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Writing Without Style

By Joseph E. Wright

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WRITING WITHOUT STYLE

Style manuals are all well and good, and in fact, highly desirable for newspapers. The average reading level of newspaper readers is the sixth grade. Over the years it became imperative that newspaper writing be simple, consistent, and use basic punctuation, even when that violated some elementary rules. The end result has been that borderline idiots may now understand today's papers.

I feel that these manuals should not be taken as carved in stone for fiction writers. Imagine, if you will, someone dictating to Picasso, Dali, or the French impressionists which colors of paint they may use, which strokes, which perspective, etc. Unthinkable, yet there are many people who insist that fiction writers must abide by the (sometimes) arbitrary grammar and style rules in the popular style manuals.

There are certain rudimentary dictates we must all follow, otherwise our writing would be chaotic. However, fiction writers should, more than any other writers, be allowed enough freedom of expression to create a style that is special to them. In other words, a style that is peculiar (in the correct meaning of that word.) In the editing process of my book, TALES FROM THE WRECKTORY, I had an incident with the editor (He won, I lost.) over the use of the word, "tenebraephobic." (Tenebrae is the service used during Christian Holy Week, and the Latin word, "tenebrae" means shadows, hence darkness.) I wanted to use it to convey a particular kind of fear of the dark. Now, there is more than one word for this condition: nyctophobia and lygophobia, to name two. The individual I was writing about was afraid to be alone in an old, multistory, rambling house in the dead of night. I ask you, which word conveys the impression I wanted to create: one of the two clinical names I mention, or the one which speaks of fear of shadows?

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The editor objected to my "tenebraephobic" because he said there was no such word, that I had made it up, and, of course, he was right. There wasn't and I had. Damn it all, if a fiction writer is not allowed to coin a word, who is? Political speech writers? Computer nerds? Or, as we see happen every day, the intelligentsia who, through ignorance or sloppiness, take a perfectly good word or phrase, misuse it, and give it a whole new meaning. Others follow the bad example and it suddenly jumps up the ranks in today's parlance. "Impact" is a perfect example of that.

The same editor then pointed out that most people would not know the meaning of the word, "tenebrae." My answer to that was: "Then, let them look it up. If they want simple words that won't strain their poor brains, they should stick to newspapers (or television) for their entertainment. Fiction should do more than entertain; it should also broaden the mind."

Another editor (I quickly changed this one) tried to correct my grammar and spelling in dialogues. Now,

to me, dialogue is sacrosanct. Apart from obvious typos, no one fools around with it. Words in dialogue are, after all, not my words, not the editor's words. They belong to the character speaking. You wouldn't say, "Just between you and I" but one of your characters certainly would. You'd die rather than say, "Me and my friend did..." Would one of your characters? You betcha.

Years ago, I was responsible for training several would-be writers for an international corporation. It was hoped that what they wrote would convince those who read it to buy our products and services. These young writers soon became sick of hearing me say, "We don't write the way we speak, any more than we speak the way we write. Writing is a visual medium; speaking is an audible medium." I convinced them (I think) to throw away the style manuals (or at least leave them on the shelf most of the time), and concentrate on what was important: getting a message across, a message that was brief, succinct, and easy to read.

When it comes to the final showdown, who wins, editors or you, the writer? That's an easy one. Editors. Certainly you have the right to take your work elsewhere. My rule on this is quite simple. If I have any doubt whatsoever of the suitability of what I wrote, I don't mind giving in, especially to an editor who is usually cooperative. Such an editor deserves my cooperation. On the other hand, if I believe I could not go on living with myself by abandoning my precious words, I'll insist it stay as written and accept the consequences. *Quod scripsi, scripsi.*

The test of fiction writing is not whether it conforms to any style manual, but whether or not it works for you, the writer. Unless your words move you to laugh or cry (preferably both), it isn't likely to affect anyone else. How do you make your words work? The formula is simple, although not easy. You must make your words flow as though they were about to run off the page. The nonfiction writer must be careful that all facts are correct, make sure the writing conforms to the publication for which it is written, and for the intended audience. You, as a fiction writer must do the very same, but only as a starting point. You must go on become a poet, a word-painter, a strummer on people's emotions. The person who originally said one picture is worth a thousand words had it all backwards. A thousand words can conjure up as many pictures, as many emotions as there are people who read them.

As a writer of fiction, you need only keep one eye on your style, and only an occasional eye on the

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rules set down, but you must at all times keep both eyes wide open and directed towards that which you hope to pursue, and by that I mean pursue that noblest of trades: the writer who leads others to far-off lands in this world and in other worlds; the trade of Dickens or Tolstoy; of Bradbury or Poe, of Cartland or Hemingway; and above all, the trade of _____(please insert your name here.)

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Joseph E. Wright is the author of Tales from the Wrecktory (

), The Bodies

Out Back and The Remigrants (both published by

). His writing has

appeared in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine.

Joseph E. Wright was born and went to school in New England and later moved to Philadelphia. He considers Philly his home town.

Joe grew up addicted to the British cozies of Christie and Sayres and the American counterparts of Queen and Stout. He was a fan of the film noir of Hammett and Chandler.

His first published novel, Memorandum of a Murder (Manor Books) confirmed his determination to become a writer. A short story of his appeared in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine.

While writing, Joe had to make a living, which he did in many ways. One period of his life, he lived in a dark, rambling, nineteenth century rectory in downtown Philadelphia. It inspired his Tales from the Wrecktory (MetropolisInk) which appeared last year.

Somewhat different from the whodunit style of novel, Joe's The Remigrants, the story of those who return from the dead, is currently in the editorial stage.

The Bodies Out Back is the first in a completed trilogy starring Pat Montgomery and Phillis Toner. The next two, The Maris Cove Murders and Aisle of the Dead should be published this coming year.

Joe and his life partner spend most of the year in sunny Florida.

Are You Really Writing Haiku?

By Gary R. Hess

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Haiku is originally a Japanese style poem, however it has changed into a favorite of many young adults. One problem though, most who claim they write haiku, generally don't. Haiku is a strict style of writing that consists of a 5 7 5 style, meaning 5 syllables the first line, 7 the second and ending it with 5. Haiku is also written in a way related to nature.

Many who claim they write haiku are in fact writing a whole other style. One style which is generally confused as haiku is cinquain. Cinquain, although closely related to haiku, consists of five lines instead of three. Cinquain is also written about an object and/or person and not nature specifically.

In order to write a true haiku poem, it must consist of three lines with five syllables in the first, seven in the second while the third and line consists of again five syllables. The poem must also be somehow related to nature, while using few words and expressing great emotion.

An example of haiku is:

"Darkness"
Blackened evening sky
Moon shifting across the darkness
Waiting for the sun

Gary is a writer for

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