CREATING A TEXT-BASED CULTURE

THE HABITS OF LIFELONG READERS AND WRITERS

STUDENT READER

GRADE 8

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Biographical Sketch

Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican-American poet, essayist, and author of short fiction and novels. Her acclaimed coming of age novel, *The House on Mango Street*, reflects the experimental aspects her writing is known for as well as exploration of themes of cultural displacement. Written as a series of short vignettes that occupy a space somewhere between poetry and short story, the stories are based loosely on Cisneros' own experiences growing up in working class neighborhoods in Chicago.

Born in Chicago in 1953, Cisneros was the third child in a family of seven—and the only girl. As a child, her family traveled back and forth between Chicago and Mexico City frequently, marking her childhood and her writing with a unique insight into both cultures and languages. Cisneros earned her undergraduate degree from Loyola University in 1976 and went on to attend the Iowa Writers

Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she received a Master of Fine Arts.

Cisneros has been the recipient of many literary and cultural awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship, known informally as a "Genius Grant," the PEN Center USA Literary Award, NEA Fellowships in poetry and fiction, the Texas Medal of the Arts, and many others. She actively supports emerging writers through two nonprofit organizations she founded: the Macondo Foundation and the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation. Cisneros is a dual citizen of Mexico and the United States and lives in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Our Good Day

Sandra Cisneros

If you give me five dollars I will be your friend forever. That's what the little one tells me.

Five dollars is cheap since I don't have any friends except Cathy who is only my friend till Tuesday.

Five dollars, five dollars.

She is trying to get somebody to chip in so they can buy a bicycle from this kid named Tito. They already have ten dollars and all they need is five more.

Only five dollars, she says.

Don't talk to them, says Cathy. Can't you see they smell like a broom.

But I like them. Their clothes are crooked and old.

They are wearing shiny Sunday shoes without socks. It makes their bald ankles all red, but I like them. Especially the big one who laughs with all her teeth. I like her even though she lets the little one do all the talking.

Five dollars, the little one says, only five.

Cathy is tugging my arm and I know whatever I do next will make her mad forever.

Wait a minute, I say, and run inside to get the five dollars. I have three dollars saved and I take two of Nenny's. She's not home, but I'm sure she'll be glad when she finds out we own a bike. When I get back, Cathy is gone like I knew she would be, but I don't care. I have two new friends and a bike too.

My name is Lucy, the big one says. This here is Rachel my sister.

I'm her sister, says Rachel. Who are you?

And I wish my name was Cassandra or Alexis or Maritza—anything but Esperanza—but when I tell them my name they don't laugh.

We come from Texas, Lucy says and grins. Her was born here, but me I'm Texas.

You mean *she*, I say.

No, I'm from Texas, and doesn't get it.

This bike is three ways ours, says Rachel who is thinking ahead already. Mine today, Lucy's tomorrow and yours day after.

But everybody wants to ride it today because the bike is new, so we decide to take turns *after* tomorrow. Today it belongs to all of us.

I don't tell them about Nenny just yet. It's too complicated. Especially since Rachel almost put out Lucy's eye about who was going to get to ride it first. But finally we agree to ride it together. Why not?

Because Lucy has long legs she pedals. I sit on the back seat and Rachel is skinny enough to get up on the handlebars which makes the bike all wobbly as if the wheels are spaghetti, but after a bit you get used to it.

We ride fast and faster. Past my house, sad and red and crumbly in places, past Mr. Benny's grocery on the corner, and down the avenue which is dangerous. Laundromat, junk store, drugstore, windows and cars and more cars, and around the block back to Mango.

People on the bus wave. A very fat lady crossing the street says, You sure got quite a load there.

Rachel shouts, You got quite a load there too. She is very sassy.

Down, down Mango Street we go. Rachel, Lucy, me.

Our new bicycle. Laughing the crooked ride
70 back.

Laughter

Sandra Cisneros

Nenny and I don't look like sisters . . . not right away. Not the way you can tell with Rachel and Lucy who have the same fat popsicle lips like everybody else in their family. But me and Nenny, we are more alike than you would know. Our laughter for example. Not the shy ice cream bells' giggle of Rachel and Lucy's family, but all of a sudden and surprised like a pile of dishes breaking. And other things I can't explain.

One day we were passing a house that looked, in my mind, like houses I had seen in Mexico. I don't know why. There was nothing about the

house that looked exactly like the houses I remembered. I'm not even sure why I thought it, but it seemed to feel right.

Look at that house, I said, it looks like Mexico.

Rachel and Lucy look at me like I'm crazy, but before they can let out a laugh, Nenny says: Yes, that's Mexico all right. That's what I was thinking exactly.

Gil's Furniture Bought & Sold

Sandra Cisneros

There is a junk store. An old man owns it. We bought a used refrigerator from him once, and Carlos sold a box of magazines for a dollar. The store is small with just a dirty window for light. He doesn't turn the lights on unless you got money to buy things with, so in the dark we look and see all kinds of things, me and Nenny. Tables with their feet upside-down and rows and rows of refrigerators with round comers and couches that spin dust in the air when you punch them and a hundred T.V.'s that don't work probably. Everything is on top of everything so

the whole store has skinny aisles to walk through. You can get lost easy.

The owner, he is a black man who doesn't talk much and sometimes if you didn't know better you could be in there a long time before your eyes notice a pair of gold glasses floating in the dark. Nenny who thinks she is smart and talks to any old man, asks lots of questions. Me, I never said nothing to him except once when I bought the Statue of Liberty for a dime.

But Nenny, I hear her asking one time how's this here and the man says, This, this is a music box, and I turn around quick thinking he means a *pretty* box with flowers painted on it, with a ballerina inside. Only there's nothing like that where this old man is pointing, just a wood box that's old and got a big brass record in it with holes. Then he starts it up and all sorts of things start happening. It's like all of a sudden he let go a million moths all over the dusty furniture and swan-neck shadows and in our bones. It's like drops of water. Or like marimbas only with a funny little plucked sound to it like if you were running your fingers across the teeth of a metal comb.

And then I don't know why, but I have to turn around and pretend I don't care about the box so Nenny won't see how stupid I am. But Nenny, who is stupider, already is asking how much and I can see her fingers going for the quarters in her pants pocket.

This, the old man says shutting the lid, this ain't for sale.

Biographical Sketch

Bessie Head

Bessie Head is considered Botswana's most prominent writer. Born in South Africa in 1937 to a woman of European descent and a man of African descent at a time when interracial marriage was outlawed, Head's early life was marked by poverty, upheaval, and discrimination. Head was raised in a foster home before authorities sent her to St. Monica's Home for Coloured Girls, an Anglican boarding school in Durban where she eventually earned her teaching certificate.

In 1958 she began working as a journalist in Cape Town at a time when nonwhite South Africans were pushing back against the restrictions and injustices of apartheid. She moved to Johannesburg a year later, where she met many well-known South African journalists and became involved with the Pan-Africanist Congress, one of several liberation movements that sought political power for the black majority. Still, she continued to

experience the hardships of being "coloured" (or of mixed ancestry) in a society where racial segregation was enshrined by law.

In 1964, she secured a one-way exit permit and left South Africa and apartheid for good. In Botswana, where Head committed herself to writing fiction, she often worked into the night, writing by candlelight. She sold her first short story in 1966. Her first novel, *Rain Clouds*, was published a little over a year later in New York and London to strong reviews. Her second novel, *Maru*, was published in 1971. Her autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power*, would become her best-known book. Head's most significant works were set in her adopted homeland of Botswana, and she depicted the lives of ordinary people, set within the context of the political struggles that affected Africa.

The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses

Bessie Head

Scarcely a breath of wind disturbed the stillness of the day, and the long rows of cabbages were bright green in the sunlight. Large white clouds drifted slowly across the deep blue sky. Now and then they obscured the sun and caused a chill on the backs of the prisoners who had to work all day long in the cabbage field. This trick the clouds were playing with the sun eventually caused one of the prisoners who wore glasses to stop work, straighten up and peer shortsightedly at them. He was a thin little fellow with a hollowed-out chest and comic knobbly knees. He also had a lot of fanciful ideas

because he smiled at the clouds.

"Perhaps they want me to send a message to the children," he thought tenderly, noting that the clouds were drifting in the direction of his home some hundred miles away. But before he could frame the message, the warder in charge of his work span shouted:

"Hey, what you tink you're doing, Brille?"

The prisoner swung round, blinking rapidly, yet at the same time sizing up the enemy. He was a new warder, named Jacobus Stephanus Hannetjie. His eyes were the color of the sky but they were frightening. A simple, primitive, brutal soul gazed out of them. The prisoner bent down quickly and a message was quietly passed down the line:

"We're in for trouble this time, comrades."

"Why?" rippled back up the line.

"Because he's not human," the reply rippled down, and yet only the crunching of the spades as they turned over the earth disturbed the stillness.

This particular work span was known as Span One. It was composed of ten men, and they were all political prisoners. They were grouped together for convenience, as it was one of the prison regulations that no black warder should be in charge of a political prisoner lest this prisoner convert him to his views. It never seemed to occur to the authorities that this very reasoning was the strength

of Span One and a clue to the strange terror they aroused in the warders. As political prisoners they were unlike the other prisoners in the sense that they felt no guilt nor were they outcasts of society. All guilty men instinctively cower, which was why it was the kind of prison where men got knocked out cold with a blow at the back of the head from an iron bar. Up until the arrival of Warder Hannetjie, no warder had dared beat any member of Span One and no warder had lasted more than a week with them. The battle was entirely psychological. Span One was assertive and it was beyond the scope of white warders to handle assertive black men. Thus, Span One had got out of control. They were the best thieves and liars in the camp. They lived all day on raw cabbages. They chatted and smoked tobacco. And since they moved, thought and acted as one, they had perfected every technique of group concealment.

Trouble began that very day between Span One and Warder Hannetjie. It was because of the shortsightedness of Brille. That was the nick name he was given in prison and is the Afrikaans word for someone who wears glasses. Brille could never judge the approach of the prison gates, and on several previous occasions he had munched on cabbages and dropped them almost at the feet of the warder, and all previous warders had overlooked

this. Not so Warder Hannetjie.

"Who dropped that cabbage?" he thundered.

Brille stepped out of line.

"I did," he said meekly.

"All right," said Hannetjie. "The whole span goes three meals off."

"But I told you I did it," Brille protested.

The blood rushed to Warder Hannetjie's face.

"Look 'ere," he said. "I don't take orders from a kaffir. I don't know what kind of kaffir you tink you are. Why don't you say Baas. I'm your Baas. Why don't you say Baas, hey?"

Brille blinked his eyes rapidly but by contrast his voice was strangely calm.

"I'm twenty years older than you," he said. It was the first thing that came to mind, but the comrades seemed to think it a huge joke. A titter swept up the line. The next thing Warder Hannetjie whipped out a knobkerrie and gave Brille several blows about the head. What surprised his comrades was the speed with which Brille had removed his glasses or else they would have been smashed to pieces on the ground.

That evening in the cell Brille was very apologetic.

"I'm sorry, comrades," he said. "I've put you into a hell of a mess."

"Never mind, brother," they said. "What hap-

pens to one of us, happens to all."

"I'll try to make up for it, comrades," he said. "I'll steal something so that you don't go hungry."

Privately, Brille was very philosophical about his head wounds. It was the first time an act of violence had been perpetrated against him, but he had long been a witness of extreme, almost unbelievable human brutality. He had twelve children and his mind traveled back that evening through the sixteen years of bedlam in which he had lived. It had all happened in a small drab little three-bedroomed house in a small drab little street in the Eastern Cape, and the children kept coming year after year because neither he nor Martha managed the contraceptives the right way and a teacher's salary never allowed moving to a bigger house and he was always taking exams to improve this salary only to have it all eaten up by hungry mouths. Everything was pretty horrible, especially the way the children fought. They'd get hold of each other's heads and give them a good bashing against the wall. Martha gave up somewhere along the line, so they worked out a thing between them. The bashings, biting and blood were to operate in full swing until he came home. He was to be the bogeyman, and when it worked he never failed to have a sense of godhead at the way in which his presence could change sav-

ages into fairly reasonable human beings.

Yet somehow it was this chaos and mismanagement at the center of his life that drove him into politics. It was really an ordered beautiful world with just a few basic slogans to learn along with the rights of mankind. At one stage, before things became very bad, there were conferences to attend, all very far away from home.

"Let's face it,'' he thought ruefully, "I'm only learning right now what it means to be a politician. All this while I've been running away from Martha and the kids.''

And the pain in his head brought a hard lump to his throat. That was what the children did to each other daily and Martha wasn't managing, and if Warder Hannetjie had not interrupted him that morning, he would have sent the following message:

'"Be good comrades, my children. Cooperate, then life will run smoothly.

The next day Warder Hannetjie caught this old man with twelve children stealing grapes from the farm shed. They were an enormous quantity of grapes in a ten-gallon tin, and for this misdeed the old man spent a week in the isolation cell. In fact, Span One as a whole was in constant trouble. Warder Hannetjie seemed to have eyes at the back of his head. He uncovered the trick about the cab-

bages, how they were split in two with the spade and immediately covered with earth and then unearthed again and eaten with split-second timing. He found out how tobacco smoke was beaten into the ground, and he found out how conversations were whispered down the wind.

For about two weeks Span One lived in acute misery. The cabbages, tobacco and conversations had been the pivot of jail life to them. Then one evening they noticed that their good old comrade who wore the glasses was looking rather pleased with himself. He pulled out a four-ounce packet of tobacco by way of explanation, and the comrades fell upon it with great greed. Brille merely smiled. After all, he was the father of many children. But when the last shred had disappeared, it occurred to the comrades that they ought to be puzzled. Someone said:

"I say, brother. We're watched like hawks these days. Where did you get the tobacco?''

"Hannetjie gave it to me,'' said Brille.

There was a long silence. Into it dropped a quiet bombshell.

"I saw Hannetjie in the shed today,'' and the failing eyesight blinked rapidly. ''I caught him in the act of stealing five bags of fertilizer, and he bribed me to keep my mouth shut."

There was another long silence.

"Prison is an evil life," Brille continued, apparently discussing some irrelevant matter. "It makes a man contemplate all kinds of evil deeds."

He held out his hand and closed it.

"You know, comrades," he said. "I've got Hannetjie. I'll betray him tomorrow."

Everyone began talking at once.

"Forget it, brother. You'll get shot."

Brille laughed.

"I won't," he said. "That is what I mean about evil. I am a father of children, and I saw today that Hannetjie is just a child and stupidly truthful. I'm going to punish him severely because we need a good warder."

The following day, with Brille as witness, Hannetjie confessed to the theft of the fertilizer and was fined a large sum of money. From then on Span One did very much as they pleased while Warder Hannetjie stood by and said nothing. But it was Brille who carried this to extremes. One day, at the close of work Warder Hannetjie said:

''Brille, pick up my jacket and carry it back to the camp."

"But nothing in the regulations says I'm your servant, Hannetjie," Brille replied coolly.

"I've told you not to call me Hannetjie. You must say Baas," but Warder Hannetjie's voice lacked con-

viction. In turn, Brille squinted up at him.

"I'll tell you something about this Baas business, Hannetjie," he said. "One of these days we are going to run the country. You are going to clean my car. Now, I have a fifteen year-old son, and I'd die of shame if you had to tell him that I ever called you Baas."

Warder Hannetjie went red in the face and picked up his coat.

On another occasion Brille was seen to be walking about the prison yard, openly smoking tobacco. On being taken before the prison commander he claimed to have received the tobacco from Warder Hannetjie. All throughout the tirade from his chief, Warder Hannetjie failed to defend himself, but his nerve broke completely. He called Brille to one side.

"Brille," he said. "This thing between you and me must end. You may not know it, but I have a wife and children, and you're driving me to suicide."

"Why don't you like your own medicine, Hannetjie?" Brille asked quietly.

"I can give you anything you want," Warder Hannetjie said in desperation.

"It's not only me but the whole of Span One," said Brille cunningly. "The whole of Span One wants something from you."

Warder Hannetjie brightened with relief.

"I tink I can manage if it's tobacco you want," he said.

Brille looked at him, for the first time struck with pity and guilt. He wondered if he had carried the whole business too far. The man was really a child.

"It's not tobacco we want, but you," he said. "We want you on our side. We want a good warder because without a good warder we won't be able to manage the long stretch ahead."

Warder Hannetjie interpreted this request in his own fashion, and his interpretation of what was good and human often left the prisoners Span One speechless with surprise. He had a way of slipping off his revolver and picking up a spade and digging alongside Span One. He had a way of producing unheard of luxuries like boiled eggs from his farm nearby and things like cigarettes, and Span One responded nobly and got the reputation of being the best work span in the camp. And it wasn't only taken from their side. They were awfully good at stealing commodities like fertilizer which were needed on the farm of Warder Hannetjie.

Biographical Sketch

Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver is one of several writers credited with revitalizing the English language literary short story in the late 1900s.

The characters Carver writes about typically reflect the same working-class background that he knew intimately from his own life. He was born in a small Oregon saw mill town in 1938 and grew up in Yakima, Washington. After graduating from high school, he worked briefly in the same saw mill where his father worked. Within a year, he and his girlfriend, Maryann Burk, married and began working in a series of low wage jobs to support their young family while Carver earned his bachelor's degree at Humboldt State University in northern California. He studied briefly at the Iowa Writers' Workshop (at the University of Iowa) before the family returned to California, where Carver found work as a textbook editor while he pursued his writing.

Carver's breakthrough came in 1967 with the story *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* During this period, he began to drink heavily and was hospitalized several times before finally becoming sober in 1977. In a 1983 *Paris Review* interview, he acknowledged that his drinking would have killed him, had he not stopped. A second break also came in 1983, when he received a literary award and stipend that allowed him to focus on writing full time. Carver was also an accomplished poet who published several collections of poetry.

Everything Stuck to Him

Raymond Carver

She's in Milan for Christmas and wants to know what it was like when she was a kid.

Tell me, she says. Tell me what it was like when I was a kid. She sips Strega, waits, eyes him closely.

She is a cool, slim, attractive girl, a survivor from top to bottom.

That was a long time ago. That was twenty years ago, he says.

You can remember, she says. Go on.

What do you want to hear? he says. What else can I tell you? I could tell you about something that happened when you were a baby. It involves you, he says. But only in a minor way.

Tell me, she says. But first fix us another so you won't have to stop in the middle.

He comes back from the kitchen with drinks, settles into his chair, begins.

They were kids themselves, but they were crazy in love, this eighteen-year-old boy and this seventeen-year-old girl when they married. Not all that long afterwards they had a daughter.

The baby came along in late November during a cold spell that just happened to coincide with the peak of the waterfowl season. The boy loved to hunt, you see. That's part of it.

The boy and girl, husband and wife, father and mother, they lived in a little apartment under a dentist's office. Each night they cleaned the dentist's place upstairs in exchange for rent and utilities. In summer they were expected to maintain the lawn and the flowers. In winter the boy shoveled snow and spread rock salt on the walks. Are you still with me? Are you getting the picture?

I am, she says.

That's good, he says. So one day the dentist finds out they were using his letterhead for their personal correspondence. But that's another story.

He gets up from his chair and looks out the window. He sees the tile rooftops and the snow that is falling steadily on them.

Tell the story, she says.

The two kids were very much in love. On top of this they had great ambitions. They were always talking about the things they were going to do and the places they were going to go.

Now the boy and the girl slept in the bedroom, and the baby slept in the living room. Let's say the baby was about three months old and had only just begun to sleep through the night.

On this one Saturday night after finishing his work upstairs, the boy stayed in the dentist's office and called an old hunting friend of his father's.

Carl, he said when the man picked up the receiver, believe it or not, I'm a father.

Congratulations, Carl said. How is the wife?

She's fine, Carl. Everybody's fine.

That's good, Carl said, I'm glad to hear it. But if you called about going hunting, I'll tell you something. The geese are flying to beat the band. I don't think I've ever seen so many. Got five today. Going back in the morning, so come along if you want to.

I want to, the boy said.

The boy hung up the telephone and went downstairs to tell the girl. She watched while he laid out his things. Hunting coat, shell bag, boots, socks, hunting cap, long underwear, pump gun.

What time will you be back? the girl said.

Probably around noon, the boy said. But maybe as late as six o'clock. Would that be too late?

It's fine, she said. The baby and I will get along fine. You go and have some fun. When you get back, we'll dress the baby up and go visit Sally.

The boy said, Sounds like a good idea.

Sally was the girl's sister. She was striking. I don't know if you've seen pictures of her. The boy was a little in love with Sally, just as he was in love with Betsy, who was another sister the girl had. The boy used to say to the girl, If we weren't married, I could go for Sally.

What about Betsy? the girl used to say. I hate to admit it, but I truly feel she's better looking than Sally and me. What about Betsy?

Betsy too, the boy used to say.

After dinner he turned up the furnace and helped her bathe the baby. He marveled again at the infant who had half his features and half the girl's. He powdered the tiny body. He powdered between fingers and toes.

He emptied the bath into the sink and went upstairs to check the air. It was overcast and cold. The grass, what there was of it, looked like canvas, stiff and gray under the street light.

Snow lay in piles beside the walk. A car went by. He heard sand under the tires. He let himself imagine what it might be like tomorrow, geese beating the air over his head, shotgun plunging against his shoulder.

Then he locked the door and went downstairs.

In bed they tried to read. But both of them fell asleep, she first, letting the magazine sink to the quilt.

It was the baby's cries that woke him up.

The light was on out there, and the girl was standing next to the crib rocking the baby in her arms. She put the baby down, turned out the light, and came back to the bed.

He heard the baby cry. This time the girl stayed where she was. The baby cried fitfully and stopped. The boy listened, then dozed. But the baby's cries woke him again. The living room light was burning. He sat up and turned on the lamp.

I don't know what's wrong, the girl said, walking back and forth with the baby. I've changed her and fed her, but she keeps on crying. I'm so tired I'm afraid I might drop her.

You come back to bed, the boy said. I'll hold her for a while.

He got up and took the baby, and the girl said from the bedroom. Maybe she'll go back to sleep.

The boy sat on the sofa and held the baby. He jiggled it in his lap until he got its eyes to close, his own eyes closing right along. He rose carefully and put the baby back in the crib.

It was a quarter to four, which gave him forty-five minutes. He crawled into bed and dropped off. But a few minutes later the baby was crying again, and this time they both got up.

The boy did a terrible thing. He swore.

For God's sake, what's the matter with you? the girl said to the boy. Maybe she's sick or something. Maybe we shouldn't have given her the bath.

The boy picked up the baby. The baby kicked its feet and smiled.

Look, the boy said, I really don't think there's anything wrong with her.

How do you know that? the girl said. Here, let me have her. I know I ought to give her something, but I don't know what it's supposed to be.

The girl put the baby down again. The boy and the girl looked at the baby, and the baby began to cry.

The girl took the baby. Baby, baby, the girl said with tears in her eyes.

Probably it's something on her stomach, the boy said.

The girl didn't answer. She went on rocking the baby, paying no attention to the boy.

The boy waited. He went to the kitchen and put on water for coffee. He drew the woolen underwear on over his shorts and T-shirt, buttoned up, then got into his clothes.

What are you doing? the girl said.

Going hunting, the boy said.

I don't think you should, she said. I don't want to be left alone with her like this.

Carl's planning on me going, the boy said. We've planned it.

I don't care about what you and Carl planned, she said. And I don't care about Carl, either. I don't even know Carl.

You've met Carl before. You know him, the boy said. What do you mean you don't know him?

That's not the point and you know it, the girl said.

What is the point? the boy said. The point is we planned it.

The girl said, I'm your wife. This is your baby. She's sick or something. Look at her. Why else is she crying?

I know you're my wife, the boy said.

The girl began to cry. She put the baby back in the crib. But the baby started up again. The girl dried her eyes on the sleeve of her nightgown and picked the baby up.

The boy laced up his boots. He put on his shirt, his sweater, his coat. The kettle whistled on the stove in the kitchen.

You're going to have to choose, the girl said. Carl or us. I mean it.

What do you mean? the boy said.

You heard what I said, the girl said. If you want a family, you're going to have to choose.

They stared at each other. Then the boy took up his hunting gear and went outside. He started the car. He went around to the car windows and, making a job of it, scraped away the ice.

He turned off the motor and sat awhile. And then he got out and went back inside.

The living-room light was on. The girl was asleep on the bed. The baby was asleep beside her.

The boy took off his boots. Then he took off everything else. In his socks and long underwear, he sat on the sofa and read the Sunday paper.

The girl and the baby slept on. After a while, the boy went to the kitchen and started frying bacon.

The girl came out in her robe and put her arms around the boy.

Hey, the boy said.

I'm sorry, the girl said.

It's all right, the boy said.

I didn't mean to snap like that.

It was my fault, he said.

You sit down, the girl said. How does a waffle sound with bacon?

Sounds great, the boy said.

She took the bacon out of the pan and made waffle batter. He sat at the table and watched her move around the kitchen.

She put a plate in front of him with bacon, a waffle. He spread butter and poured syrup. But when he started to cut, he turned the plate into his lap.

I don't believe it, he said, jumping up from the table.

If you could see yourself, the girl said.

The boy looked down at himself, at everything stuck to his underwear.

I was starved, he said, shaking his head.

You were starved, she said, laughing.

He peeled off the woolen underwear and threw it at the bathroom door. Then he opened his arms and the girl moved into them.

We won't fight anymore, she said.

The boy said, We won't.

He gets up from his chair and refills their glasses.

That's it, he says. End of story. I admit it's not much of a story.

I was interested, she says.

He shrugs and carries his drink over to the window. It's dark now but still snowing.

Things change, he says. I don't know how they do. But they do without your realizing it or wanting them to.

Yes, that's true, only—But she does not finish what she started.

She drops the subject. In the window's reflection he sees her study her nails. Then she raises her head. Speaking brightly, she asks if he is going to show her the city after all.

He says, Put your boots on and let's go.

But he stays by the window, remembering. They had laughed. They had leaned on each other and laughed until the tears had come, while everything else—the cold, and where he'd go in it—was outside, for a while anyway.

Biographical Sketch

Ralph Fletcher

Ralph Fletcher is a writer of prolificacy and breadth. He has written numerous illustrated children's books, collections of poetry, young adult fiction, books on the craft of writing, and two memoirs.

Born in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1953, Fletcher grew up in a large family that loved telling stories. Immersed in narrative and enchanted with books, he learned the power of language and imagined what it would be like to write books that affected others the way his favorite books had affected him. During his junior and senior high school years, he received encouragement that sustained his writing from a few of his teachers, and he kept notebooks in which he wrote for purely for himself. When Fletcher studied abroad in college, he filled his notebooks with observations, ideas for poems, character sketches, and more.

Fletcher describes his brother's death in an automobile accident as the catalyst for his first novel, *Fig Pudding*, the story of a pre-teen boy whose younger brother dies after riding his bicycle into vehicle. Balanced with humor and vulnerability, *Fig Pudding* has been praised as a realistic portrayal of the frustrations and difficulties of life in a large, tightly-knit family. Fletcher earned a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing at Columbia University where he studied with distinguished writers like Gail Godwin, Richard Price, and Edmund White.

The Set Piece: Something Small and Beautiful

Ralph Fletcher

In his or her journals, the writer is unprofessional, unbuttoned, unguarded. A writer uses a journal to try out the new step in front of the mirror. He or she can abandon constraints of narrative form and allow the luxury of verbal spontaneity. In journals, therefore, we often find delightful small set pieces: descriptions for their own sake, character sketches, bits of philosophy, heartfelt cries that take on a particular brightness precisely because they aren't embedded in a larger narrative.

Mary Gordon

Go to any playground and you'll see kids practicing moves. Over there that kid in the Knicks T-shirt is trying hard to balance a spinning basketball on his forefinger. On the soccer field a girl is juggling a soccer ball, seeing how many times she can hit it with her feet and knees before it hits the ground.

What's going on?

Moves like these aren't very practical. It's hard to imagine how balancing a spinning basketball or juggling a soccer ball would ever come in handy during an actual game. But they do demonstrate certain intangibles that are important to becoming a skilled player: balance, confidence, a feel for the ball. These intangibles signal membership in the club, a way for the player to announce first to him- or herself and then to the world: *I've got a little game. I can play. I belong in this league.*

My notebook is the place where I try out moves. I take an idea or technique and play with it for a stretch, seeing how long I can keep it going.

I like towns with two-word names—New York, West Islip, Ann Arbor, Chapel Hill, Murder Creek. There's a freedom of space in two-word towns—a distance between the Chapel and the Hill, Ann and the Arbor, Murder and the Creek, that makes

breathing easier. I get nervous in one
word-towns. I get claustrophobic.

I dug this piece out of a notebook I kept during my late twenties. It's not profound writing that tries to touch on any immortal truth. Rather, it's reaching for ironic humor, wit. And much as it is fashionable to disown one's pathetic early writing attempts, I think this one works pretty well. I can sense the fun behind the writing, as well as the more serious long-term purpose: learning to juggle the words of my craft. Getting my balance. Finding my voice. Gaining confidence. Trying to prove to myself that I am good enough to play in this league.

The audience for this set piece was nobody but me. I fashioned it for my eyes, my practice, my pleasure. And I believe this is true for most writers. Occasionally a piece like this is a rehearsal for publishable writing, but more often it gets written for the sheer pleasure (or challenge) of the prose itself, with little worldly ambition beyond that.

The set piece is a genre specific to the writer's notebook. It can range in length from a few sentences to a few paragraphs, perhaps longer. It differs from a typical entry by its wholeness and polish. Like a poem or short story, the set piece has a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Usually it can stand on its own, separate and unattached to

larger work. It is an informal genre—there are no set rules to the set piece.

The urge to craft a set piece begins with the desire to create something small and beautiful. John Cheever's journals are peppered with set pieces, so much so that at one point he complains about his tendency to write too many of them. Some of these pieces explore characters he has observed and speculated about. Others describe places, settings imbued with that famous Cheeverian light. Still others describe a particular state of mind:

> The house was dark, of course. The snow went on falling. The last of the cigarette butts was gone, the gin bottle was empty, even the aspirin supply was exhausted. He went upstairs to the medicine cabinet. The plastic vial that used to contain Miltown still held a few grains, and by wetting his finger he picked these up and ate them. They made no difference. At least we're alive, he kept saying, at least we're alive, but without alcohol, aspirin, barbituates, coffee, and tobacco it seemed to be living death. At least I can do something, he thought, at least I can distract myself, at least I can take a walk; but when he went to the door he saw wolves on the lawn.

This set piece is not wholly fictitious; Cheever himself admitted that he struggled with various addictions during his life. Working from this autobiographical seed Cheever carefully crafts this passage with all the tools available—authentic tone, chilling detail, frame-by-frame motion, repetition, voice. Interesting that he chose to write about this character through the third person "he" instead of the "I." The final image of the wolves brings this piece to a definite and disturbing end.

If a novel is a marathon, the set piece is a sprint. Reading the set pieces from various authors' notebooks you can sense their pleasure in writing a brief stretch of prose without having the additional pressure of having to integrate it into a novel or short story. The notebooks of Dorianne Laux contain several set pieces that portray a vision of the world, a vision grounded in memorable particularity.

> I have always loved the world, in spite of itself, the chancreous volcanos, the lurid eye of the Iguana, the lure of black water. I guess because it gives back what it takes, manure to flower, dead wood to mushroom, water to rain. Even when the worst was upon me, the father's belly large with his children's souls, even as the

light was sucked from my mouth, my eyes
darkening, even then, I watched the fly
climb the wall, iridescent, winged a holy
image to carry with me until I woke.

Usually I wait for something to inspire a set piece of writing. But I sometimes take a more active role and give myself a specific writing task I sense might stretch me.

In early autumn I went with my family to a restaurant at York Beach in Maine. When we arrived the restaurant had not yet opened, so we took the kids across the street to the beach. The beach was beautiful and cold and strangely moving at low tide. *Write about this*, I told myself; the next day I did.

Went to Mimmo's yesterday. The restaurant
wasn't open yet so we wandered across
the street to kill time. Clear, sunny, cold
on the beach. It was low tide with a
strong onshore wind and lots of long
shadows and everything illuminated by
pure slanting late afternoon light. As if
we were all exactly halfway between two
worlds: day and night, land and sea, earth
and sky. The sand dark with dry whiter
sand blowing over it. The dry sand made

ghostly ribbons, white snakes; Joseph and Robert squealed chasing them down to the water's edge. I was ravenous. My nose was twitching, torn between the smell of the sea and the aroma wafting from the restaurant, pungent rivers of butter and garlic snaking invisibly through the air.

Writing this feels as satisfying as being alone and hitting a tennis ball against a smooth wall, trying to hit it flat and low and hard: whap! whap! whap! whap! I'm trying out a new move: describing a particular place at a specific time of day. I give myself lots of room to play even as I try, finally, to bring the piece to some small resolution, to polish it, to produce an effect for an imagined reader.

You can use your notebook to try out set pieces. If you're looking for a subject, you might reread your notebook and see whether a line or image jumps out at you. Or use what is close at hand. Is there a character around town you have watched and wondered about? Is there a particular gesture your father makes, a ritual he plays out at the end of your family gatherings? Is there a special Sunday night breed of despair you feel, exhausted by the weekend, not yet ready to face Monday morning? It usually takes me a few drafts until the set piece sounds the way I want; set pieces are

usually short enough that I can try two or three versions on a double notebook page.

Getting in the habit of crafting and polishing set pieces in your notebook can help you acquire the moves and bounce and stride of a writer. The set piece may be foremost an act of playfulness and pleasure, but when skillfully done it has an undeniable value of its own.

> When I am dead, make of my skin a sounding board. Drum out hope where there was none before. Make a timpani of my bones and despair. Go past shame and remember me as I truly was, child of a family not meant to survive who lived anyway. Remember me, the one who loved well the women in her life.
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> Dorothy Allison