

Narration in Literary Fiction: Making the right choices.
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Chapter One. Mellissa Learns to Create a Character-based Literary Story.

This is a story about Mellissa Cranick. She is thirty-two, works as a legal assistant in a law firm; she's single but in love with her lawyer boss who is married and has two children. She loves to read, has a degree in English, and is dedicated to be a writer of fiction.

"So you want to be a writer," her MFA professor said. "What is it you want to write?"

"Stories!" she answered, impatient at the question.

"Do you want to make a living writing stories?"

"If I could, I would."

"Do you want to be famous?"

"Not particularly."

"Really. You want to be an obscure writer?"

"You know what I mean. I want to be read. Of course"

"By how many?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Because you'll want to write what will sell so you can be read. You need recognition and the credibility lots of money will bring you. Look at John Grisholm. Agatha Christie. Steven King."

Mellissa thought for a moment. "I've enjoyed those authors."

"And admired the success of their careers?"

"Well, yes."

"Could you tell me about one of the characters on the train in *Murder on the Orient Express*? Could you summarize the plot for me in Grisham's *The Firm*? What was Steven King's meaning in *Firestarter*?"

Melissa turned defensive. "What's your purpose, Professor?"

"Well, name a story you remember. A story that comes back to you from time to time. A story that made you think in new ways."

"The story of Job."

"Interesting. Another?"

"The Siege of Troy," she added.

"One more?"

"Anna Karenina."

"You remember it?"

"Oh yes. Oblonsky and Dolly. The ball scene. Vronsky in the officer's quarters. Levin and Kitty. The suicide."

"Did you think Tolstoy had a purpose in Anna Karenina?" the Professor asked.

"From the second time I read it, I never had any doubt. I think his story told me about love and lust. That Anna was a victim of her lust."

"That's a valuable and interesting reaction. I can see it moved you."

"Yes. But where are you going with this?"

"The skill of a writer to move a reader is rare and special. And Tolstoy moves only a certain type of reader with certain expectations and capabilities. I'm pleased to see you are capable."

"Thank you, but I still miss your point."

"Compare a Harry Bosch detective novel by Michael Connelly."

"I love his work."

"And it entertains you?"

"Of course."

"But does it move you? Does it change you in the way Tolstoy did."

"Of course not. That was not Connelly's purpose."

"Tolstoy used the developing art form of the literary fictional story to move you and give you thought and pleasure for years."

Mellissa thought for a moment and slowly nodded in agreement.

"Do you think Tolstoy would be weeks on the best seller list today?" asked the Professor.

"Probably not."

"Do you think Michael Connelly's novels will be in the hearts and minds of humans a hundred years from now?"

"Probably not."

"Ah," said the Professor. "And that is where you must make the decision as a writer. Two paths. One. Immediate recognition and rewards. Two. Maximum impact for a selected number of readers that will last for generations. Both are different. Which do you want to do?"

Mellissa didn't answer that day. She thought about it. When she returned for her next session with the Professor, she said, "I want to write with the impact of Tolstoy . . . Homer . . . and the Bible."

The Professor smiled. "Your first assignment is to read these books. Come back and tell me what a literary fictional story is for you. And then tell me what you think is the single most important feature of a literary story that makes it last in memory."

She read *The Collected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, Flaubert's *The Simple Heart*, and Emily Bronte's, *Wuthering Heights*.

In her next session, she said, "I believe a story is a progression of events, or scenes, that are interrelated; that the word fiction means the story is imagined; and that the word literary denotes meaning."

"What do you mean by meaning?" the Professor asked.

"That the story is significant with a purpose and a theme."

"Excellent," the Professor gushed. "Return in two weeks and show me how you perceive a great writer instills significance in a story. Do it as an essay. And show me why other forms of storytelling, particularly nonfiction, differ."

Excited, Mellissa left and returned two weeks later with this essay.

"Stories with significance have theme and meaning. This is created by the story structure so that the story is character-based. As an example, I present a story that has action with serious consequences.

"Once upon a time, in a village near the deep dark woods, Little Red Riding Hood wanted to take Grandma, who was very ill, a basket of goodies. She would have to walk through the woods for half an hour to get to Grandma's house, which was in another village. 'Be careful,' her mother said. 'Go straight on the path and do not talk to strangers.' So Little Red goes into the woods and meets a wolf who wants to eat her but can't because there is a woodsman nearby. The wolf asks her where she's going, whom she will visit, and where. Red tells all. The wolf runs off and Red continues her journey, leaving the path to chase butterflies, and pick bluebells, and dip her toe in a cold refreshing stream. When she gets to grandma's house, the wolf has already arrived, because she failed to heed her mother's warning about staying on the path. He imitated Red's voice to gain entrance, and he devoured grandma. Then he dressed in her night clothes and crawled in bed under the covers. Little Red arrives. He tells Little Red to come in. As the wolf exposes himself little by little, Red listens to his smooth talk when she asks him about his big eyes, hairy arms and big teeth. Unsuspecting, she gets in bed and he devours her.

"The literary writer might ask," Mellissa said, "what has held this story in the collective consciousness of humans for centuries. First, it carries two significant messages. Listen to your parents. And innocence and naïveté can cause irreversible harm. You can get devoured. There is also the effective metaphor of the wolf for a child predator. But the significance of the story is mainly carried by the narrative story structure. Little Red is a character-based story. The plot moves forward because of Red's human characteristics -- especially her human foibles: 1) that she holds onto her childhood innocence, and 2) she disobeys her mother."

The Professor interrupted Mellissa. "You are absolutely right about character-based plots and significant meaning," he said. "But it's not easy to understand without examples."

"I'm getting to that," Mellissa said, annoyed that the Professor wouldn't assume she would completed the assignment properly. "Let me finish."

"Apologies," he said, frowning.

Mellissa continued.

"An author could, for example, frame this story as genre fiction. It could still be interesting, but it might not be as lasting because of the structure. Here is a possibility.

"Red Riding Hood is kidnapped from the woods near her house. A few hours later some bones and scraps of skin are found at her grandmother's house a mile away. The police are called and discover from the grey hairs trapped in grandma's hand-woven throw-rug that the wolf did it. The wolf escapes. Red's mother grieves.

"This version is a statement of happenings. Red is a part of the plot. But she is not driving the plot with her disobeying her mother and her wallowing in her innocence, and also the author would lose the effectiveness of the wolf metaphor when the story moves from fantasy to a more reality-based police procedural.

"Here is another genre framework for the story. An action-adventure genre story. Something like this.

"Red decides to go to grandma's house for a visit. In the deep dark forest she meets a woodsman. The woodsman is tracking a wolf who has eaten two children in the last two weeks. Red wants to help find the culprit. The woodsman agrees and sends her out as a decoy. The wolf tries to attack Red, but she stabs him with a knife the woodsman has given her. The wolf runs away, but the woodsman is able to follow the trail of blood. He finds the wolf near grandma's house, and after a life-threatening duel, the wolf is killed. Red falls in love.

"In this story, again, all that happens in the plot is circumstantial. Who Red really is makes little difference. What she says, thinks, or says would be irrelevant to the story. The same story could be written with Pinocchio as the major character.

"To drive home the point, an author could restructure so that Red's decisions do drive the plot to become more character-based again, but in another way. And the story gains meaning.

"Red Riding Hood's grandma, who lives in another village, is very rich and has a new dress, a box of Swiss chocolates, and bath oil waiting for Red Riding Hood for her birthday party the following week. But Red wants her presents now, even though her mother tells her to wait until her father can go with Red through the woods, which can be very dangerous. But Red goes anyway to get her presents early, meets the wolf in the forest, and is devoured.

"Red is back driving the plot again, and there is significant meaning related to Red's human attributes. Greed and impatience can be disastrous.

"The writer seeking to write great literary fiction can take two important points from this story: Structure the story to display what it means to be human through character-based

plot, and make the story significant. In Red's case, the significance is partially related to the dire consequences of getting eaten by a wolf after Red's seemingly almost innocuous actions."

Mellissa let out a long breath. "What do you think, Professor?"

"Excellent," said the Professor. "You have come a long way in a short time."

At the next session, Mellissa was impatient. "Professor," she said bluntly. "I want to write a story."

They sat down in their usual chairs.

"Of course," he said. "Write whenever you have the time and will. But always structure first, and then write to rewrite and change for perfection. In revision, make your story clear; improve your prose through word choice and well formed syntax; write action scenes more often than narrative descriptive passages; avoid excessive back story, description and exposition; make your imagery vibrant; and look to the desires and motivations for your characters to integrate smoothly with your plot progression."

"That's a lot said," said Mellissa.

The Professor nodded. "Be prepared to restructure the entire story at the slightest hint you think it may be needed for improvement. Don't obsessively tinker with prose craft only without working on character emotional arcs and related plot structure. Always be thinking of ways to keep your reader reading. Don't let anything on the page be accepted as final. That decision is reserved to that rare point when a story is finished."

"How will I know when I'm finished?" asked Mellissa.

"You will not be able to find one improvement in the creation or telling of the story."

"That's a vague, professorial answer," she smiled good-naturedly.

"But loaded with truth."

"I'll try," she said.

"But we must now get on with our learning. I have a video I want to discuss."

The Professor reached for the remote control.

"This is a short tale that has lasted for centuries," he said. "I would like to discuss why you think it has been remembered."

The head and shoulders of a professional storyteller filled the TV screen and the story began.

Frankie and Johnny were lovers,
Oh, how they could love.
Swore to be true to each other,
Just as true as the stars above,
He was her man,
He might be doing her wrong.

Frankie went down to the barroom,
Went for a bottle of beer,
Says to that fat bartender man,
My loving Johnny boy been here?
He is my man,
I think he's doing me wrong.

I ain't going to tell you no stories,
I ain't a going to tell you no lies,
Your ole man here bout an hour ago,
With that no good Nellie Bly,
He may be your man,
But he's doing you wrong.

Frankie went down to the pawn shop,
Bought herself an old forty-four,
She pointed it at the ceiling,
Shot a hole right through the floor,
He might be her man,
But he was doing her wrong.

Frankie went down to the hotel,
She rang the hotel bell.
"Come out, come out, you floozies,
Or I'll blow you all to hell.
He was her man,
But he was doing her wrong.

Frankie peeked in through the transom,
It wasn't no surprise,
There sat Johnny making love
To that no good Nellie Bly.
He was her man,
But he was doing her wrong.

Johnny saw Frankie a coming,
Out the back door he tried to scoot,
Too late, too late, three times she shoot,
The gun went root toot toot,
He was her man,
But he had done her wrong.

Roll me over easy, boys,
Roll me over slow,
Roll me over easy boys,
My wound, they hurt me so,
I was her man,
But I done her wrong.

The sheriff arrested poor Frankie,
It was right on the very same day,
Threw her in a dungeon cell,
And threw that key away,
He'd been her man,
But he had done her wrong.

This story ain't got no moral,
This story ain't got no end.
This story just goes to show you,
There ain't no good in men,
They'll do you wrong,
Every chance that they get.

The Professor turned off the set. "Well?" he asked.

Melissa smiled. She was beginning to anticipate the Professor's questions. "This is why I think it lasts," she said. "A definitive moral. Don't cheat on your woman. A beginning, middle and end, so that the listener has the suspense of a story progression. There is continuous action . . . and ironies. And, as I've learned from you Professor, emotions are shown and not told. The story doesn't say Frankie got mad as hell. It shows what she did -- she shot the poor bastard."

"Good," said the Professor. "Important points. But the story is also told from multiple points of view. Four, in fact. A narrator, Frankie, Johnny, and the bartender."

"I sensed that. But what does that have to do with story longevity?"

"A lot actually. Let me show you how characterization is strengthened and sympathy for the characters is enhanced.

"In the verse when the point of view changes to the bartender he says: 'I ain't a going to tell you no stories, And I ain't a going to tell you no lies, Your old man was here about an hour ago, with that no good Nellie Bly,' he amplifies Frankie's character. Frankie is not just some paranoid loose woman desperate for any man for a couple dollars. And the bartender lets us know he respects Frankie. In Frankie's point of view, we learn when she sees her man making love to another woman, it wasn't a surprise, and it reveals the depth and length of her pain. Later, in Johnny's point of view, Johnny tells us he knows he done her wrong. And 'I hurt, boys.' Direct from Johnny's mouth. It's Johnny's enlightenment about his erring ways. A tough way to figure it out. It causes some sympathy for him that would not be as effective if presented from another point of view."

"I see," said Mellissa. "But is there a guideline here for a writer?"

"Of course. Don't you see? Use point of view imaginatively to provide credibility and reliability for characters as well as clarifying story delivery for impact."

"Don't most good writers do that naturally?"

"No, Mellissa. It must be learned.

You're beginning to understand story structure and how characters integrate with the plot in literary fiction and you can see how effective fiction strengthens the story. And as you deal with emotions expressed through action, you'll develop your own preferences in point of view, as you will for other techniques. Accurate use of point of view is critical for excellence. The more sophisticated your choices, the more definitive your style, and the more effective you will be."

"That's not an intuitive way to write," Mellissa said.

"No. But it does present a new level of achievement in engaging a reader."

The Professor stood and served his usual pot of tea; they chatted for a while, and then he continued.

"Now I want you to think about story presentation."

He assigned reading: "Turn Of The Screw," by Henry James; "Lady with a Dog," by Chekhov, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, by Virginia Wolff.

"Come back," he said, "and tell me what you understand about how information is transferred from author to reader and its relationship to story narration."

After a month, Mellissa came back with an essay that pleased the Professor very much. She read it to him.

"All stories are a transfer of information in the form of ideas and images from author to reader. This is one of the major ways genre fiction differs from literary fiction.

"Genre stories please by discovery of plot information -- who murdered whom? Did they finally get married? Will the dam burst and flood the town? This information is withheld by the author to build suspense. In a literary story, the plot momentum generates from the decisions of the characters based on their weaknesses and strengths. The student murdered the landlady, and the information transferred lets the reader know why. For example, we know she did not get married, and the information tells us that it was her selfish inability to care for others that was the cause. And for another example, information tells that the evil king banishes his saintly brother who wants to repair the dam that bursts and floods the town.

"Genre fiction relies on information that solves a mystery, that completes the plot action. This builds tension in the reader."

"Do you believe it is an intellectual process mainly?" the Professor asked.

"Yes," Mellissa answered. "The reader is searching possibilities and clues for solutions to what is pretty much a circumstantial plot movement."

"Doesn't that occur in literary fiction too?" the Professor interrupted.

Mellissa frowned with irritation. "Yes. To some extent. Of course. But in literary fiction, important plot information is provided as needed for the progression of the plot along the timeline. It is the decisions of the characters and their emotions and thoughts that change plot direction. And that is the information that affects what happens. And so information is presented to engage the reader in the thoughts and actions of the character and the action that follows."

"Great," the Professor said. "I knew you could do it. It's an example of literary fiction making people feel through engagement in addition to just being immersed in an outcome. You've done better than any of my students, I might say."

Mellissa smiled.

Chapter TWO. Mellissa Learns How to Apply Imagination to Great Literary Story Telling.

The Professor had to lecture in Toronto, and it was two weeks before Mellissa saw him again.

"I lectured on imagination," he said.

"I'm not sure exactly what imagination is," Mellissa said.

"It is abstract at times. Here is the definition I use, although it fails woefully to explain the complexities. *'Imagination is the formation of new ideas, images, or concepts about things not present to the senses.'* All writers use imaginative description of people and events . . . a clever word, a catchy metaphor. But most great fiction writers also use imagination for creation of a story, the strength of the characterization, and the meaning of the story."

"I don't understand," said Mellissa.

"The literary writer's goal is to engage the readers and make them feel, as well as see. This requires using imagination for story structure, as we've seen, but also for actions and thoughts to develop characters. It's not just describing what has happened, it's creating what might have happened."

"Are you implying writers have to have exceptional imaginations?"

"To write great fiction, yes."

"How do I know I'm good enough?"

"You can improve what you've got."

"I thought you mainly inherited imagination."

"There are ways to nurture imagination," he said.

*"*Live to experience and discover.*

A rich life reliably stimulates imagination.

**Learn to live actively, not passively.*

Reading is active. Watching TV is predominantly passive.

Listening to music is passive. Creating original music by composing and/or playing an instrument is active. Looking at travel photos of France is passive. Two weeks of backpacking in the Loire Valley is active.

**Learn as much about everything you possibly can.*

Disparate ideas and unlike associations seem to sprout new images and ideas.

**Examine metaphysical questions.*

Who are we and why are we here? Is there an afterlife? Why do we suffer? Who is God? Is there an ultimate truth? What is beauty?

Musing the unanswerable questions helps with character development and significant story meaning.

**Know your own strengths and weaknesses.*

Determine as truthfully as possible how you fit into a world with billions of other unique, vastly different human beings. This may require painful self-examination."

"But how do I do it, Professor? I understand working on my lifestyle to make imagination better. But how do I get it to work on the page?"

"As I keep telling you, it's learning how to frame and tell your story. Work not only on the craft of writing, but the art of storytelling. Learn, too, about storytelling in film, stage drama, oral stories and mime."

"What are some of the craft improvements, then?"

"Practice imaginative writing," the Professor said. He counted on his fingers,

1. Study the great literary creations of the past, and carefully filter out any useless or harmful dogma of contemporary teaching.
2. Explore daily metaphors . . . the timing of delivery, acceptability, and the logic and credibility.
3. Learn the use of clear and accurate language in all communication, and expand vocabulary with image provoking words and active verbs.

"It is important to think about your goal as a fiction writer. When you write, you are always imagining actions and circumstances that will better serve your purpose to engage and please the reader."

"Isn't that what I'm doing?" Mellissa asked.

"Not always. Not yet. You are still following the path that all fiction writers take. They either know a story and characters from experience, or they think of a character or situation and let the story unfold from there. Either way, the average literary writer winds up describing the story, not creating."

"Isn't that imagination? Many of my friends let the character tell them the story."

"It's popular. But it's mainly without purpose. Writing without purpose can never be excellent because the true imaginative work of story creation has been ignored."

"I see. But I'm not sure I believe."

"Keep thinking about it. Authors who let things develop are depending on their own experience and ideas. Great literary writing must come from outside the author, take in the world, involve people above average. The literary author uses imagination and withholds his or her own personality from the story creation. The result is more purpose, more meaning, less cliché and sentimentality, and a more logical and significant story."

"I'll think about it," Mellissa said.

"Master it, Mellissa. Remember, part of creating a story is imagining actions, desires, emotions and happenings."

"But I love imaginative, lyrical writing."

"Which is never sacrificed and always enhances the storytelling. Let me give you some examples."

He searched through his file cabinet.

"Here are examples of a scene necessary for a story. A young man is about to shoot his first deer and is conflicted about it. The first example is by an author whose conceptualization includes use of imagination throughout the creative process for building character and action. Read out loud, and note that emotions are delivered through actions in the first example. That will not be present in the next example."

Mellissa began.

"I steadied my arm with my elbow wedged at the base of an oak branch where it went into the trunk of the tree. I sighted through the scope, the cold steel of the Winchester sharp on my cheek for a few seconds. Magnified, I could see the deer eye staring toward me, without fear, without curiosity. The breeze gusted and the leaves rustled around me. There was no movement in the scope. The eye unblinking. The mouth closed. The tail flicked once. A flash of white. My finger tightened. A bead of sweat formed and rolled slowly down my forehead."

The Professor stared thoughtfully at Mellissa. "All information has been told through a narrator telling only important story information in the story moment. Now we'll see how another student, using himself as the source of information, writes the same scene as if he were there describing his environment and his thoughts and feelings about something that has happened, at least in his mind. Please continue."

Mellissa began again.

"I loved hunting, the thrill of it. My grandfather had taught me; my father never hunted. So when I saw the deer, a buck, nine points I think, I couldn't exactly be sure at that distance, I felt a surge of excitement mixed with pleasure. This is what I'd been waiting for. To relive the memories of my youth."

"Certainly acceptable to many," said the Professor. "But the story slows down. There is a lack of focus in the ideation. It is more difficult to be engaged. There is telling of feelings that makes the reader feel more like an observer than being involved. It's a different way of thinking about story telling."

"I think I like the first better," said Mellissa.

"I do too," said the Professor. "Here is the message. Every writer should be proficient in varied styles. But good fiction writers will broaden the use of imagination from simply prose and description to reimagining the actions, motivations and presentations of entire scenes."

"Could you give me more examples, Professor?"

"Of course." The Professor went back to his file cabinet.

"Consider this scene and the way a writer might seek to work best for his or her story. You read it for me."

Mellissa began.

"There was no doubt the ship was sinking. The captain sat alone, stone faced, in his cabin, an illustrious career turned infamous in minutes. In the radio room, the operator had twisted the knob off the now silent radio and laid his head on his arms. Below deck, the engineer failed to seal a compartment door, and a rush of water banged his head on a girder, causing him to lose consciousness before he drowned.

"I watched as the life boat hit the water and rocked violently for a few seconds. Someone pushed me from behind. 'Dear, God,' I said. I jumped and felt my lower leg crack as I hit one of the wooden seats that broke my fall.

"'Move out of the way,' someone said kicking me in the ribs."

"Read the next," said the Professor. "In this example, dialogue is used to deliver story information."

Mellissa continued.

"We were crowded near the railing on the port side, the deck slanting twenty degrees.

"'The Captain's taken to his cabin. He ain't seeing no visitors,' a man said.

"'Career ruined,' a sailor said.

"A dead man,' said another.

"The radio's out,' came from the back of the crowd.

"Engine room flooded a few minutes ago. I saw the engineer floating face down with my own eyes.'

"Someone pushed me from behind. I looked down to the lifeboat as it hit the water and rocked. A deck officer shoved me. Three of us fell at the same time. My leg cracked as I hit the edge of a wooden seat. Pain seared upward. Someone kicked me in the ribs.

"Get out of the way,' he said."

The Professor spoke. "For many, this attempt to provide, through dialogue, the story information needed is awkward. It rings with a lack of credibility and therefore makes the scene seem less real and harder to accept and enjoy. And there's a major distraction. The speakers are facing death, and it has a barroom chatty tone due to exposition mistakenly filtered through dialogue. The same information might be provided through internal reflection. Read the next example."

Mellissa began.

"I imagined the Captain alone in his cabin, a man with a stellar career ruined. I doubted the distress signals were going out anymore. In fact, the bridge had become silent and eerie among the yells and shouts on the deck. A man said the forward compartment had flooded, he thought he heard the cries of the engineer who suddenly became silent. The lifeboat dropped, the winch handle spinning to a blur. Someone pushed me and I fell, hitting the gunnels. My leg cracked and a searing pain shot upward in me. Someone kicked me in the ribs to move me out of the way to clear space for others to fall."

"But this seems awkward, too," the Professor said. "The construction makes the scene seem too passive."

"And it tells, rather than shows," said Mellissa.

"And the information is filtered through the consciousness of the narrator's imagination, which makes the listener wonder if it's credible or not. Read the next. Much more internal in construction, but not internal reflection really. And note how the passage moves into scene."

Mellissa started.

"With the deck slanting, I could not stand without gripping a rope or a metal ring fixed to flooring. My fall had broken my leg above the knee; pain seared through me with every movement. But I held on, waiting for the cries to signal when a rescue boat might be below. I was close enough to the rail to be in the crowd who would jump to the twenty feet or so below the slanting deck.

"I can't jump,' a woman whispered to me, sobbing, clutching my leg to keep from slipping violently into the rail. I yelled out in pain. Was she an evil woman? Did she deserve to die? There was no time to lower her into a boat securely and safely. She'd have to jump. She'd have to be forced. Was there someone to do it? Even with my leg whole, I could never shove a woman, or any human, to possible death. She had to make that decision, not me.

"Do you have family?" I asked. That brought more sobs and she did not answer. The ship's horn blasted. The passengers panicked and began to jump. A few hit the boat, but most went into the water, looking for something to cling to, a deck chair, an oar, some piece of ocean debris. They'd all be unconscious in two to three minutes, motionless with the cold, clumped with broken ice. I began to pray.

Mellissa looked up. "I like it better, but I don't know why."

"The point of view did not change, but the action progressed well and the internal reflections dealt with emotions directly related and consistent to the scene."

"How did it differ from the others?"

"In the main, there was no description, just action. For example, 'We were crowded near the railing' is different than "'I can't jump,' a woman whispered to me, sobbing, and clutching my leg to keep from slipping violently into the rail.'"

"I understand," said Mellissa.

"Remember. There is no right way. There are alternatives which the writer creates and then chooses for his or her story."

Chapter THREE. Mellissa Learns How to Write In-scene and Engage a Reader.

For the next session, the Professor had prepared Mellissa by discussing narrative distance, imaginative choices to properly pace the story and to engage the reader at the

right times. He especially emphasized how imagination is used to engage the reader at different levels of reader involvement.

When Mellissa returned, she brought in her assignment, a summary for a new story.

The story:

A man and his wife drove in a forty-five year old 1967 VW bus with their two children in the back seat. They argued over his recent affair with another woman. The bus sped along. Cars and trucks whizzed by on the opposite lane of a two-lane road. He refused to acknowledge his wife. Her anger mounted. She attacked him; he lost control so the van hit an oncoming car head on. They died.

"Good," said the Professor. "Your very succinct narrative telling is excellent. It moves well. Now I want you to bring the reader into the story by in-scene construction. Use action and shorten the narrator distance to the story. See what you can do."

Mellissa consulted her notes and wrote while the Professor went to the store for tea. This is what she read when he returned.

Paul drove and Sarah had her arms wrapped around her knees in the passenger seat. It was a VW minibus from the sixties, and the years had rusted the frame and two windows in the back had cracks and gaps that were covered with surgical tape.

Paul looked straight-ahead. Sarah yelled, her face white with anger. She was not so much angry at his infidelity, but at his self-righteous attitude about it all.

"Look at me!" she yelled. "Goddamn it! Look at me." She wanted to tell him it was over. One of the children cried in the back.

He remained expressionless. The VW picked up speed, straining at its limits. The sun glared near the horizon, blinding him for an instant. He studied the central stripe on the two-lane road. A dump truck passed blowing its horn. He did not think he was over the centerline. A Volvo station wagon whizzed by.

As the sun began to set, Sarah screamed. "You self-righteous bastard!"

A car heading toward them was small and red. A sedan.

"I will not let you humiliate me."

He held the speed. The glare made the centerline indistinct.

"Can't you say something?" She raised her fist. "I've given you ten years. I deserve a few words."

"Go fuck yourself," he said softly.

She lunged toward him, using the power of her folded legs. With both hands, she clutched the wheel, turning it from his grasp.

"Absolutely great, right on target," the Professor said. "You're amazing. Now I want you to shorten the narrative distance again. I want you to create the same scene in the moment. You'll need to change the syntax and the prose, adjust the pacing, and choose other imagery. Give it a try."

The Professor went to the kitchen to brew tea and make scones from scratch while Mellissa wrote. When Mellissa read, the Professor was immensely pleased with her result.

Sarah's scream, stretched out and rising, hurt his right ear. He refused to talk to her. He consciously kept every muscle of his face an unrevealing mask, his eyes held to the road. He squinted in the glare of the sun. The engine whined; the loose body-parts of the car vibrated with an intermittent clamor as he hit every pothole on the right side of the road. When she came at him, he saw her from the side. She was sitting with her feet on the seat, her knees bent, and she unwound toward him. He saw the red car a few hundred yards away now. The sun blinded him again for a second.

"Jesus," he said. And then the sun was blocked behind a line of trees. He clutched the wheel.

She wrenched his hands from the wheel. He tightened his grip, trying to keep control. The VW crossed the centerline; it was as if he could count each segment of the broken line now.

"Let go," he yelled to her. He pushed her with one hand, the other hand on the plastic of the wheel. He twisted to the right. Sarah was pressed against his chest. She was trying to turn to pommel his face, but her fists pounded on his side.

The oncoming car was chili pepper red; the sun glinted off the surface. As the distance closed, the car image zoomed larger. And then, the

impact. Sarah's head cracked the window, an image etched in his mind, a star burst in the glass, but there was no sound of her head splitting—he thought he was imagining when he saw her brain, it couldn't be, those enigmatic folds, but he knew her body ejected, shoulders first, through the shards of glass. Her dress ripped, exposing her leg, a piece of glass cutting deep, probably to the bone, so smooth and clean it was bloodless in the instant he saw it, and then she disappeared in a crush of folding metal and his world went dark.

"Excellent again," said the Professor. "Note how much time the writing takes up on the page when the narrator distance is shortened, how time is slowed, and how, after a while, the intensity can only be maintained for so long before the reader's interest wanes."

"Why does that happen?" asked Mellissa.

"All humans have limits as to how long they can maintain intense emotions like anger, as an example. There seems to be a need in normal humans to slip away from prolonged intense emotion."

Chapter FOUR. Mellissa Learns to Dramatize Her Writing.

"As we come to the end of our time together," the Professor said one day, "I want to urge you to always think dramatization in your fiction."

"I think I do that," Mellissa said, slightly offended.

"Not enough. In every story, especially in revision, dramatization is always to be considered."

"Spell it out for me, Professor."

"Dramatization is conflict with resultant action and resolution. It happens at all levels of story creation: overall structure, scene paragraph, even in a word.

"Let me give you examples. The first is a passive description of an image. The second is the same image with action and conflict. You read again. It will help you understand."

Mellissa started.

"The small black bird with the brilliant red wings and inquisitive yellow eyes perched on the white picket fence just out of reach of the tabby colored cat with a scar on his leg and his one eye half-closed and scarred from some long ago fight."

"See?" the Professor said. "Now with action. See if you can visualize it."

Mellissa continued.

"The red winged blackbird glided in for a landing, and the battle-tested tabby cat leaped up, claws out, and caught only the edge of one of the bird's wings to scratch a feather loose that floated down to the garden path as the bird safely landed on the fence a few feet away."

"I now want to show you an example of conflict in dialogue," the Professor said. "A woman sports commentator says to on-air older-man colleague: 'What was it like, Cliffy, when you played tennis . . . you know . . . in the age of the dinosaurs, when the technology couldn't give us the speed of the ball on serve.' Here, the attempt of humor by ridiculing the age difference implies competitive conflict in the relationship, and says that the woman commentator may be unreasonable and insecure."

"Why is this important to the writer?" Mellissa asked.

"All dialogue needs elements of conflict to be successful."

"And it contributes to the character development?"

"Yes. Good," the Professor said. "Now let's look at various levels of conflict at the sentence level. Note the way syntax, and how ideas are delivered, can change the energy of a sentence, often by clarifying the conflict."

Mellissa began.

"A basic message: Grandpa killed Granny. First example: At the funeral and for years after, Grandfather never mentioned the day he hammered Granny to her grave."

"There's no conflict in that sentence," the Professor pointed out. "The construction -- past, distant and telling -- gives a fait accompli tone that might not serve well in fiction."

"Second example," Mellissa continued. "Grandfather killed our granny."

"There's still no conflict," the Professor said. "This sentence tells. There's no action."

Mellissa read the third example. "No one was witness and we had to imagine Grandfather standing over the bed and smashing Granny's skull with a hammer before she woke."

"Here, the action is filtered through the character's imagination, but both action and conflict are present because of in-the-moment sentence construction," the Professor said.

Melissa nodded. "Fourth example," she read. "Grandpa stared at the hammer where Granny's blood began to congeal with hair and fragments of skull bone."

"Now this shows in-scene action -- staring and congealing blood," the Professor said, "but not a lot. However, there is tension. What happened? Is she dead? But it's still missing conflict."

Melissa took a moment to absorb this before reading the fifth example. "After he killed Granny with a hammer, Grandfather washed imagined blood off his hands every hour of the day until the skin was raw."

"Now we're getting somewhere," the Professor said. "In-scene action. Implied emotion of guilt. Movement. Internal conflict revealed through the character's actions."

Again, Melissa nodded. "Sixth example," she read. "We thought Grandfather was an intelligent man, well-educated, famous in his own right, but we discovered his major flaw the night we discovered Granny murdered in her bed and Grandfather laughing hysterically a few feet away."

The Professor shook his head. "There's no conflict in that sentence. The author tells lots of information, but the only description of action is Grandfather laughing, something that happened in the past. This is an unsuccessful sentence for story action and conflict."

After that session, Melissa wrote more stories and completed her remaining lessons with the professor. At their final educational meeting, the Professor said:

"You've learned the path to great literary fiction. The narration of a story: the complexities of structure and meaning, engagement, imagination, and conflict. But now you must prepare yourself for frequent rejection of your work interspersed with a few glorious expressions of satisfaction from the readers you targeted. Rest assured that the movement of a reader in significant ways with a story delivered through prose is a rare and significant achievement. It is an art form, not to the taste of all, but also not in the range of all talents either. And be proud of your accomplishment of making a difference. Never self-flagellate because you have not made the bestseller list for commercial publishing. You are, after all, creating a work to last, like Michelangelo's Pieta, and not catching a touchdown pass for the super bowl victory. An athletic hero, in fiction, is a circumstantial hero. In contrast, you create heroes of the human heart with different long-term significance and lasting value. Be proud."

More than ten years later, Mellissa was happily married to a pediatrician. She had a degree in anthropology and was an expert in Mycenaean Pottery and participated in digs in the ruins of Troy twice a year. When she was in the city where the Professor now lived, she diverted from her schedule for a visit.

"Thank you, Professor," Mellissa said. "I will always value what you've given me."