

Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Alan Mahar

No 1: Keep Your Eyes and Ears Wide Open

What's the best advice for a writer of stories? Learn from the acknowledged masters of the form. The modern short story tradition must start with Chekhov and pass through Katherine Mansfield, DH Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway before it gets to Raymond Carver or William Trevor.

To start this series off, my advice to new writers of the short story concerns the importance of precise detail in dialogue and observation. Always keep your ears and eyes wide open. Story writers must be good listeners and they must be observant.

My choice of model was a great writer, with a great name: Eudora Welty. She isn't very well known, though she won countless American literary prizes. She died earlier this year (2001) at the age of 92. She hailed from Jackson, Mississippi and she lived a comparatively quiet life. Her stories and novels show how you don't have to travel the world to write great books. Just like her fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, her subject was the infinite variety and humanity of small time life in the Southern States. Both are an inspiration to writers from a provincial city such as Birmingham – you don't have to live in London or New York to write interesting, relevant stories. All human life is around you anyway.

Can I tell you a holiday story? I was getting dry on a beach towel in August. The maram grass and sea holly were dangerously close to the touch of bare feet. Still chilled by my dip twenty yards out, where three powerboats had anchored, I could still taste the diesel fuel from the seawater. The two beach readers in front of me were trying to keep their concentration on JK Rowling and Jeffrey Archer, respectively. Their pale fleshy torsos hugged the sand. When I was safely dry, I pulled an ancient Penguin paperback from a rucksack. It was orange with a white band across the

middle, near the bottom a dancing penguin and the price: 'one shilling'. I bought it second hand. A man's penned copperplate signature on the title page: Lionel Randle 1948. I'd packed it with me because I heard Eudora had died. A cut-out newspaper obituary was my bookmark. A Curtain of Green it was called – Ms Welty's literary debut. The first page I read and straightaway I'm no longer on a beach in Guernsey, no I'm in a hairdressers shop in Mississippi, inside a story called 'Petrified Man' and they're talking like this:

'Reach in my purse and git me a cigarette without no powder in it if you kin, Mrs Fletcher, honey,' said Leota to her ten o'clock shampoo-and-set customer. 'I don't like no perfumed cigarettes.'

Mrs Fletcher gladly reached over to the lavender shelf under the lavender-framed mirror, shook a hair net loose from the clasp of the patent-leather bag, and slapped her hand down quickly on a powder puff which burst out where the purse was opened.

'Why, look at the peanuts, Leota!' said Mrs Fletcher in her marveling voice. 'Honey, them goobers has been in my purse a week if they's been in it a day. Mrs Pike bought them peanuts.'

For the entire story they gossip about the formidable Mrs Pike who later reveals the true guilt of the Petrified Man; he's a rapist. The plot has its mystery and its twist at the end, but its success depends on the uncanny accuracy of Welty's ear as she records odd turns of phrase in the conversation. Meanwhile, the atmosphere of the salon is brilliantly manufactured by her exact observation of the oddest details of the women's lives, as simple as a cigarette contaminated by face powder.

Over fifty years old, but it lives through its closely heard dialogue and its observation of unexpected things. On the inside cover of my aged Penguin paperback Katharine Anne Porter said of Eudora Welty: 'She has an eye and ear, shrewd and true as a tuning-fork – she can very well become a master of the short story.'

In the same collection is the famous story 'Why I Live at the PO'. (This was revived in the miniature Penguin 60s in 1995). There is a family argument between two sisters: one, the narrator, doesn't believe the other, Stella-Rondo, when she claims her illegitimate child is adopted. The parents side with the untruthful daughter, so the narrator takes herself off to the deserted post office and even if no one comes she

doesn't care.

“But here I am and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy. And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and attempt to explain the incidents of her life with Mr Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen.”

There the author has caught the exact tone of defiance in the character's voice. It is exactly the way stubbornness speaks.

Another one is called 'A Memory'. The girl in the story, like many writers, is an avid watcher, a keen observer, who can't help but notice everything:

To watch everything about me I regarded grimly and possessively as a need. All through this summer I had lain on the sand beside the small lake, with my hands squared over my eyes, finger-tips touching, looking out by this device to see everything: which appeared as a kind of projection. It did not matter to me what I looked at; from any observation I would conclude that a secret of life had been nearly revealed to me.

She watches a family: two fat boys and a girl in a green swimming costume, fooling on the beach, jumping on a bench and leaping into the water, squealing and pinching each other. Meanwhile the husband buries his wife in the sand. The narrator sees all this and senses the secrets behind what she sees. That's how hard you have to watch and listen to write a good story – to discover the secrets of your characters.

So my advice is: Listen very carefully. Look very carefully. Treasure the telltale oddity and the unexpected detail; these are what can bring your characters and scenes to life. If you are wondering what a writer from Jackson, Mississippi has to tell us in Birmingham in 2001, well, her genuinely observant stories have stood the test of time. She wrote vividly about the life she saw all around her.

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ALAN MAHAR is the author of two novels, *Flight Patterns* (Gollancz, 1999) and *After the Man Before* (Methuen, 2002), and is working on a third, *Huyton Suite*, for

which he won an Arts Council Writers' Award 2002. His short stories and book reviews have appeared in, among others, *Critical Quarterly*, *New Statesman*, *Literary Review* and *Times Literary Supplement*. He founded Tindal Street Fiction Group in 1982 and is currently Publishing Director of Tindal Street Press.

EUDORA WELTY (1909–2001) lived in her familial homes in Jackson, Mississippi for most of her ninety-two years. Welty has been acclaimed as one of the twentieth century's most gifted and radical practitioners of the short story. She won most of the major literary prizes during her career, including the Pulitzer Prize and the French Légion d'Honneur. Her oeuvre – four collections of stories, five novels, two collections of photographs, three works of non-fiction and one children's book – shows Welty's wide scope as an artist, and her work reveals an astonishing, expansive tonal range in subject and style.