

The Death of Narrative

by Jake Barnes

I'm sixty-five years old, and this spring I went back to college just for kicks. I had a heck of a good time. I enrolled in a creative writing class, and my fellow students sat there open-mouthed when I was asked to read. The consensus was that I was a throwback (to the age of mastodons and saber toothed tigers) and my tales were antiquated. "Why, you *tell a story*," one young fellow said. The expression on his face said "How gauche, how passé!"

Several of the students volunteered to bring me up to speed. We would sit in the sun on the quad, and I would read my stories to them. Then they told me where I had gone wrong.

A youngster with freckles on her nose said chronology in fiction was a thing of the past. So and so did this, then so and so did that. How boring! A blonde who wore her hair in her face like an Afghan Hound said the narrative arc was dead.

A boy from a Catholic high school in St. Paul said that what he did was write a narrative, then jumble the sentences, making the last sentence first, the first last. Another fellow said that he wrote sentences and later plucked out words at random and discarded them.

One day we got to talking about content. "Memories?" I offered. The young people hooted. "No, no!" they said. "Sex, drugs, and rock and roll!"

Okay, I said. I think I've got it. I read from my notebook. "Long on word pictures, short on coherence. No narrators. Scenes chronologically mutilated for maximum profundity. The quest for meaning replaced by a frantic pursuit of wonder."

The students looked at each other. "Well, yeah, sorta," said the girl with freckles.

Need I mention that after a couple of weeks I dropped the class? One day I woke up and decided to spend the day reading a novel by Joseph Conrad instead.

