

A Manual for Readers

by David Backer

"Rejoice." --Donald Barthelme, "The Dead Father"

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The long-thin story is a story of dialogue between two synchronized personalities tuned like piano strings in a writer's mind. They discuss war, windmills, menstrual cycles, police reports, and mysterious disappearances. They may talk on the phone or in the parlor or in a truck parked in a parking lot in the town where they grew up. The dialogue stretches down the page like a tape worm seeking refuge. Therefore, to remove the long-thin story, a cracker must be held at the opening of the mouth after five days of fasting to entice it to crawl up the esophagus. The story will starve. It will crawl up your throat to get the cracker. When it takes the bait, grab it by its title and pull it up and out of you.

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The twitter-sized story says more or less what she is and is more or less than she says. She blurps, spurts, then silent-farts her narrative, which escapes into the air through a blow hole on her smooth back. The twitter-sized story must be consumed like popcorn, that relatively recent snack made from the ancient strain of budding plant (maize) that was grown and harvested, we must remember, in the times of Gilgamesh, when the first twitter-sized stories were written.

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The square story swims in front of you like a blowfish. He demands your attention for a slightly longer period than the twitter story, but with the intention of showing you to yourself in the manner of the ever-so-brief. (This is different than the never-so-brief and the always-so-brief.) The square story is shaped like a frame of consciousness in the tradition of the pictorial theory of meaning, wherein a proposition is a picture that depicts a state of affairs. Accordingly, the square story may be framed and put on the mantel next to the picture of your three beautiful schnausers, whom you tell apart by their differently-colored handkerchiefs. The square story's personality may vary in just this way.

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The story with many paragraph breaks wants you to look at each of its parts. It is a Ford Model T that has suddenly taken on the soul of Woody Allen after Allen's unexpected passing. It hiccups what it believes are well-constructed phrases and dialogue and description. The writer of the story with many paragraph breaks has fiddled with the format of the text in their word processing program such that they've processed the words in every way and have decided that, like doting parents of spoiled children, each sentence must be seen in the light of its own shining quality, which is obviously present.

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First-person stories are fraught with scars shaped like "I". These scars occur in every sentence. They've been in fights with bears, manually-operated lawnmowers, and women with pedicures. To soothe them, replace each of their I-shaped scars with a palliative "it" and reread twice thusly. They will complain at first . Just wait. They will thank you at the end of the second reading.

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Second-person stories are very demanding of "you." They demand that "you" take out the trash, "you" have intercourse with your cousin, "you" kill a lover in a cave, etc. Second-person stories will tell you what to do, but they mean to take you by the hand and leadeth you through green pastures, yea, though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you shall fear no evil for they art with "you," amen.

* * *

Third-person stories, as their name connotes, don't need you or anyone else. They're fine just by themselves. They get persnickety, though, when they overhear questions being put to their omniscient narrators who, like the Wizard of Oz, are wonderful in some ways but snivelish in others. If you find the Wizard of a third-person story she will try to seem bigger than she is by casting turquoise images to obfuscate. Don't be fooled: she wants you to slide the silk curtain away and let the sunlight hit her. She wants to be seen through, though she's done a thorough job hiding herself.

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The story with rhetorical questions is an impostor-sophist, a lawyer-story. Don't believe it. Don't look at it another second. It doesn't

understand itself. This is why it asks itself questions that it already knows the answers to. Calmly ask it to be still and wash its hair with a lice shampoo. Comb out the questions like parasites from the story's curly locks with the understanding that parasites were created (by god or the random walk of evolution over natural selection or plasma-based aliens) to be what they are. They cannot help it. They are honestly parasitic. For this reason stories with rhetorical questions must be sung to with lullabies just before they're flushed down the toilet.

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The long story is an incredible blob that wants to take you into its jellied folds and keep you there until it spits out a better version of you. It thinks itself a giver of worthy gifts. Give it the benefit of the doubt. It is excited to you see you, small though you are in its eyes. This may seem belittling. It is. But we all must be belittled at one time or another, and the onus is on the small if giants are to be conquered. Allow yourself to be surrounded by the blob of the long story. It will be uncomfortable at first--the first sensations of a blob will always demand fast adaptation--but once you sink in and trust it you'll see its gifts and you'll exit with new patiences. These patiences will help you achieve your goals, no matter they are.

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The story written by a famous person has all the advantages. It has wealthy parents in a capitalist system. It has perfect teeth. It hangs out with the cool kids. It has all the clothes from all the commercials. It starred in the commercials. It is accepted as a genius by the department when it is still an undergraduate and is given a doctorate by the chair of the department. Pay attention to this story, but do so quietly. Watch it like the nerd watches the jock. Watch it like Heraclitus next to a river, repeating word "flux" yourself. Know that the story by a famous person suffers inside, just

like you; that it is small and juvenile, just like you; that it has not asked to be what everyone supposes it is, just like you; that the material world is a world of hierarchy-makers whose gazes have just so happened to fall upon it; that its immaterial nature, its soul, is just as fragile as yours. The functions of celebrity over time have forced this lipstick upon it. But every story by a famous person knows that the roots of its fame are buried deep in the dirt. Listen, they are constantly begging with their birdsongs to be treated like everyone else.

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The story by an unknown person is standing by himself in a convention center. Everyone around him talks while talks. He has traveled from South Dakota to be here, packed his big green suitcase. He has had his suit hemmed. He has purchased cologne and has used it. He has left his wife and child, who are beautiful and love him dearly, to attend this convention. His hopes are high and his confidence at the breaking point. He speaks as convention-goers pass his table by, looking at the bright displays of the stories by famous people. He sweats, wondering why he has come. He castigates himself and begins to think he should pack up and go, but the story from an unknown person continues talking, deluded by the dream he's dreamed for so long in his sleepless nights: that someone will hear him, will find a melody in his voice, just as he has found melodies in the voices of others. If you are attending the convention, keep this story in mind, look for him--you will recognize his blue-green eyes and wavy hair. On your way to the big show stop for him and smile and listen. Everybody wins in this.

