

Short Story Writing, Webinar, January 18, 2022: (Stories referenced during presentation.)

Bio:

Donna is the author of 3 mystery novels and many short stories. Her *Toboggan Mystery Series*, which includes: *North on the Yellowhead*, *Sept-Iles and other places* and *Knowing Penelope*, offers short-story lovers a broad collection of her work. Donna has also collaborated with fellow authors to produce seven outstanding multi-author anthologies as an independent publisher and author.

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A. Elements of the short story

1- Theme

- Sinclair Ross, “The Painted Door”, themes of love, betrayal, the measure of a man and sacrifice, weakness.
- Sylvia Maultash Warsh, Music/Oppression/Revenge, “None Shall Sleep”, *In the Key of 13*
 - 1950 Stalin’s Soviet Union, Galina is sent to a prison camp for the crime of criticizing the state. In a joke, she implies the performers in the opera have not been paid.
 - The themes of oppression, ruined passion and revenge are prevalent. Maultash Warsh renders these themes like few other current authors, bringing poignancy and humanity to the fore and not allowing them to be ignored.

2- Character

- Alice Munro, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”, (movie: *Away From Her*), abiding love and the revelation of relationship between an errant husband and the wife, who he is losing to Alzheimer’s.
- Rosemary Aubert, The aging Judge and his wife, “The Bench Rests”, *13 O’Clock*
 - The aging judge, Judge Marshall and his wife. The way he tenderly allows her to remember the facts on her own, instead of “leading” the witness. The way the two of them lean on each other, their shared love of routine, and his concern for not telling her what to do.
- Catherine Dunphy, likeable librarian Winona Fletcher, “Winona and the CHUM Chart”, *In the Key of 13*
 - Certain, competent and lovable, but not one to take fools gladly, Winona is a wonderful repeat short story character for cozy readers with discerning taste. Winona is a fully developed character, complete with mystery, hominess and romance and always full of surprises. Dunphy is also a master of plot...nothing is left to chance and no loopholes are unplugged.

3- Plot

- Margaret Atwood, “Stone Mattress”, the story of the wronged woman, Verna, and her chance opportunity for revenge.
- Rosemary McCracken, “Hooked”, *A Grave Diagnosis*; “The Sweetheart Scamster”, (Derringer Nominee), *Thirteen*
 - McCracken rolls her plot out with deadly precision, in “Hooked” leaving us aware that only the one conclusion is acceptable.
 - In “The Sweetheart Scamster”, when Financial Advisor Pat Tierney meets with recent widow Trudy Sullivan, the plot follows a perfect path to murder. McCracken furthers the plot using prejudice, suspicion and urgency.

4- Setting

- J.K. Rowlings, *Harry Potter*, not a crime story, but a great illustration of how setting is a pervasive element in a great story.
- Agatha Christie, almost any of her stories, set on isolated islands, quaint villages, exotic trains...
- Charles Dickens, “A Christmas Carol”, shows how “time” can be a critical part of setting.
- Jack London, “To Build a Fire”, the pervasive cold and darkness of a Yukon forest.
- Catherine Astolfo, On the far east coast, in an isolated part of NL, “The Outlier”, *13 Claws*, (CWC Award Best Short)
 - Set in Back Side Harbor, NL, told in the first person, protag is an outlier, someone who’s ‘come from away’. The place is an outport. Protag lives on a hill above the harbor, so not even part of the village proper. Out of the way in an out of the way place on the farthest edge of the country. This matches his being on the outer edge of life, nearing 90 years of age. His only friends: Miss Kitty, and the pig.
- Marilyn Kay, Wales, scenic travel, “Her Perfume”, a tale of espionage and intrigue, *In the Key of 13*
 - Welsh town of Chepstow, scenic vistas, castles, towers, mountains. Kay uses a combination of the travelogue beauty and the oppressive surround of mountains and cliffs to set the scene for murder. Her descriptions of place are alluring and compelling.
- Therese Greenwood, uses time, place and situation to set the stage for “Boomtown Shakedown”, *A Grave Diagnosis*
 - Bethany Vanderbeek works at a seniors’ home in an oil boomtown. In a boomtown, life is a pageant! Everything is larger than life, it’s a wide-awake wide open town. The sense of hustle and bustle is undeniable and sweeps the reader along.
- Donna Carrick, the mood of the far north, Sept-Iles, QC, “Spring’s Last Skate”, “Dancing With Carole”, *North on the Yellowhead*
 - The dark, cold and brooding landscape of northern Quebec, in a fictional village near Sept-Iles, about 20 miles from QC, set the stage for the darkest of crimes. In “Spring’s Last Skate” we learn that, in the far north, spring *proper* comes late. In March the skies are sapphire blue, the rinks are just beginning to show wear, and the snow is finally threatening, just threatening, mind you, to melt. And a mother, even a truly loving one, can disappear without a trace, without so much as bootprints to lend a clue. In “Dancing With Carole”, also in a fictional village in the far north of Quebec, the joy of chatting and dancing with a young mother leads to revelations of abuse and murder, all shrouded in the mystery of thick dark pines, and watched over by the jaded eye of Mother Mary, the statue at the side of the road.

5- Conflict

- Edgar Allen Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”. Conflict is not always what we expect. Poe creates a conflict between the man and his own conscience.
- Joan O’Callaghan, “Napoleon’s Nose”, *A Grave Diagnosis*, conflict between innocent wife and would-be-murderous husband, also between woman and life-threatening disease, as well as between the errant husband and the Russian mob.
 - *Karen Whitney thought he was the ugliest creature she’d ever laid eyes on.* Thus begins the story. But in no time, her love for the mangy alley cat is fiercely reciprocated, and eventually he saves her life.
 - There are a number of layers of conflict in this story. The husband hates the cat. The husband wants his wife’s money. The mob wants the husband’s money.

6- Resolution

- Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery”. The story meanders almost pointlessly to a “bang” conclusion.
- Blair Keetch, “A Contrapuntal Duet”, *In the Key of 13*, symmetry in resolution
 - Charles Soliqov, a music critic, teams up with Jeanie, a young music student, to create *A Sour Note*, a show to discuss the elements of classical music. But when Charles strays, his actions lead to disastrous consequences, the kind of symmetry that one might crave in a Greek tragedy.

7- Imagination

- W.W. Jacobs, “The Monkey’s Paw”. Be careful what you wish for! Great use of imaginative tale.
- M.H. Callway (Madeleine), “The Eternal Bakery of the Fractal Mind”. Time travel, space, *A Grave Diagnosis*
 - Dementia, time travel, murder and justice. The long-ago memories of the elderly are often wrapped up in tastes, smells. The cruelty of time.
- Lisa de Nikolits, “Love Thy Neighbour”, Character voice, often strange POV, *A Grave Diagnosis*.
 - De Nikolits uses language and obsession to roll out a diabolical murder plot involving per protagonist, the fiancée, the roommate and some very noisy neighbors.
- Rosalind Place, “Bad Vibrations”, the instruments plot a murder, *In the Key of 13*
 - Place takes the Carrick prize for imagination, in both “Bad Vibrations” (the instruments plot a murder) as well as “Criminals Like Us”, *A Grave Diagnosis*, with it’s futuristic world-building.
- Madona Skaff-Koren, THE GREAT LEONARD, “Soul Behind the Face”, *In the Key of 13*
 - After 10 years of pretending to be a psychic, life was good for The Great Leonard. That is until he encountered his first genuine paranormal experience.

B. Short Story Devices

1- Symbolism

- Ed Piwowarczyk, “The Ballad of Will Robinson”, ancient folk ballads, their meaning, *In the Key of 13*
 - Will Robinson, not “of the stars”, but looking up at them.
 - Folk music, the ballads of lost generations, traditions and lost memories immortalized in songs that can no longer be attributed.
 - The Willow Tree. The lost child. Deeds that are older than time, that live in our collective memories.

2- Imagery

- Anything by R.K. Rowlings or Charles Dickens are a crash course in the use of imagery.
- Caro Soles, “Waiting in the Wings”, Off world, excellent use of imagery, *A Grave Diagnosis*
 - *The sun shone on the rope trees of the Pleasure Gardens, releasing the heady scent of their flowers above Marlo Dasha Borgardini’s head. He sat complacently eating a cloud cone as he watched the passing crowd*
 - Soles builds an entire world, and invites us to savour it in bursts of images, the entirety of Marlo’s Merculian home.

3- Point of view

- Rosalind Place, “Bad Vibrations”, the instruments plot a murder, *In the Key of 13*
 - We touched on “Bad Vibrations” earlier, so I won’t re-visit it, but Point Of View is so critical in mystery and crime, especially in shorts. Many authors make excellent use of the first person to add a layer of urgency to the story-telling. Place takes that to a new level in giving the instruments a point of view.

4- Irony, and its cousin Karma.

- O Henry, aka William Sydney Porter, “The Gift of the Magi”, a perfect example of pure irony.
- Rosalind Croucher, “The Drowning”, what goes around..., *A Grave Diagnosis*
 - There is very little true irony in modern story-telling. I’m thinking specifically of the kind of irony that O-Henry used in “The Gift of the Magi”, with the giving done by both Jim and Dell, the lost hair and the comb. The sold watch and the gold chain. This is a simply brilliant use of irony.
 - In more modern prose, we often find irony’s kissing cousins, like Karma. In “The Drowning”, Croucher shows us that what goes around does indeed come around, sometimes in very dark and unwelcome ways.

5- Personification

- I’ll again mention “The Monkey’s Paw”, as an example of where a “thing” is infused by the author with powers beyond its true capabilities.
- Rosemary Aubert, “Kitty Claws to the Rescue”, projects the feelings onto the cat, *13 Claws*
- Mary Patterson, Malachi, “Night Vision”, *13 Claws*
 - In both of these works, we are given a glimpse into the possible feelings and thoughts of the cat, at least as they are projected onto the animals by their human counterparts in the stories.
 - True personification allows the reader to come at the harsher realities of crime by viewing it through the more forgiving eyes of the animal. And it’s also fun, watching the animals help to solve the mysteries.

6- Humour

- Charles Dickens, “The Pickwick Papers”, a great example of a light touch in story-telling.
- Lynne Murphy, “Let the Sunshine In”, a Seniors’ caper, *In the Key of 13*
 - Charlotte Manners takes us on a romp through the Sunny Ways nursing home, in a caper to solve the killings of the elderly and bring down a murderer.
- Melody Campbell, “Two Crooks Walk into a Store”, a caper with a hint of poignancy, *A Grave Diagnosis*
 - In her quest to feed Percy, her dog, Betty Glummer is forced into a reluctant life of crime, in this hilarious caper.

7- Revenge

- Jane Petersen Burfield, “Unmasked”, *A Grave Diagnosis*
 - Gentle medical worker and housewife Annie escapes her troubled marriage by building a garden. But when her husband, despite pandemic rules of engagement, becomes truly unmasked, Annie finds that even her gentle soul is not really above revenge.

8- The Underdog

- J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter*, the quintessential underdog. Everyone loves an underdog.
- M.H. Callway (Madeleine), “Brainworm”, the struggling and under-loved half-sister Fiona, *In the Key of 13*
 - The down-trodden and under-loved half sister Fiona struggles for fairness in a world dominated by her step-mother Cherie and half brother Bertie (Bertrand), but finds her quest to be hopeless.
- Jayne Barnard, “Christmas Rose”, *A Grave Diagnosis*
 - The hen-pecked husband Fred Peterson has had just about enough of his demanding wife Rosemary. But striking back is not in his nature. When events offer a permanent solution, well, Barnard follows them to their conclusion.

9- Technique

- Discuss the need for technical skills above all.
 - It goes far beyond the correct use of your and you’re, or they’re, there and their. Some authors who rant online about these grammatical mistakes are given to even bigger mistakes in their own work.
 - Watch the over-use of adjectives and adverbs. Leave something to the reader’s imagination. You can cut a lot by searching “ly”.
 - Watch the Canadian tendency to “diminish” in our wording. (Just a little bit...)
- The story needs to keep pace with the author. Some unfold, like a long-burning campfire. Some race or careen from conflict to resolution. Some are happy capers. All should flow with the author’s mind, in true form. Allow the art to be organic in flow.
- Kevin P. Thornton, “Under the Lamplight”, *In the Key of 13*, touching, moving, captures many of the key elements:
 - Theme (war, loss)
 - Conflict
 - Character
 - Setting
 - Plot
 - Above all, poignancy, a beautiful use of the language.