

# Short Story Playlist

*The liner notes*

**Noah Charney**

**Earlier this year I embarked on a month-long literary voyage.**

I read thirty great short stories, by thirty renowned authors, in thirty days. My intention was to read a lot of great writing over a concentrated period of time, reading with a writer's eye. What could I, as an author, learn from reading the greats? Specifically, what tactics and techniques could I gather from these masters of short fiction, that I might then apply to writing a short story myself? I've written novels, trade non-fiction, academic texts, articles and reviews, even the teleplay for a Croatian sitcom, but I haven't written a short story since college. Inspired by what may be a renaissance of the form and by the revival of the publishing world's interest in short story collections (from Jess Walter, Nathan Englander, George Saunders, Charles Baxter, Karen Russell, Wells Tower, to name a few), I thought this might be a fine time to attempt something in the genre. Short story collections have always been well-reviewed, but lately they've even been selling as well as novels. And, in the age of eBooks and digital downloads, short fiction collections may go the way of music albums, which are now available as downloadable individual songs. I imagine readers downloading Englander's "Free Fruit for Young Widows" for 99 cents, without necessarily buying his entire book of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, which lists for \$20. Such self-curating of new literary works is not yet possible, but with eBook "singles" available for a few bucks, I believe it's just a step away. You heard it here first, folks.

My task of reading a story a day lent itself to the idea of the self-curated "playlist," hence the title of this series, which I kicked off with an introductory essay in the spring 2013 print issue of the *New Haven Review*: "The Short Story Playlist." I read each story once at night, once more the next morning, and then I wrote an informal, thousand-word response to each. My responses to the stories were posted on New Haven Review's web-site by its editor, Donald Brown, from late July to early October, stretching my "thirty stories

in thirty days” approach into a more leisurely “thirty in two months and change.”

Here is that list again, as it originally appeared, with the dates of the blog posts added.

1. Ambrose Bierce “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (7/23)
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne “The Minister’s Black Veil” (7/25)
3. Mark Twain “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (7/28)
4. Edgar Allan Poe “Fall of the House of Usher” (7/30)
5. Washington Irving “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (8/2)
6. Rudyard Kipling “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” (8/5)
7. F. Scott Fitzgerald “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” (8/8)
8. W. W. Jacobs “The Monkey’s Paw” (8/9)
9. H. P. Lovecraft “The Colour Out of Space” (8/19)
10. Edith Wharton “Roman Fever” (8/21)
11. William Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” (8/26)
12. James Joyce “The Dead” (8/27)
13. Ernest Hemingway “Baby Shoes” (8/28)
14. Charlotte Perkins Gillman “The Yellow Wallpaper” (8/29)
15. John Cheever “Reunion” (8/30)
16. John O’Hara “Good Samaritan” [“Graven Image”] (9/3)
17. James Thurber “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” (9/5)
18. Flannery O’Connor “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (9/8)
19. Raymond Carver “Cathedral” (9/10)
20. Shirley Jackson “The Lottery” (9/12)
21. O. Henry “The Gift of the Magi” (9/14)
22. Isaac Asimov “Little Lost Robot” (9/17)
23. Roald Dahl “Man from the South” (9/19)
24. J. D. Salinger “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (9/24)
25. Joyce Carol Oates “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (9/26)
26. Stephen Millhauser “Eisenheim the Illusionist” (9/27)

27. Woody Allen “The Whore of Mensa” (9/30)
28. Annie Proulx “Brokeback Mountain” (10/2)
29. Stephen King “One for the Road” (10/3)
30. Nathan Englander “Free Fruit for Young Widows” (10/4)

Because I wrote responses to several additional stories, there are a few “bonus tracks” as well. Once I was in the groove I felt I could happily read a different story each night for a year, though even the most avid reader’s determination might be tested by following me for 365 stories and responses. The other posted responses are:

31. H. H. Munro (Saki) “Sredni Vashtar” (10/26)
32. Vladimir Nabokov “Signs & Symbols” (10/27)

I stuck to the pre-arranged list of thirty, with one exception. John O’Hara’s “Good Samaritan” proved impossible for me to find. Though one of his better-known stories, I could find no copy online or as an eBook. It does not appear in my fat *Collected Stories of John O’Hara* (to my surprise, as I remembered it there). So I swapped in another O’Hara classic, “Graven Image,” in its place.

**The stories I chose would be considered, fairly universally, as among the best short fiction ever written in English.** Most appear regularly in high school or college literary syllabi, and many have been anthologized dozens of times. There are few stories here that any avid reader would recoil at, wondering “Why the heck did Charney choose that?” Of course, while I do prefer the horror/thriller genre above all others, the likes of Lovecraft and Poe are not for everyone, I realize. But I found that stories not intended as works of horror often have the very elements so often found in such stories: creeping dread and a twist ending. Perhaps, then, something about the short form lends itself to suspense and dread and to an ending that, because it arrives quickly, can be truly revelatory.

We might break down our list of thirty stories in a variety of interesting ways. Rather than describing characteristics and then grouping the stories accordingly (something the reader who has read along with me might be tempted to do), let's try to make some general points. After all, this exercise of reading and writing is supposed to help me write a story. So: What are the components of the ideal short story, derived from the works in my playlist?

### **Character-Based vs. Plot-Focused**

The main distinguishing factor that sorts the stories into one camp or another is the author's choice of whether to focus on character (which makes for the more literary stories) or plot (the more popular, often thrilling ones). The best fiction, whether short or book-length, combines developed characters with engaging plots. Fine, but most fiction falls into one category or the other. That doesn't mean that your standard paperback thriller doesn't have character development, but the reason you can't stop reading it is because of its plot. Likewise "things happen" in character-driven novels, but we spend most of our time focused on the characters, their thoughts and feelings: on their reaction to what is happening, not on what is happening.

Short stories, with less space to sprawl, tend to focus even more. Characters must be developed in several strokes, not slowly percolated over several hundred pages. There is space for a few plot points, but we mostly deal with one situation, and see how it resolves itself. Stories like "The Lottery" are firmly plot-based. We learn little to nothing about the characters involved, and the characters do not change over the course of the story. We read to see how the interesting situation, a lottery that no one wants to win because winning means you are killed, plays out. By contrast, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story in which very little happens—a woman is confined in a creepy bedroom with wallpaper seemingly alive—but what fascinates is the character of the woman, as we crawl inside her head (before

she crawls out of the wallpaper).

As a reader, I've learned that a great story can focus either on plot or character—whereas my inner writing teacher or literary critic seems to insist a story, to be truly great, must have both. “The Lottery” is great without character development, just as little needs to happen for “The Yellow Wallpaper” to be supremely chilling and powerful. I do not think, however, that either story could sustain itself at book length. For “The Lottery” to work as a novel, we would have to become invested in, and learn much more about, certain characters in the village, to care whether they “win” or not. And, with regard to “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it's hard, though it has been done (Emma Donoghue's *Room* comes to mind), to sustain an entire novel that takes place in one room, largely in the narrator's head. For a novel, we can certainly spend most of our time inside the protagonist's point of view, but we must also expand outward—events must take place, there must be action. In short, short stories are short enough to get away with bending the rules of “good” writing.

That said, the stories I liked best, and which most haunted me after reading them, were those that truly combined character study with plot. “Roman Fever” is a double portrait of two society ladies who share more than one of them had realized. Through their verbal duel as they look upon the ruins of Rome, we are privy to the actions of their lives, and the tug-of-war over status that they had never before articulated. “Little Lost Robot” is plot-based, following a detective-story investigation concerning which of 63 robots is behaving against its programmed requirements. But the protagonist, the robopsychologist Dr. Calvin, is so well-drawn that we remember her above the whodunit (or in this case “whereisit”) plot—she so engaged the author, Isaac Asimov, that he had her reappear in other stories. “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and “Free Fruit for Young Widows” balance character (two very similar protagonists, in fact) with thriller moments, a moving story, and that sense of creeping dread that always gets me.

## Creeping Dread

A number of the stories in this playlist (“One for the Road,” “The Colour Out of Space”) fall securely into the horror genre. But I was surprised to find that most of the stories in this project had some component of what I have termed “creeping dread.” This is the sensation that something is going to happen that you want not to happen. Simple as that. It does not have to be something monstrous, as when our narrator slowly mounts the rickety wooden stairs of the Gardner family farmhouse to see what’s left of Mrs. Gardner, who has been locked in the attic since she went mad (“The Colour Out of Space”). It could be dread at the idea that Ennis del Mar’s wife, Alma, is going to stumble upon her husband kissing Jack Twist (“Brokeback Mountain”), or that the narrator will be rude to Robert, his blind houseguest (“Cathedral”). The author intentionally triggers in the reader a dread of something unpleasant that we suspect will happen—because, given what we know, it could happen. We’re made to imagine the worst. The dread may be the dread of something truly dreadful (being attacked by vampires, as in “One for the Road”) or by setting a heroic protagonist against something we find unpleasant—such as a peppy mongoose battling cobras (in “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi”). But the dread can as easily—and more subtly—come from dread of a faux pas, or of an embarrassing secret, or of the wrong choice.

What surprised me is how stories that are not thrillers exhibited components of thrillers. “A Rose for Emily” is a character study of an ornery and mysterious southern lady. But the last scene, as guests explore her house after her funeral, is straight out of a horror story. “Graven Image” makes us ache, because we know that the mood in the bustling, glamorous restaurant is loaded with something unpleasant—we just don’t know what, or how it will manifest itself. The elderly couple’s aborted visit to see their son in a psychiatric hospital in “Signs & Symbols” is so piled with dread that we practically jump out of our seats when the phone rings back at their apartment. And then the phone rings again ...

Without trying to pick only thrilling stories, I ended up with a bunch of famous stories that have thriller components to them. This tells me that creeping dread can be a component to great stories, regardless of genre. Dread is probably the easiest emotion to trigger, more visceral and basic, requiring less space and time for development than more complex emotions like jealousy, sadness at lost love or a death. Put someone in a dark apartment, the lights suddenly flicker off, and the front door knob slowly turns. . . and you've got a little dread going on. To prompt a reaction, sparking an emotion in a reader across time and space, is a pretty powerful wizard's trick, satisfying for reader and writer alike. Many writers would be willing to saw off appendages to be able to make a reader cry out silently—or aloud, like my grandmother when watching thrillers—“Don't go in there!”

### **Surprise or Twist Endings**

About half of the playlist stories feature a surprise twist that arrives late in the story, at times in the last line. The conclusion prompts the reader to re-read the story immediately, to see if the twist came honestly, with foreshadowing that we can now, in retrospect, recognize, or whether it was a sort of *deus ex machina*. There is not a single cheating twist in my playlist, no gods descending from on high to sort out the problems that the mortals got themselves into, while subverting the consistent reality of the plot. These are all honest twists, and some are doozies.

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is the tough act to follow for twist endings. Until the last line, we think that the events in the story are taking place, only to learn that they take place only in the mind of the protagonist in the seconds before his death. By the end of “Roman Fever” we think that devious Mrs. Slade has won the verbal duel, when the last line turns the tables and we see that the demure Mrs. Ansley has in reality carried the day. “A Rose for Emily” is a solid, but perhaps unmemorable, character study of the odd

spinster Emily Grierson, until the last paragraph, when we see just how odd she was—and much less of a spinster than we imagined. “Man from the South” is a bizarre tale made more bizarre, and sinister, when we see how many fingers the Man from the South’s wife has—which we only learn in the last line. “A Perfect Day for Banana-fish” is difficult to follow until the last line, a masterpiece of tension built within a single sentence, which prompts us to re-read the story to find clues that lead to that surprise ending, and to help us understand what happened.

These twists give our hearts a little flip when we reach them. They surprise us, above all, and there is pleasure in being surprised, akin to the joy and wonder of seeing a magician pull off an inexplicable trick. We were sure that we had a handle on what was happening, until the author pulled the rug from beneath our feet. Now dismayed that we knew less than we realized, we go back through the story to make sure that the surprise ending was plausible and possible to figure out—if only we had the prescience. Like films with trick twists, from *The Usual Suspects* (who is Keyser Söze?) to *Citizen Kane* (what is Rosebud?), which we watch in a single viewing of about two hours, short stories are perfect vehicles for the employment of trick endings. Get to the end of a novel and be tricked, and we might feel cheated, strung along. I once wrote a novel in which I wanted to reveal that the protagonist was black only in the last page—my editor told me that this was too much, that readers would feel somehow betrayed to have imagined the character for over four-hundred pages and to have their image of him suddenly altered at the end. Aside from a few outliers, like Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, novels do not feature last line twists. There is too much reading time to have a whole novel lead up to one twist, although multiple surprises over the course of a novel are most welcome—serialized novels were known for that. In short stories, that final kicker is more wholly satisfying, and thus a frequently-used effect.

## Style: Baroque vs. Minimalist

Since I chose a selection of stories that covers about 150 years, we must take into account the writing styles of various eras. We tend to think that older stories will be more ornately written, with lots of description, abounding in adjectives and latinated words. Another surprise was how little “written” many of these stories felt—including my favorites among them. Edgar Allan Poe is famously Baroque in his writing style, while his rough contemporary, Washington Irving, is far more straightforward. H. P. Lovecraft was an intentionally decorative author (and perhaps unsurprisingly, like Poe, he was not very popular during his lifetime and did not earn much at his craft), while Edith Wharton, at least in “Roman Fever,” is quite direct. Approaching William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” I was pleasantly surprised at how straightforward the text was—I only knew Faulkner from *As I Lay Dying*, which uses dialect and the thoughts of uneducated, backwoods characters expressed naturalistically—powerful, but hard to read. Mark Twain wrote out dialect, which is dangerous, as some of it requires reading aloud to catch what the characters are trying to say, thus drawing the reader out of the story.

It is common in our time—after Hemingway and Carver—to expect stories to be more minimalist, less discursive, so the more modern-sounding authors are those whose work feels less “written.” Of course, every story is written, but the question is whether the writing announces itself to the reader, or whether it’s merely a conduit, a means to tell the story, with the author receding into the background. The truly minimalist stories have barely any phrase that you want to pause over, read aloud, then write in elegant cursive on a postcard and paste it to your wall. Salinger, Englander, O’Hara, Asimov are all contemporary minimalist in their style. Their writing gets the job done without announcing itself. Among contemporary writers in this playlist, only Annie Proulx can be called Baroque. She’s a great writer and she wants us to know it, whomping us on

the head with beautiful prose, the exotic vocabulary of Wyoming flora, and specific terms for cowboy paraphernalia. A lot of writers in their youth think that conspicuous writing means good writing (I certainly used to). But this project has convinced me otherwise. Tell the story cleanly; if it contains a good enough plot, with vivid enough characters, the author can recede into the background and let the tale spin forth.

**The two stories that I would rate as the “best” of those I read** were J. D. Salinger’s “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and Nathan Englander’s “Free Fruit for Young Widows.” They both combine tension, dread, and thriller moments in deep character studies of flawed, battle-scarred soldiers just after the end of their respective wars. The stories are similar in style and effect, and in the profiles of their protagonists, and their titles even have a fruity theme. Both build a story out of several linked scenes. “Bananafish” presents three scenes: a phone conversation in a hotel room, a chat between the protagonist and a child on the beach, and the protagonist returning to said hotel room to do something sinister, and surprising. “Free Fruit” contains nested stories: an incident during the 1956 Sinai Campaign between the armed forces of Egypt and Israel; a father, Shimmy Gezer, telling that story and others to his son, Etgar; and the main story the father tells, of Professor Tendler and why he was forgiven for beating Shimmy badly during the war. Salinger’s Seymour Glass and Englander’s Professor Tendler are remarkably parallel protagonists. Both bear emotional scars from their time at war. Both can kill because of those scars, desensitized to human moral interaction because of what they experienced—the main difference is that Glass kills himself, while Tendler kills others. But the narrator of “Free Fruit” makes the point that Etgar understands that only a razor’s edge separated Tendler from killing himself, as opposed to killing his enemies—a hair’s breadth in the other direction, and Tendler would have ended up as Glass did—and, until the very last line of the story, we believe Glass is going to kill his wife,

not himself. Both authors use a minimalist approach, with Salinger favoring naturalistic dialogue as a means to convey back story, while Englander employs a storytelling technique. Both are hugely effective, provoking tangible emotions, creeping dread, and dramatic tension, with sleek, unpretentious writing. Salinger features a surprise twist in the last line; Englander doesn't. They are the two standouts from a murderer's row of great writing that I feel privileged to have enjoyed over a concentrated period of time, able to juggle the authors in my head and directly compare them, thanks to the speed with which I read them.

**What did I learn, to apply to my own writing? What are the ingredients to create a killer short story?** I broke down what I culled from the project into a few basic rules, and a few basic decisions.

1. Keep the writing simple. Authorial fireworks are not necessary to make for a great story.
2. Choose a narrative technique. Naturalistic, dialogue-based ("Bananafish"). Story-teller ("Eisenheim the Illusionist"). Classical omniscient third-person narrative ("Brokeback Mountain"). Parody ("Whore of Mensa"). Unreliable first-person narrative ("The Yellow Wallpaper"). Classic first-person narrative ("Fall of the House of Usher"). Any can work. The question is what serves the story best, and what you as author are most comfortable with.
3. Surprise endings are worth the authorial effort. I love twist endings, whether they come in films or stories. That heart-flip when the twist is revealed is a powerful, visceral response that you, as author, can provoke in your readers. The writer becomes a magician and prompts not only a tip of the hat to your skills as a writer, but also encourages readers to reread your story—and what author would not want to enchant readers so much that they will reread your story immediately to see how you tricked them? Such twists are difficult to engineer, but the payoff is worth the effort.
4. Show, don't tell, unless your narrative says otherwise. How-to-books on writing always say "show, don't tell." We should see

how a character behaves to understand her character, rather than the narrator telling us a lot of information about the character. The only exception to this rule is with first-person or storyteller narrative techniques, where the fictional teller of the tale is present as a character. First-person narration means that a fictional character within the short story is telling you a story as part of the work of fiction. Such narration often tells us as much about the story-teller as about the story; whether the teller is unreliable (“The Yellow Wallpaper”) or reliable (“Fall of the House of Usher”), we need them to gain access to the story, through a limited perspective. Storyteller style uses text to replicate someone speaking a story to an audience, and therefore the speaker/narrator, a palpable presence, can tell, rather than just show. But the more naturalistic, and in my opinion more effective, techniques require the author to recede into the background to promote the reader’s immersion in the story. Even better if the reader needs to work, just a little, to extract the facts needed to understand the story wholly. I had to reread the phone call in the opening scene of “Bananafish” three times in order to unpick the lock that explained why the protagonist, Seymour Glass, killed himself at the end. I like that sort of story-as-riddle. The reader feels rewarded for having solved a puzzle.

5. Include creeping dread. Comic stories aside, the pleasurable sensation of concern over a character’s well-being, the hope that something bad, implied by the narrative, will not befall them, is a winning ingredient to include in any work of fiction. Our investment in the character urges us to read on to learn what happens, and grabs our insides like an invisible fist. All fiction hopes to provoke, to draw the reader into the story; a sense of dread compels us to find out what will happen.

6. Haunt. All fiction hopes to haunt its readers, though not necessarily in a ghostly sense. Authors work to make their readers remember images, scenes, characters, situations long after the book has been closed. If something an author wrote can stay with a reader beyond the duration of the read, if an image can crop up years down

the road, then the text haunts. This playlist brims with haunting images: Young Professor Tendler crawling out of a pile of concentration camp corpses; Emily Grierson cuddling, for decades, the well-dressed skeleton of her deceased husband in their marriage bed; a jumping frog filled with buckshot and a cobra-dueling mongoose; an outlaw with satyr-like feet perched in toe-stuffed boots and a homicidal floating color at the bottom of a well; a prostitute who charges for analysis of Melville and a veil-obscured preacher—hats off to the authors who haunt!

The response among authors to this project has been encouraging. Short story writers like Karen Russell, Junot Díaz, and Nathan Englander thought the project a great idea. Some readers “read along” with me, reading the short story prior to my essay about it. Most writers said that they were all for anything to promote the medium of short fiction which, as the playlist shows, can boast a diverse tradition of great stories. The short story is still shamefully marginalized due to publishers believing that story collections should sell like novels and that only collections by mega-hit authors like Stephen King can manage that. I wonder if the idea of selling short stories individually, packaged with “extras,” as an alternative to buying the whole book, might one day soon take off, so that we may one day hear of “hit” stories going viral.

### **Online Piracy**

This brings me to one of the potential problems with selling short stories individually: online piracy. The same problem that the music industry faces would likewise be an issue here. I was able to find PDFs online of two-thirds of the thirty stories, in most cases as part of course packets put together by university professors. Some of the stories are in the public domain, others are not, but putting such course packets online for students to access has become common practice in academia. That means that a lot of well-meaning professors assist in offering for free what potential readers should really

be paying for. It's the sort of ethical dilemma that most don't realize is a dilemma at all—how many professors would equate what they are doing with the escapades of Pirate Bay? One can invoke the 10% rule: for educational or critical purposes, up to 10% of a text can be copied, quoted, or distributed at no charge and without seeking permission. This is fine for excerpts of long texts, but a single short story in a collection will account for less than 10% of the total book, and yet is a complete work, and may not prompt the reader to go out and buy the rest. And how can you expect someone to pay for a short story, if it is available online for free?

There are ways around this, surely. The music industry, for all its whimpering, is still doing just fine, but folks may be loath to pay even 99 cents for Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" when they can get find it online for free. I believe a key to solving this problem is to add value to the purchased version, not only facilitating ease of purchase (many people like the cleanliness of clicking a button on one's i-gadget and having a file magically appear in it). How about an audio version included, the story read by the author or a name actor, plus author's comments or annotations to the story by a scholar, maybe with an additional essay about the story? Including some "extras," like those in DVD box sets, can add value to individual for-sale stories.

My ideal would have been to compile my "Short Story Playlist" by downloading, for 99 cents each, the thirty stories in the project. I wound up doing a version of that, but the stories required chasing down, and none were available to buy, outside the confines of a big printed book, or through archival access to *The New Yorker*, where a fair percentage of the stories were first published. So I cobbled together the stories the old-fashioned and unwieldy way. But my determination is stronger than ever that an iTunes-style format to sell individual stories directly to eBook readers would work, and would be popular.

## Building My Own Short Story

That so many of the stories in my playlist were first published in *The New Yorker* raises the question: is the “*New Yorker*” story the ideal for short fiction? This cannot be said definitively, because *New Yorker* stories are of a certain type: literary, thoughtful, with little action taking place outside the conversations and thoughts of a small number of characters. They are off-Broadway stage plays, with a handful of people in a small number of spaces, thinking and speaking. Genre pieces rarely make the cut (sci-fi and fantasy and horror are not considered acceptable), and so the “*New Yorker* story” is a specific species. The magazine is also just about the only game in town now, in terms of a high-profile non-book venue for short fiction, and so its importance is over-weighed, compared to decades ago, when it was just one of many fine, high-end magazines. Given my penchant for writing action, and the tiny sliver of submissions ever accepted, my chances of writing a *New Yorker* story are negligible, and my strengths as a writer discourage me from trying. I like to write about actions undertaken by interesting characters, with the focus on action rather than character.

It is evident to those who followed the thirty essays in this series, that I am more comfortable with genre pieces, and sometimes don't quite know what to say about the works that most excite English literature professors. I thoroughly enjoyed “Little Lost Robot,” while I liked but couldn't quite wrap my head around “The Dead” (whereas my editor loves “The Dead” and was unmoved by “Little Lost Robot”). I know what I was most impressed by—Salinger and Englander—but I can't quite picture how I could write stories like theirs. I'm much more apt to write (or should I say attempt) something like Joyce Carol Oates or Stephen King or Charlotte Perkins Gillman. I'd love to have the combination of dread and mystery of John O'Hara and Vladimir Nabokov—I love trying to figure out exactly what happened, being a bit uncertain, but enjoying the

uncertainty, a mystery beckoning but unsolved. Something you want to read a second time the moment you finish, with some 5-10% of the content requiring further quiet thought and contemplation to be grasped fully. So if I'm aiming for an Englander, with a side order of O'Hara, but my natural tendencies point more toward Oates, what pieces will I draw upon for my own story? If my ideal is Englander's "Free Fruit for Young Widows" crossed with the mysticism of the "bonus track" in my playlist, Nabokov's "Signs & Symbols," then I will be stretching myself. But nothing ventured, nothing gained.

I've already selected my plot, but nothing more. I like to use fiction to fill out plausible, but unsubstantiated, blank spots in the jigsaw puzzle of history. The story I've chosen fills in just such a spot. Joseph Stalin died under highly suspicious circumstances. On his last night, against his normal routine, he locked himself in his bedroom and instructed his guards not to disturb him under any circumstances. His guards left him for hours, scared to open the door against his orders. He was found the next day, apparently having suffered a stroke. He died shortly thereafter. It was found that one of the last things he looked at before he died was a letter from Tito. The letter stated that Tito was well aware that Stalin had sent many assassins (over twenty) to kill him over the years, but all had failed. Tito wrote that he would only have to send one. With Stalin's suspicious death, combined with his reading this letter hours before the stroke that killed him, a fascinating question is raised: could Stalin have been murdered by a Yugoslav assassin? In my story, as you can probably guess, the answer will be: yes.

Who will tell my story? This is the first, and most important, decision before the writing begins, because not a word can fall into place without knowing how the story will be conveyed. In choosing between a reliable and unreliable narrator, my instinct tells me to choose an in-between: a reliable third-person narration that chooses not to reveal everything. This is the realm of Salinger and Englander, who allow characters to speak and lace a lot of the hidden truths of the story within the patter of their mundane-sounding words. The

other option would be to choose a seemingly reliable first-person narrator, some character in the story, who proves him or herself unreliable in some key aspect by the end. Either way, I want something to be held back. I like to make my readers work a bit to dig out the good stuff.

I want to haunt, but that's not something you can simply add, like a touch of cinnamon to a recipe. That's about finding great phrases, lasting images, creating tension and memorable situations. That's about whether or not you're a functional writer or a great writer—and certainly not for me to say about myself. It remains to be seen if I can follow through on all this theory. But I can inject some creeping dread, quite a bit I think. That I know how to do. As I'll be writing about an assassination, a spy story, the nature of the beast allows for plenty of tension, dread, and thrills. One of my jobs will be not to make too much of the thriller aspect. I want the kind of literary puzzle that I admire in, say, John O'Hara. To tone things down from a thriller plot (no rooftops chases and kung fu fighting will be necessary) and make a quieter, more thoughtful piece out of it. That will be as close to *New Yorker* style as I can manage. In the world of spy stories, John Le Carré's *The Russia House* is as good as it gets. It features a (mostly) reliable narrator, is carefully crafted, and is a sort of textual chess game, played through a plot about spies. It's a good style to strive for. Though I read no spy stories in my playlist, the tone of both Salinger and Englander suits this idea—I'll just be inserting my own mysterious plot.

Now it's time for me to get to work on my own short story. I think I'll publish it online, with extras, and charge about ninety-nine cents....