WHAT IT REALLY MEANS  
TO BE A SUCCESS

