

## THE ONE MYTH ABOUT WRITERS THAT DRIVES ME CRAZY

There are tons and tons of myths about writing and writers—which makes sense, because we make up myths for a living, right? But many of these myths and old saws are just kind of silly. The one that drives me nuts is the idea that there are novelists and there are short fiction writers, but many (most?) writers can't do both.

This has never made sense to me—outside of a handful of short-fiction phenoms like George Saunders or Ted Chiang, and the occasional book-only author, it seems pretty clear that most writers can do both. The skills required to write a novel and a short story are somewhat different, but clearly related, and they involve a lot of the same things.

In fact, I would argue that not only can most authors do both, but they *should* do both. It's good for your writing chops to write fiction at different lengths, from flash fiction all the way up to a doorstopper novel.

Which brings me to a related myth—the idea that novels are like the “main event,” and short stories are just like an appetizer, or a sideline. This one falls apart the moment you look at it. There's a reason so many movies have been made based on short stories, and why so many great writers will tell you about that one perfect short story that made them want to try their hands at this, and why even consummate novelists like Stephen King and Robert Heinlein have certain short stories listed among their most defining works.

This is worth mentioning, because there's so much talk lately that the problem with the Hugo Awards is that they feature too much short fiction, which nobody has time to keep track of, and there should be multiple novel categories instead. Short fiction is a huge part of where the action is at, and it's where the newest, freshest writing is coming from.

But back to the *other* myth, the one about people being either novelists or short-story writers. I prefer to think of it as being more like distance runners versus sprinters—and if you do both, you get better overall muscle tone and get better at each. I believe that writing short fiction makes you a better novelist, and writing novels also makes you a better short story writer.

In particular, novelists need more practice writing endings, which is one reason I think it's such a good idea to write as much short fiction as possible. Endings are *hard*, even harder than the rest of storytelling, and having to write a dozen endings in a row helps you see where you're falling down.

Plus, short fiction forces you to think about structure in a much more pared-down way than books—with short fiction, you have a certain number of scenes, or sequences, and you have to figure out how to make them count. You also have to figure out how to convey a particular event or series of events as economically as possible: Is this something that can happen in one scene, in one time and place, or is it something that has to be conveyed through narration, like “First this happened, then a day later, this other thing happened?” Without the luxury of stretching things out, you're forced to think more about the difference between a scene or a sequence, and the relative strengths of each.

But writing novels also makes you better at short fiction. If you only write short stories, you have the luxury of not having to develop your sprawling supporting cast beyond the stuff we need to know about for this five-thousand-word tale. Ditto for world-

building. There might also be some subplots that can be left as little more than grainnotes. But once you've written some novels, you get used to having to explore more of those back alleys and bit players, and this forces you to get in the habit of asking yourself the tough questions that it's so easy (and tempting) to leave unanswered.

I used to think of myself as a short-story-only writer, until I finally tried my hand at writing a novel—and finally writing a longer work forced me to break out of all my preconceptions about storytelling. I started to see all the ways I had been cheating in my short fiction, and how it was keeping my stories one-note and basic. But it wasn't until I had written, revised and polished five novels that I started to get a serious handle on my short fiction.

After that, I went through a phase where I would start a novel and then decide that what I actually had here was a really interesting short story—which is the opposite of what some other authors report having happen. I wrote maybe a dozen short stories that started their lives as novels. What I found is that turning these novel ideas into short stories allowed me to focus in on what excited me about the idea in the first place, and distill it down to just the most essential part. But all the legwork I had done to make it into a novel made it a much, much better story.

Short fiction is where you get to experiment, with characters, themes, or ideas that you might not be able to convince a book publisher to invest in for a book-length work. Short fiction is not just where all the coolest experiments come from, but where the purest storytelling comes out. If you let yourself get caught up in that crazy “people can only write long or short” myth, then you'll be depriving yourself of a chance to really stretch your muscles as a writer. Remember, pigeonholes are for pigeons! (I guess. I've never actually seen a pigeon in one.)

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