

On the challenge of saying what you really mean



Writer Clare Sestanovich discusses distrusting triumph, writing during stolen hours, and the wisdom in abandoning a project.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2123 words.

Tags: Writing, Process.

What, to you, makes a good short story?

There's a lot to say about the difference between short stories and novels, but the criteria for quality seems fundamentally the same: a good story, whatever its length, is an experiment. You assemble an array of reactive substances, and then you watch what happens. A good storyteller, in my mind, never knows the results of that experiment in advance. That may sound self-evident, but I think it's crucial. The writer who doesn't put herself in suspense will never hold the reader's attention either.

I'm not the kind of reader or writer who needs everything to combust for the experiment to be deemed a success. I watch for small flares, subtle transformations. I do think change, above all, is essential in a story, but sometimes the most talented alchemists are the ones who are most attuned to the least obvious shifts in their material.

So you definitely don't start with an ending in mind.

Never.

I noticed that your stories rarely have a dramatic ending. Instead, they resolve quietly.

In fiction, as in life, I think we have a pretty narrow definition of what it means for something to happen. We tend to look for discrete events— the high point, the low point, the before, the after, the beginning, the end. The elements of plot that, for better or for worse, we've been trained to look for.

In my experience, so much of the drama of being alive takes place in between all those moments. I believe that turning points exist, and I often find myself gravitating toward them as a writer, but I imagine those pivotal moments as gradual rotations, not as sudden about-faces.

Your stories reminded me of Mumblecore films, just kind of day-to-day snapshots of people's lives.

I know nothing about film! It's mortifying. I'll spend an evening watching trailers and never get around to picking an actual movie. When I do go to see something in theaters, what's most thrilling, but also most daunting, for me is that, even during the previews, you're instantly immersed. A sudden plunge into someone else's universe! Films, at least for me, make you cede control in a way that books don't quite. If you're a controlling person—and, shamefully, I am—books are the more comfortable technology. As a reader, you're beholden to an

author's pacing and yet you get to retain a fair amount of agency. You get to skim, you get to stop. You can put a book down and pick it back up days, months, years later. And of course, blissfully, you can reread. We often say that we read to be transported, but I actually think it's a little more complicated than that. We read for the strange sensation of being here and there, in fantasy and in reality, all at once.

How do you start a project?

I start with the first sentence. A maddening answer, and, for my own sake, I wish I had a better one. But it's the only way I know how: one sentence on top of the other, one foot in front of the other. In that way, writing does feel exploratory to me. I never start with a map in my head or even a destination. All I have is a sense that I'm heading in an interesting direction.

How do you decide when a story is done?

When I'm revising a story, I almost never change the first sentence, and I almost always change the last one. I tend to write past my endings. It'll turn out that the third to last sentence is really the very last sentence, or maybe the final paragraph gets lopped off completely.

My great fear is that the ending of a story will feel predetermined or over explained. Earlier I was using the analogy of exploration. Well, imagine you're off in some unknown terrain, no map, no plan, and when you finally arrive at a breathtaking view, someone's there waiting, pointing everything out, handing you binoculars— playing tour guide instead of just letting you enjoy the landscape.

So one answer is that I want my endings to feel like that breathtaking view. I aspire to stop people in their tracks. At the same time, I want readers to see it, to *enjoy* it, for themselves.

I think that you have perfect endings—they don't feel forced at all, they just resonate. Each time I was just kind of stunned and very pleased.

You don't *always* have to kill your darlings, but with my own endings, less is usually more.

How does the rest of your drafting process look?

As I say, it really is one sentence, one step at a time. And crucially, at least for me, I retrace my steps every day. I read from the top. That results in a lot of little fussing and fixing along the way, and occasionally some big new leaps.

Then I get to the end and I invariably think, *congratulations, this is brilliant!* And if I'm being stupid, at that point I will go ahead and show it to someone right away, so they can see how brilliant I am. But I think I've learned by now that the surge of triumph that you get when you finish a story is actually just relief that you're done. So, if I'm being smart, I will leave a draft aside for a while and then I'll read it again and think, **congratulations, you're terrible. *And then I'll leave it a bit more, or maybe someone else will read it, and then I come back and think, okay, some of it's brilliant and some of it's terrible.* There's a lot of oscillation between extremes. I have gradually learned to discipline those swings, or at the very least not to trust them.

I know that you are also an editor. Has your editorial work changed your writing and/or revision. And if so, how?

Absolutely. I think that everyone should have to do both. Writing is solitary and mysterious, but only up to a point. Then you need someone to ask you what you're trying to say—and to make you say it. Editing other people has helped me ask that question for myself as I'm writing, but the truth is that it's a difficult question, and we're really good at avoiding difficult things. As an editor, being a writer has helped me understand that writing is extremely hard. As a writer, being an editor has helped me understand that it should actually probably be even harder.

Do you have any rituals for your writing? Any preference on the environment in which you write, things you have to have around you, anything like that?

I used to write in the early morning before my day job started. My schedule is much more on my own now, but I've kept the habit. Those early hours can feel like stolen hours, where there's a sense of pressure to make the most of the day, but there's also this sense of freedom. If you don't get a single word out, well, fine, nobody else has either. They're probably still asleep.

I have to work in silence. I'm the insufferable person who's wearing earplugs in the library. I've worn earplugs when I'm home alone. A few years ago I encountered some predictably super doomful research about phones, the main takeaway of which was that even just having your phone in sight, even if you're not using it, causes productivity and concentration to plummet. So now I'm a fanatic. I'm always hiding my phone from myself. I don't even want to see it turned over on the chair next to me.

A lot of your stories seem to have an interest in the alternate paths a life could take. Could you speak more to this?

Every story in its most essential form is a response to the question, *what if?* And most people experience their lives as stories; we're narrative creatures, whether we're writers or not. I'm drawn to characters who do their own what if-ing, in part because asking myself what characters would ask themselves feels necessary to give them agency, even dignity. I believe that it's only by imagining alternate lives that anyone is able to fully possess their real life. Or, to put it slightly differently, I don't think you know who you are until you've considered who you might have been.

Your characters' self-perception often shifts depending on who or what they're around. Is this something that you consider in your life or writing?

Yeah, all the time! Right now! I think fiction is uniquely equipped to render the texture of subjectivity, and how that texture's always changing. It's dumb to generalize, but I'll do it anyway: I do think that Americans are especially enthralled to the cult of authenticity. I've definitely felt its constraints in my own life. We're familiar, as readers of fiction, with asking the question, *is this character believable?* Which usually means, **is this character consistent?* *Meanwhile, it's easy to overlook the fact that we ask the same thing about each other and about ourselves all the time. We're always trying to find our "true selves"; we talk about seeing "the real you." At its best, fiction draws our attention to questions about continuity and consistency of character, and then dismantles the idea that we should have the answers to those questions, or should even be looking for the answers in the first place.

I've been thinking about that a lot lately. If a character is only supposed to do what that character would do, how can change happen without compromising that?

I think we spend a lot of life wanting people to surprise us—that is, wanting them to act out of character. That probably ought to tell us something about just what a complicated, fragile idea character is to begin with. Those complications can be maddening in your friends, of course, but they're a boon for fiction. Making sense of that mess of contradiction is what stories can do best.

I noticed that your characters often speak past each other. Or one of them will be saying something, and the other just isn't responding. They're just saying their own thing. I thought that was really true to life. What interests you in dialogue? What do you strive to reveal in speech?

There's a certain kind of conversation that's like a tennis match, where people are just volleying questions and answers and mutual affirmation back and forth, but I basically think that kind of conversation is rare. We spend so much time ignoring each other and interrupting each other. We're really good at turning something that should be a monologue into something that sounds like a dialogue. I think everyone has had the experience of telling somebody what they want to hear, yet we long for other people to tell us what they really believe. I want to capture, if I can, all that in fiction, not because I'm so committed to realism—I am and I'm not—but because I

want to capture how much miscommunication is involved in communication. And, in my view, there's nothing harder than saying what you really mean.

What advice, if any, would you give to writers who are just starting out?

My main advice, demoralizing though it will sound, is to abandon things. It's not the same as giving up! It's just the first step to starting again.

I threw out a novel when I was getting an MFA, and I've thrown out so many pages since. If you told me right now that I had to erase everything I wrote yesterday, it would feel like grief. But if you tell me to throw out that page in three months, I'll probably think, *good idea*.

It's of course important to feel an investment in your work, but I think there's a tendency to fetishize the tortured artists for whom creativity is a kind of painful single-mindedness. It leads people to believe that nothing short of totalizing (possibly debilitating) passion can justify a project. There's value, too, in cultivating a certain detachment from your work, in being able to pull yourself out of things, redirect yourself, try something new. Everyone has more than one story. Less torture, more art!

Clare Sestanovich Recommends:

[A Dialogue on Love](#) by Eve Sedgwick

[This video](#) of Stevie Nicks backstage

Using a thirty-dollar [car buffer](#) instead of an expensive massage gun (trust me!)

"[Joy](#)" by Zadie Smith

Drinking decaf

[Name](#)

Clare Sestanovich

[Vocation](#)

writer

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Edward Friedman