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PERRINE'S STORY AND STRUCTURE

THOMAS R. ARP

NINTH EDITION

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THOMAS R. ARP
Southern Methodist University

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Fort Worth Philadelphia San Diego New York Orlando Austin San Antonio
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ISBN: 0-15-503721-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-72036

Address for Editorial Correspondence: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 301 Commerce Street, Suite 3700, Fort Worth, TX 76102.

Address for Orders: Harcourt Brace & Company, 6277 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, FL 32887-6777. 1-800-782-4479.

Website address: http://www.hbcollege.com

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Printed in the United States of America

8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 016 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Preface

In the previous eight editions of this book, the preface has contained a brief introduction to the plan of the book and some expressions of gratitude. The ninth edition requires an expanded and more personal preface.

Most of the loyal users of this book and its predecessors will know that Laurence Perrine died in April 1995 after a protracted battle with Parkinson's disease. His death was a sad occasion for me, for his family, and I am sure for many who since 1959 have regarded *Story and Structure* with high respect and esteem.

In 1977, a few years after I arrived at Southern Methodist University, I received a brief note from Laurence Perrine asking me to name a convenient day to join him for lunch off campus. I naturally panicked: what had I done that my senior colleague needed to move to neutral turf to counsel or chide me? We met at a cafeteria, filled our trays, and sat down; instead of detailing my manifold shortcomings, Larry asked me if I would join him in revising his series of textbooks. My delight was even greater than my relief, and I accepted on the spot. From that point we worked together in producing the sixth and seventh editions of *Story and Structure,* and I graduated from being "with the assistance of" to coauthor for the eighth, with chief responsibility for selecting stories and revising the text.

Because of his health, Larry was not able to be as involved in the two latest revisions of the book, although as late as February 1995 he was still making suggestions that he thought worth considering for the new edition. Over the years that we worked together, he expressed his confidence in my knowing how the book works, and how individual stories function in the book. I hope that his confidence will be justified by the decisions I have made in this edition.

Story and Structure is designed for the college student who is beginning a serious study of fiction. Our initial assumption is that some stories repay more richly than others the time and effort expended in reading them, and our objective is to help the student identify, understand, enjoy, and prefer such stories. To this end, the book examines the major elements of fiction and suggests some criteria for judgment.

A short story is a short fiction. Attempts to define it more narrowly prove unsuccessful, for exceptions always exist that escape the definer's net. No such attempt is made here. Our interest is in the art of fiction, in understanding and enjoying and making judgments about it. Though short stories are used for illustration, the elements discussed are to be found in all fiction.

The ninth edition of *Story and Structure* maintains the balance between classic and contemporary practitioners of the short story and continues to offer a wide sampling of vicarious experiences through the work of women as well as men, ethnic minorities as well as other American and European authors. One innovation is the inclusion of a group of three novellas constituting Part 3 of this book, where students may try out their knowledge and skill on longer and more complex fictional forms.

A book of such enduring usefulness grows through time and advice, and the debts to the helpful attention of others are now innumerable. With Larry, I wish to thank especially his wife Catherine. I have also been given valued assistance by my two editors at Harcourt Brace, Helen Triller and John Meyers. But as the sole signatory, I must of course reserve most of my gratitude for Laurence Perrine.

—T. R. A.

Professional Acknowledgments

The following instructors have offered helpful reactions and suggestions for this ninth edition of *Story and Structure.*

Alice Adams
Glendale Community College

Donald W. Adams
Chipola Junior College

Carolyn Allison
Essex Community College (Baltimore County Community Colleges)

Warren Almand
Chipola Junior College

Diane S. Baird
Palm Beach Community College, Central

Frank Beesley
Dalton College

Louise D. Bentley
Union University

Don Blankenship
West Valley College

Paul Bodmer
Bismarck State College

Arnold J. Bradford
Northern Virginia Community College, Manassas

Steve Brahlek
Palm Beach Community College, Central

Elaine Brookshire
Northeast Alabama State Community College

Annie L. Burns
Meridian Community College

Susan McCann Butler
Thomas Nelson Community College

Randall Calhoun
Ball State University

Catherine Calloway
Arkansas State University, Jonesboro

Sophie Cashdollar
Dyersburg State Community College

Susan Catalano
Samford University, Birmingham

Nathan Anthony Cervo
Franklin Pierce College

Betty Cochran
Beaufort County Community College

Michael Colonnese
Methodist College, Fayetteville

Charlotte C. Crittenden
Georgia Southern University

Charles R. Croghan, Jr.
Indian River Community College

Brenda Crowe
Gadsden State Community College

Michael J. Daly
Glendale Community College

Wayne G. Deahl
Eastern Wyoming College

Margaret DeHart
Trinity Valley Community College

Charles DeMatteo
Sage Junior College of Albany

Marvin Diogenes
University of Arizona

Richard Downing
Pasco-Hernando Community College

Robert Dunkle
Chipola Junior College

Barbara J. Frieling
Bainbridge College

Dick Frontain
Pima Community College, Downtown

C. Herbert Gilliland
U. S. Naval Academy

John D. Hain
Tennessee Temple University

John Hanes
Duquesne University

Ruth M. Harrison
Arkansas Tech University

Anne M. Haselkorn
New York City Technical College, CUNY

Wayne E. Haskin
North Carolina State University

Timothy K. Hobert, Sr.
San Joaquin Delta College

Roderick Hofer
Indian River Community College

James Hoggard
Midwestern State University

Robert M. Hogge
Weber State University

John B. Humma
Georgia Southern University

Jodi Wood Jewell
Utah Valley State College

Carole Johnson
Shelton State Community College

Mellania Johnson
Wallace State Community College

Ruby T. Johnson
Wallace State Community College

James L. Jolly, Jr.
Shelton State Community College

Joyce Jolly
Shelton State Community College

Mary Jordan
Illinois Central College, East Peoria

Harvey Kassebaum
Cuyahoga Community College,
Western Campus

David Kelly
Dyersburg State Community College

George M. Kelly
Hinds Community College

Sue Kimball
Methodist College

Patricia C. Knight
Amarillo College

Albert E. Krahn
Milwaukee Area Technical College

William Lawlor
University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

Kenneth P. Leisch
Danville Area Community College

Roy Lynn Lewis
Brazosport College

John Lightfoot
Brazosport College

Gary W. Longrie
Milwaukee Area Technical College

Vincent Lopresti
University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh

Gerald F. Luboff
County College of Morris

Robert L. McBroom
Midwestern State University

Kelly J. McCaffrey
Palm Beach Community College

Adelio F. Maccentelli
Essex Community College

Carole McClanahan
Danville Community College

Al Mitchell
Meridian Community College

Nancy Newell Moore
University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

Vivian B. Naylor
Meridian Community College

John D. Nesbitt
Eastern Wyoming College

Alice O'Melia
Essex Community College

Sherry Balthrop Organ
Arkansas State University, Beebe

David M. Packard
John A. Logan College

John S. Pappas
San Joaquin Delta College

Daniel Peterson
Southern University, Baton Rouge

Helmuth C. Poggemiller
Liberty University

Neil B. Porterfield
San Joaquin Delta Community College

Barbara Read
Kilgore College

Carol Robbins
Meridian Community College

Mardee M. Rose
University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

Daniel W. Ross
Columbus College

Paula J. Ross
Gadsden State Community College

Philip Duhan Segal
Queensborough Community College, CUNY

Linda R. Selman
Southern Arkansas University

Bill Shaw
Brazosport College

Kathleen A. Sherfick
Albion College

Craig L. Shurtleff
Illinois Central College

Lynne M. Shuster
Erie Community College, North Campus

Keith Slocum
Montclair State University

Roxanne Solomon
Palm Beach Community College

S. Gregory Tiernan
Mission College, Santa Clara

Guy Turcotte
Mount Wachusett Community College

Ann Tyler
Crowley High School

Mikel Vause
Weber State University

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Utah State University

Cathy Webb
Meridian Community College

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Odessa College

Glenn Whitesides
Newberry College

Richard Wilcher
Brazosport College

Marcella Willson
Wilmington College, New Castle

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CONTENTS

Part 2 Stories for Further Reading 377

Part 3 Three Novellas 449

PART 1

The Elements of Fiction

CHAPTER ONE

Escape and Interpretation

The first question to ask about fiction is, Why bother to read it? With life as short as it is, with so many pressing demands on our time, with books of information, instruction, and discussion waiting to be read, why should we spend precious time on works of imagination? The eternal answers to this question are two: enjoyment and understanding.

Since the invention of language, people have taken pleasure in following and participating in the imaginary adventures and imaginary experiences of imaginary men and women. Whatever—without causing harm—serves to make life less tedious, to make the hours pass more quickly and pleasurably, surely needs nothing else to recommend it. Enjoyment—and ever more enjoyment—is the first aim and justification of reading fiction.

But, unless fiction gives something more than pleasure, it hardly justifies itself as a subject of serious study. Unless it expands or refines our minds or quickens our sense of life, its value is not appreciably greater than that of video games, bridge, or Ping-Pong. To have a compelling claim on our attention, it must yield not only enjoyment but also understanding.

The experience of humankind through the ages is that literature may furnish such understanding and do so effectively—that the depiction of imagined experiences can provide authentic insights. "The truest history," said Diderot of the novels of Samuel Richardson, "is full of falsehoods, and your romance is full of truths." But the bulk of fiction does not present such insights. Only some does. Initially, therefore, fiction may be classified into two broad categories: literature of escape and literature of interpretation.

Escape literature is that written purely for entertainment—to help us pass the time agreeably. **Interpretive literature** is written to broaden and deepen and sharpen our awareness of life. Escape literature takes us *away* from the real world: it enables us temporarily to forget our troubles. Interpretive literature takes us, through the imagination, deeper *into* the real world: it enables us to understand our

troubles. Escape literature has pleasure as its only object. Interpretive literature has as its object pleasure *plus* understanding.

Having established a distinction, however, we must not exaggerate or oversimplify it. Escape and interpretation are not two great bins, into one or the other of which we can toss any given story. Rather, they are opposite ends of a scale—the two poles between which the world of fiction spins. The difference between them does not lie in the absence or presence of a "moral." The story that in all of its incidents and characters is shallow may have an unimpeachable moral, while the interpretive story may have no moral at all in any conventional sense. The difference does not lie in the absence or presence of "facts." The historical romance may be full of historical information and yet be pure escape in its depiction of human behavior. The difference does not lie in the presence or absence of an element of fantasy. The escape story may have a surface appearance of everyday reality, while the tale of seeming wildest fancy may press home on us some sudden truth. The difference between the two kinds of literature is deeper and more subtle than any of these distinctions. A story is interpretive to the extent that it truly illuminates some aspect of human life or behavior. An interpretive story presents an insight—large or small—into the nature and conditions of our existence. It gives us a keener awareness of what it is to be a human being in a universe sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. It helps us to understand our world, our neighbors, and ourselves.

Perhaps we can clarify the difference by suggestion. Escape writers are like inventors who devise a contrivance for our diversion. When we push the button, lights flash, bells ring, and cardboard figures move jerkily across a painted horizon. Interpretive writers are discoverers: they take us out into the midst of life and say, "Look, here is the world!" Escape writers are full of tricks and surprises: they pull rabbits out of hats, saw beautiful women in two, and snatch brightly colored balls out of the air. Interpretive writers take us behind the scenes, where they show us the props and mirrors and seek to make clear the illusions. This is not to say that interpretive writers are merely reporters. More surely than escape writers they shape and give form to their materials. But they shape and form them always with the intent that we may see, feel, and understand them better, not for the primary purpose of furnishing entertainment.

Now just as there are two opposite extremes of fiction, there are also two poles between which different kinds of readers move. At one extreme are readers who find their demands gratified by escape fiction.

Even when they suppose that they are reading for interpretation, they expect that what they read will return them always some pleasant or exciting image of the world or some flattering image of themselves. Our early reading experiences are likely to be with stories such as that of Cinderella, whose fairy godmother transforms a pumpkin and some mice into a coach-and-four, whose slim foot is the only one that fits the crystal slipper, who rises superior to her cruel stepmother and taunting stepsisters to marry and "live happily ever after" with the charming prince, and who—never for a moment anything but sweet and virtuous—forgives her former tormenters.

Though most people move on from fairy tales into a seemingly more adult kind of reading, if they find themselves wholly satisfied with escape literature they may not have progressed as much as they suppose. The element of unreality in fiction does not lie primarily in magic wands and fairy godmothers but in a superficial treatment of life. The story of a poor but honest, hardworking shopgirl who is lifted from the painful conditions of her work and home life by a handsome young suitor from the upper classes may be as truly a Cinderella story as the one we read in childhood, though its setting is Memphis rather than a kingdom by the sea. Unfortunately, some readers never accept the challenges of interpretive literature and remain contented with escapist fairy tales, however transformed their settings and actions.

Those who prefer escape literature often make fixed demands of every story and feel frustrated and disappointed unless those demands are satisfied. Often they stick to one type of subject matter. Instead of being receptive to any story that puts human beings in human situations, they read only crime stories, or love stories, or science fiction. If they are willing to explore a wider range of experience, they may still unconsciously want every story to conform to certain formulated expectations. Among the most common of these expectations are (a) a sympathetic hero or heroine—one with whom the reader can identify and whose adventures and triumphs the reader can share; (b) a plot in which something exciting is always happening and in which there is a strong element of suspense; (c) a happy outcome that sends the reader away undisturbed and optimistic about the world; (d) a theme—if the story has a theme—that confirms the reader's already-held opinions of the world.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these characteristics as story elements. Significant fiction has been written having all of them. But if they become a rigid set of requirements and form the basis for deciding the value of a story, they drastically reduce the