

OTHER BOOKS  
BY JACK HODGINS

*Damage Done by the Storm*  
*Distance*  
*Broken Ground*  
*The Macken Charm*  
*Over Forty in Broken Hill*  
*Innocent Cities*  
*Left Behind in Squabble Bay*  
*The Honorary Patron*  
*The Barclay Family Theatre*  
*The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*  
*The Invention of the World*  
*Spit Delaney's Island*

A Passion for Narrative

*A Guide for  
Writing Fiction*

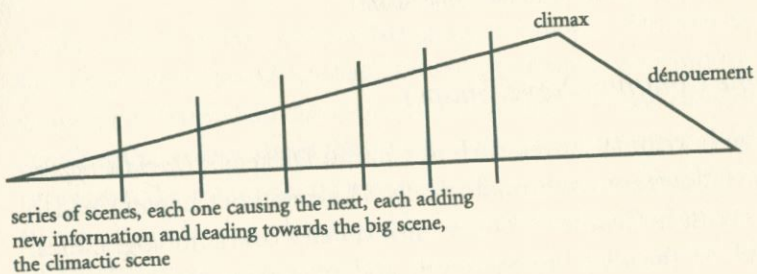
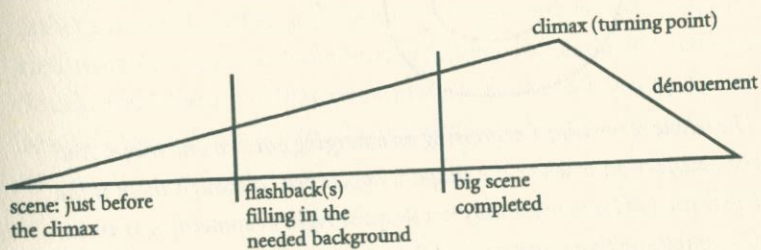
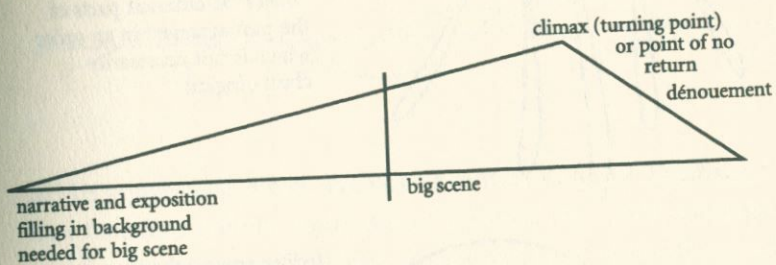
Jack Hodgins

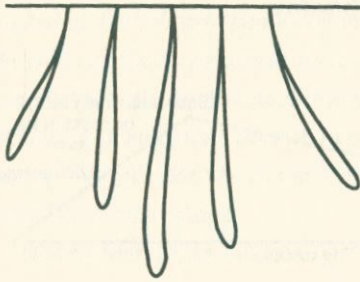
[A DOUGLAS GIBSON BOOK]



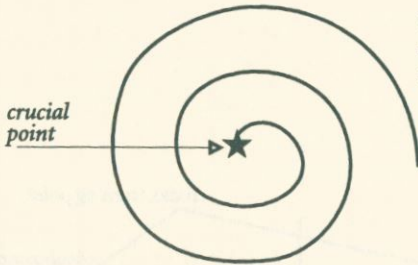
McCLELLAND & STEWART

## Some Common Short Story Shapes





"now," remembering various  
"then's" at different parts of  
the past arranged in an order  
which is not necessarily  
chronological



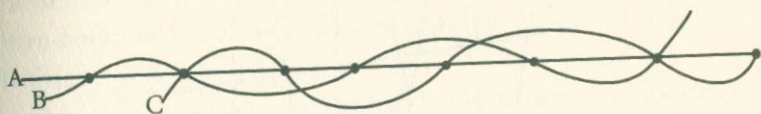
circling around the important  
moment and only eventually  
showing it directly

*The whole of writing is expressing an emerging pattern and shape. And the satisfaction is when the shape is concluded, although there is the frustration of knowing it may not be quite right or something is amiss. It's something that emerges, and this is for me the real joy of writing. I mean it's not publication or anything else, it's just as one is writing a pattern grows and everything seems to fall into place – very exciting, very exciting just to see it.*

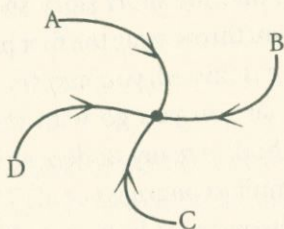
(Janet Frame, in *In the Same Room*)

### *Some Common Novel Shapes*

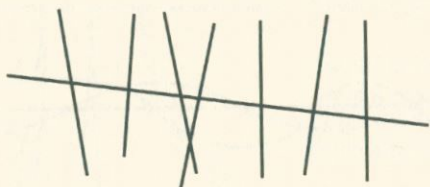
1. The horizontal novel, such as Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, follows events chronologically. The events of Chapter 1 lead to the events in Chapter 2. This is most suited to the autobiographical novel or the plot-driven novel, and of course will sometimes include flashbacks that briefly interrupt the forward movement.



2. The converging novel, such as Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, follows a number of separate sequences, perhaps a number of separate characters, until events and characters finally coincide at one place and time. William Faulkner's *Light in August* explores, quite separately, the stories of a half-black orphan trying to find out who he is, a pregnant peasant woman in search of her father's runaway father, a preacher who has lost his faith, an unmarried woman who is a Northern reformer living in the American South, and others – all stories converging upon a burning house in Mississippi and leading to a horrendous murder.



3. The vertical novel, such as Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, sinks a series of narrative shafts down into memory according to some order *other* than chronological, working towards an understanding that comes about the total experience. A present-time narrative may be going on simultaneously, as it is in *The Diviners*, though it needn't – and does not in *The Good Soldier*, except to the extent that we are made aware of the narrating character sitting by the fire relating the story.



(These three categories were suggested by critic Clifton Fadiman.)

### *The Flashback*

*The summonings of memory can have only one purpose – to illuminate and influence the present. They should never, either through garrulity or their own fascinations, overwhelm the intentions of the present story.*

(Robie Macauley and George Lanning, *Technique in Fiction*)

It has been suggested that the short story should start as close as possible to its end. If you throw away the first page and discover that nothing of importance is missed, you may try throwing the second page away too. How far can you go with this before something begins to hurt? (I can think of many student writers who have found their stories' true beginnings on page 3 or 4!) The closer you start to what your first draft discovered to be your ending, the more tension you are likely to achieve.

Occasionally, of course, there are events in the character's past that have an influence upon the action in the story. Do you move the story's beginning back in order to include that earlier event, or do you pause in your story to remember it? Writers have done both.

Sometimes the flashback is set up as though the protagonist is remembering it; at other times the narrator abandons the protagonist and takes the reader into the past to witness the events directly. In the first situation, some part of the reader's attention remains

with the main story while revisiting the past with the character; in the second, the reader is asked to leave the main story in suspension, turn back the clock, and journey through the events of the past before returning to the present.

Remember, though, that the flashback material must be there to *serve* the main story, not compete with it. I have read countless short stories in which the flashback went on for so long that I forgot what the main story was about, countless short stories in which the flashback was far more interesting than the main story, and countless short stories in which an introductory frame leads us into a flashback that goes on for too long and then is followed by the rest of the frame *in which nothing happens that depended upon that flashback*. Sometimes this suggests that the writer should have started the story earlier, sometimes that the flashback is all the story the writer wanted to tell, and sometimes that the writer was too rushed to remember that a flashback must be an experience through which a reader goes in order to understand better what follows and precedes it.

### *Beginnings*

*With the beginning of a book, I will often re-write first paragraphs, and the first few pages, thirty and forty times, because another belief I have is that in that moment, in that fix, in those first crucial pages, all the reader's decisions are made. To trust or not to trust? And all stylistic decisions are really made at that point, especially nowadays.*

(Brian Moore, in *Conversations with Canadian Novelists 2*)

Gabriel García Márquez also emphasizes the importance and the difficulty of a story's opening, claiming that "[one] of the most difficult things is the first paragraph."

*I have spent many months on a first paragraph and once I get it, the rest just comes out very easily. In the first paragraph you solve most of the*

*problems with your book. The theme is defined, the style, the tone. At least in my case, the first paragraph is a kind of sample of what the rest of the book is going to be.*

(Gabriel García Márquez, in *A Writer's Chapbook*)

"In the stories I admire," Clark Blaise writes, "there is a sense of a continuum disrupted, then re-established, and both the disruption and the re-ordering are part of the *beginning* of a story."

*The first paragraph tells us, in effect, that "this is how things have always been," or at least, how they have been until the arrival of the story. It may summarize, as Faulkner does in "That Evening Sun":*

*Monday is no different from any other weekday in Jefferson now. The streets are paved now, and the telephone and electric companies are cutting down more and more of the shade trees. . . . or it may envelop a life in a single sentence, as Bernard Malamud's often do:*

*Manischevitz, a tailor, in his fifty-first year suffered many reverses and indignities.*

*Whereupon Malamud embellishes the history, a few sentences more of indignities, aches, curses, until the fateful word that occurs in almost all stories, the simple terrifying adverb:*

*Then,*

*Then, which means to the reader: "I am ready." The moment of change is at hand, the story shifts gears and for the first time, plot intrudes on poetry. . . .*

*Suddenly there appeared . . .*

*Then one morning . . .*

*Then one evening she wasn't home to greet him . . .*

*. . . The rest of the story will be an attempt to draw out the inferences of that earlier upheaval. What is often meant by "climax" in the conventional short story is merely the moment that the character realizes the true, the devastating, meaning of "then." He will try to ignore it, he will try to start again . . .; he can't of course.*

... "Then" is the moment of the slightest tremor, the moment when the author is satisfied that all the forces are deployed, the unruffled surface perfectly cast, and the insertion, gross or delicate, can now take place. It is the cracking of the perfect, smug egg of possibility.

(Clark Blaise, "To Begin, To Begin")

In the best fiction, there is a sense that the entire story, including its ending, somehow grows out of the first sentence, that everything is organically related to the first cluster of words the reader encounters. Below, you will find some opening sentences from successful short stories and novels. For those that make you wish to read on, can you identify the qualities you respond to? Notice that some make us feel something is wrong. Some raise questions. Some imply an uneasy position in time. Some establish a strong sense of a narrator's voice. All of the best ones make us in some way curious.

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

(Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans by Gregory Rabassa)

Laforgue felt his body tremble. What can be keeping them? Has the Commandant refused? Why has he not sent for me? Is this God's punishment for my lie about my hearing? But it wasn't a lie; my intention was honorable. Or is that a sophistry? Am I now so mired in my ambition that I can no longer tell truth from falsehood?

(Brian Moore, *Black Robe*)

Cripples, one-eyed people, pregnant women: we are all the children of eggs, Miss Miller, we are all the children of eggs. Consider Isobel, leaning over the railing on the promenade deck of the HMS Pylades, watching a workman, a spanner sticking out of the back pocket of



his overall, run lightly and self-consciously down the gangway on the balls of his feet.

(Audrey Thomas, *Blown Figures*)

Once upon a time – if we counted time not by calendars but by assimilated history and scientific change I'd be tempted to say four or five thousand years ago: before total war and all-out war, before death camps, Nagasaki, before fusion and fission, jets, moon shots, cosmonauts, Luniks in orbit, before antibiotics, polio vaccine, open-heart surgery, before TB, carburetors and other wonders of automation, before dead-faced hoods on motor cycles, dead-faced beatniks on maldecycles – once upon *that* kind of time lived a boy and his horse.

The year was 1939. This is no pastoral tale. The boy and the horse are both dead.

(Jack Ludwig, "Requiem for Bibul")

Suddenly – dreadfully – she wakes up. What has happened? Something dreadful has happened. No – nothing has happened. It is only the wind shaking the house, rattling the windows, banging a piece of iron on the roof and making her bed tremble.

(Katherine Mansfield, "The Wind Blows")

As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters.

(John McGahern, *Amongst Women*)

I'm not Stiller.

(Max Frisch, *I'm Not Stiller*, trans by Michael Bullock)

Nothing as appalling had happened before at Drimaghleen; its people had never been as shocked.

(William Trevor, "Events at Drimaghleen")

There are times even now, when I awake at four o'clock in the morning with the terrible fear that I have overslept; when I imagine that my father is waiting for me in the room below the darkened stairs or

that the shorebound men are tossing pebbles against my window while blowing their hands and stomping their feet impatiently on the frozen steadfast earth.

(Alistair MacLeod, "The Boat")

This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch. I know what this means. Since I go there every Sunday for dinner and today is Wednesday, it can mean only one thing: she wants to have one of her serious talks.

(Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*)

And then he understood that he was going to die. The thought came to him in the middle of a sentence, as he was looking for the right words, unsatisfied with the ones he had found.

(Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, *Don Quixote in Nighttown*, trans by Sheila Fischman)

The  
train  
was  
leaving  
town.

Lying back with his head against his mother's shoulder, Patrice followed the dappled countryside with a melancholy expression. Behind his forehead everything grew confused, like a billowing stormcloud on a screen. He watched in silence and did not understand, but his idiot face was so dazzling that it made one think of genius.

(Marie-Claire Blais, *Mad Shadows*, trans by Merloyd Lawrence)

I was never so amazed in my life as when the Sniffer drew his concealed weapon from its case and struck me to the ground, stone dead.

How did I know that I was dead?

(Robertson Davies, *Murder & Walking Spirits*)

## Endings

*The good ending dismisses us with a touch of ceremony, and throws a backward light of significance over the story just read. It makes it, as they say, or unmakes it – a weak beginning is forgettable, but the end of a story bulks in the reader's mind like the giant foot in a foreshortened photograph.*

(John Updike, Introduction to *Best American Short Stories* 1984)

Sometimes a writer will have a story's ending in mind from the start, and will see the writing of the story as a way of working towards it. At other times, a story's ending will remain unseen until several drafts have brought the writer to its brink. It is one thing to know that in general stories should end as soon as possible after the climax, but it is another to write that precisely perfect ending for a particular story.

I suspect the best endings do not have to be invented at all, but recognized. Even those that have existed from the beginning in the writer's plans may have to be abandoned when characters insist on having their say. A good ending may not reveal itself until after many, many drafts have run up to the climax and stalled. I tend to think of a story's ending as something waiting for me, unseen, behind the hill of the story's climax. When I get to that pinnacle, so to speak, I ought to be able to see the end quite clearly. If I can't, maybe there's something wrong with the peak I've climbed, or maybe the ending has been underfoot and travelling with me all along. Sometimes I discover that it was hiding all the while in the opening paragraph – the subtlest hint.

It is not a good idea to give a story a merely adequate ending "just for the time being" – you may be fooled into thinking you have finished the story and have only to work a little harder on the ending itself. Until the right ending comes along it is the whole story and not just the ending that must be worked on. A story should not be

ended at all until an ending presents itself that leaves you breathless with its "rightness," its surprise, and its inevitability. Reread the final paragraphs of "Miss Brill," of *The Old Man and the Sea*, of *The Tree of Man*, and of the stories in Alice Munro's *Friend of My Youth*—good endings leave us with a sense that they could not possibly have been anything but what they are.