

Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Write Novellas

A career between lengths

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The novella has become the Rosalind Russell of American literature, liked by all the guys but never taken out on a date. Universally acknowledged as an important and respected literary genre—everyone can cite a few examples from college literature courses, from *Daisy Miller* to *Heart of Darkness*—the novella is thriving in theory but not in practice, which has polarized around the Big Novel and (to a lesser degree) the short story. Unable to make it in the commercial markets, the novella has been driven into various niches of American publishing, like tiny creatures escaping predators. Lamenting this can induce readers to nod sympathetically, but I'm not sure how many truly care. When was the last time—be honest—that you actually read one?

For me, it's a personal question. I love the novella; its flexibility, amenability to innovation, and ability to accommodate dramatic development with compactness make it irresistible, and despite the fact that I've published a few novels and lots of stories, the novella remains my favorite form. God knows it isn't remunerative: after spending four months writing something that earns you \$1,300, a safe civil-service job starts to look good. With nice reviews, some award nominations, and a few appearances in year's best anthologies, my career has been more successful than most. But the truth is that the novella has fallen between the two stools of American literature: too brief (usually) to appear as a separate volume, too long for the layout-driven format of today's magazines, and widely regarded as fatally lite in a culture that wants everything super-sized.

The short story, written off a generation ago, has enjoyed a modest revival since the eighties, when writers like Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel made the form seem smart and contemporary to young readers uninterested in following *The New Yorker*. Collections (especially in trade paperback format) made stories available to these readers, and two year's-best volumes—the venerable *O. Henry Prize Stories* and the *Best American Short Stories*—got

long-overdue makeovers. There is still precious little money to be made in short stories, and it remains (like poetry) a genre in which a small number of successful practitioners gets all the attention, with a precipitous drop-off for the rest. But its position as a niche market seems to offer some protection from the juggernaut of big fat novels.

Such is the allure of the big novel today that short novels are often labeled as novellas, presumably because a real novel should weigh in at something longer. John Updike's "Rabbit Remembered" and Mona Simpson's *Off Keck Road*, each about 170 pages long, are both called novellas by Knopf, creating the interesting situation of Updike publishing a novella that is longer than several of his early novels. It's as though McDonald's had so accustomed its patrons to outsized fare that it had to begin calling its regular hamburgers "mini burgers."

The true novella is a still slimmer creature, not just a smaller species but a different genus. Its upper range just fails to touch the minimum length at which publishers feel comfortable producing a volume—somewhere between Stephen Crane's "Maggie: A Girl of the Streets" and *The Red Badge of Courage*—while its lower limit slightly exceeds the length of Alice Munro's stories, those canny works that feel distinctly longer than a short story but still fit into the pages of *The New Yorker* and the annual *Best American Short Stories* volume. Between 15,000 and 35,000 words lies an intermediate zone, a green expanse too deep to wade across but navigable without a fully rigged ship.

Novellas are the traditional discovery of high school students, who encounter them in volumes with titles like *Six Great Modern Short Novels* or the fatter Norton anthologies. It's where they make their acquaintance with *The Turn of the Screw*, *Notes from Underground*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *Death in Venice*—works that can be read in an evening or two, that seem to take readers as far away as a novel but return them sooner. The above are fine stories, but also, readers may notice, rather old; those "modern" short novels include entries by Melville and Gogol. The novella has a splendid American

history, but try to find students reading anything much more recent than, say, *The Old Man and the Sea* or *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and you are probably out of luck.

The historical reasons for this are interesting, having largely to do with the changes in the role of magazines (which took an enormous hit in the early nineteen-fifties with the advent of television) and the rise of the mass market paperback. When all books were hardcovers and all broadcasts were radio, readers looked to magazines for long as well as short fiction, and novellas (often called a "Complete Novel in This Issue!") were a staple. After such magazines as *Colliers*, *Blue Book*, and *The American Mercury* failed, the short story went into a decades-long decline, and the novella seemed to disappear.

But for a writer who loves the novella, evidence that the form is still alive and vibrant seems everywhere, if only, perversely, for writers famous for other things. Stephen King's collections of novellas have all been bestsellers, while other commercially successful authors, such as Don DeLillo and Joyce Carol Oates, have published novellas as stand-alone volumes. (Saul Bellow, who also developed an interest in novellas late in his career, has managed both.) A sufficiently popular writer can probably publish anything, but in fact critically acclaimed yet only modestly popular writers such as William H. Gass, Jane Smiley, John Barth, Jim Harrison, and Steven Millhauser have also published collections of novellas.

So while the days when William Faulkner could publish "The Bear" in the *Saturday Evening Post* may be long gone, writers with sufficient chops in critical reputes can join the best-selling novelists in bringing out novellas in book form. How crucial are those chops, however? Is book publication of so uncommercial a genre as the novella truly open only to authors already celebrated for other works? Sad to say, this seems to be true: search for "novella" in Amazon.com, and what you will get—aside from some tiny publishers specializing in gay, Christian, and romance fiction—are books by well-known novelists.

Another sanctuary is the field of science fiction, where short- and medium-length fiction still manages a precarious existence. Most of my own published novella-length work has been in this genre, even though much of it does not technically qualify as either science fiction or fantasy. Generous definitions of those genres have gotten me through: one story, set in the seventeenth-century heyday of microscope and telescope pioneers, deals with technical innovation and intellectual revolution in a way that won it courtesy credentials as a kind of science fiction; another, a meditation on 9/11 and the “end of history,” cast around a computer-game version of the Gilgamesh legend, was published in an anthology of fantasy stories about the Bronze Age. And the science fiction and fantasy community has year’s-best anthologies of its own, which have made room for the occasional novella, including some of mine.

So I have been treated well enough. But aside from the science fiction field, magazines—from the few high-circulation slicks that still publish fiction to the literary quarterlies—are so penurious with their page space that only short stories can squeeze through. With our culture’s continuing fascination with first novels (even an obsession with celebrity requires new product), a talented young writer stands a better chance of publishing something good at 5,000 or 90,000 words than at 20,000.

If that’s the way folks want it, of course, who am I to complain? Readers vote with their wallets, and as busy as people are these days, they still seem to prefer enormous novels, many of them longer than they should be, to a compact tale that still possesses the depth and dimensions to involve them. The novella may be the most cinematic of lengths—it’s when short stories and novels are adapted into screenplays that scenes must be added or cut. But audiences don’t even like their movies at cinematic lengths any more. If I really wanted my next novella to reach a wide audience, I should make it 600 pages long.

Ursula K. Le Guin and Jonathan Lethem are sufficiently well-known that their novellas “The Word for World is Forest” and “This

Shape We’re In” are available in book form, and the success of the film version of Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain” allowed the original story—twenty-seven pages long in its year’s best anthology, a bit short for a true novella—to enjoy life as a sixty-four-page slim paperback. But these are the exceptions. You will have to dig into the library stacks to find Damon Galgut’s “The Follower” or Wolfgang Hilbig’s “Knacker’s Yard,” available only in old issues of *Paris Review* and *Grand Street*.

Defiantly its own size, a good novella may simply not fit into today’s readily available formats. Nobody’s asking you not to buy *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* this summer, but if you’re going to be venturesome and read something shorter, why not try for something less tidy than what accommodates the well-established magazines and anthologies? A work that refuses to adhere to portion size may be interesting in other ways as well.