

Storycatching
short talk

^{Mary} I seem to have been brought ^{me} here to think out loud a little--instead of sitting staring at my ~~typewriter~~ ^{keyboard} and waiting for it to tell me what to think, as I do on ordinary days--to think out loud what they mean to us.

Myself, I'm in the business of catching stories. Hunting them, corraling them, looking them over--trying to pick out the next likely one, the best of the ^{hard} ~~super~~. It's a strange occupation, ^{I suppose --}pre-occupation, some people would say--but at least it deals in one of humankind's best urges instead of the wide market of humanity's worst urges. The urge to know all the shapes and sizes and colors life comes in; that, I think, is why stories are told, and get listened to.

We know that stories become vital to us, very early.

~~The novelist~~
Eudora Welty recalls, as a small child in Mississippi she would plant herself between the grownups in the living room and urge them, "Now, talk." (emphasis)

Looking back on that, she thinks her hunger ~~to hear~~ to hear those grownups talk was her origin as a writer. "Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the world," ^{Eudora Welty} ~~she~~ says. "Then artists come along and discover it the same way, all over again."

The best description of stories as handled by writers--that I've been able to find--
is the one,

by the poet Randall Jarrell--whose poem, The Woman at the Washington Zoo, is in itself one of the most magnificently done American stories. Randall Jarrell said,

"A story is a chain of events. Since the stories that we know are told by humans, the events of the story happen to human or anthropomorphic beings--gods, beasts, and devils, and are related in such a way that the story seems to begin at one place and to end at a very different place, without any essential interruption to its progress. The poet or storyteller, so to speak, writes numbers on a black-board, draws a line under them, and adds them into their true but unsuspected sum."

13 m.p.
Those "true but unsuspected sums" occur not only on the blackboards of literature and poetry and drama, of speech and folklore. They are writ large in other great areas of learning as well. One of the best workers of story we had in America in this century was an anthropologist--the late Loren Eiseley. The opening story in Eiseley's book, The Immense

Journey, tells of a day on the long-grass prairie of the middle of America when he went down into a crack in the earth--a narrow limestone slit which, he realized when he had inserted himself into it, "was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million years of time." An anthropologist being an anthropologist, Eiseley writes next: "I hoped to find at least a bone." What he found instead was a skull, embedded in the ^{lime}~~sand~~stone. It was not human--some creature pre-human: with, Eiseley says, "a low, pinched brain case...and the face of a creature who had spent his days following his nose, and whose power of choice was very small. ~~that~~

Though he was not a man, nor a direct human ancestor, there was yet about him some trace of that low, snuffling world out of which our forebears had so recently emerged." Under the prairie sky, Loren Eiseley stares down at ^{that}~~the~~ skull. The skull ~~stares~~ stares, sightless, up at ~~him~~ him. And Eiseley writes of that moment: "This creature had never lived to see a man--and I; what was it I was never going to see?"

It seems to me that in that single sentence, Loren Eiseley managed to write the immense story of humankind. (pause)

I've spent some time--I ~~guess~~, quite a lot of my adult life--trying to figure out what it is, within stories and the telling of them, that is as valid and vital for an anthropologist as it is for a poet or novelist. The best I can come up with, and more and more I think it may be enough, is craft. The craftsmanship intrinsic to

good storytelling. I had an unexpected lesson in this when I was working on my first novel, ~~The Sea Runners~~, ^{at a time} In trying to write about New Archangel in the time when Alaska still was Russian America, I wanted to know what kind of wood, in the ship timbers and lumber piles, my characters would be seeing and smelling as they walked along the New Archangel ^{in the 1850s.} waterfront. I got in touch with a park ranger up at Sitka, as New Archangel has become; an expert on the carpentry and shipbuilding during the period of Russian America. ^{The ranger} He gave me not only the working details I needed--yellow cedar was the distinctive smell that I put into the book--but he also wrote out for me a quote ~~from the English poet~~ from the English poet William Blake: "Art cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars."

When I'd finished blinking over the literary and philosophical bent of park rangers at the time--~~probably something needed to get through the era of James Watt--~~

^{this ranger in Sitka} I saw that he'd told me something I already believed but hadn't known how to say. That when craft--craftsmanship--is done well enough, it begins to be art.

A quick example: at one turn of the plot in my novel Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, the three main characters visit the family ranch that one of them, Riley Wright, turned his back on for a newspaper life instead. Riley's rancher brother Morgan Wright shows up briefly to confront Riley--and here is Morgan's appearance:

"Morgan stood spraddled, thumbs alone showing from the weather-worn hands parked in his front pockets, as though it might take all the time in the universe to hear this matter out."

The vital word, what is sometimes called the crystallizing detail, in that sentence is the verb "parked"--those hands "parked" in the front pockets of Morgan's bluejeans, habitually, naturally, not stuck in his pockets, jammed in his pockets, but just by God parked. And I suppose I only worked about half a day to come up with that one precise word--that minute particular.

In my own case as a writer, not only am I ^a believer in Eudora Welty's demand to her grownups, "Now, talk," but my characters usually believe it, too.

They want to know what's going on with each other, they talk a lot. I at times close my filibuster off by reading you a "talk" scene from my next book, and then let's have some questions.

My Montana trilogy, I think was a try at a writer who is, himself, a storycatcher. The struggle is to pull itself from the effects of the struggle not to pull itself to pieces in the process--a young boy named Jick McCaskill. Jick likes his mother,

his mother, generally thinks she has better things

Here is a brief scene where the boy's quest

His town weekly newspaper has come, this day, and Jick

notices that in the 25-years-ago column, there is a reprinted item about a wagon trip his mother and her brother and their mother--Jick's grandmother--had taken, to St. Mary lake in Glacier National Park, where Jick's grandfather was providing the

at the time.

workhorses for road-building. Jick's mother then would have been about his age by wagon, alone, now, fourteen or so, and he's curious about that journey by a woman and two children, in the early years of this century. Jick across the Montana prairie. After supper, he starts in on his mother:

two

Time zones from Scotland to Seattle balled up within them, the zombied passengers of flight 99 from Prestwick were being gradually disgorged from the Customs area, dragging baggage and an air of serious expenditure as they made their way toward the concourse exit where Lexa watched as keenly as though counting sheep through a gate.

Here came a milling Elderhostel tour group with fresh crushes on each other like eighth-graders, trudged after by ruddy Scotch-faced geezers who all looked like ex-Mounties, trailed by a cloned-looking Silicon Glen clan whose minds were plainly ahead on their software presentation in Redmond--

There. Announced by her hair.

“Mariah! Over here!” Lexa lifted her right hand from its pocket perch and wigwagged it as high as she could reach.

Mariah, all footwork and grin, cut a sharp angle through the concourse crowd. Bangles probably from Timbuktu flashing from her ears, and her gray eyes the quickest anywhere.

“Hey there, cowgirl. Aren’t you the sight.” They hugged the breath out of each other, *mmm mmm*ing in near-identical timbres.

The sisters pushed back to arm’s-length, gazing with frank investigative smiles into the family mirror they provided each other. Mariah as ever wore her contradictions like a gorgeous breastplate: she was starting to look her years, but those were only forty-two and most of them devilishly flattering to her. Her narrow quick-fox face was tanner than tan from her year of summers in both hemispheres. The fetching mouth, between tiniest parentheses of wrinkles, was expressive in more ways than one. Nose, eyes, eyebrows were the full set that had come down to her from their regal grandmother, Beth McCaskill, guaranteed to still hold beauty when Mariah was twice forty-two. Looks aren’t everything, Lexa one more time tried on in self-defense. *They’re a hell of a lot, though.* She would not have bet on how she herself was holding up, but knew for sure that she would have Mariah’s reading on that soon enough. She felt the familiar stir, the forcefield of all the years of love and contention. Reuniting with Mariah always gave her a buzz on, a

complicated one, heart and head kicking in at different times. There was nothing remotely like it, these first minutes back together with someone you have known as long and acutely as yourself.

“Brought you stuff,” Mariah was already at. “Your little Norskie bungalow is going to look like the United Nations powder room before I’m done.”

“Hey, all right. In that case I didn’t absolutely waste the trip to the airport, did I.” Lexa poked her sister’s ribs as best she could through the protuberances of photographic gear slung on Mariah. “Come on, you walking camera shop, let’s get you home. So how was the big silver bird?”

“Can you believe it?” Mariah’s hair flung vividly. “We’re flying over the North Pole, there’s the ice cap and the sun out on the Arctic Ocean and every iceberg in the world, and what happens but those stews--”

“--flight attendants, Ms. Politically Uncorrectable.”

“--those dumb-ass stews come around asking us all to pull down our shades to watch a rerun of some freaking television program. I wouldn’t do it. Would. Not. Do. It. Told them that until television gets as rare as that icecap, I’ll look out the window I paid a junior fortune for.”

“You didn’t happen by any chance to be *shooting*, did you?” Lexa teased.

“Me? Shoot pictures in public? Which reminds me. Jesus, you look good, squirt. Your own catering must agree with you. I want to take a bunch of new shots of you while I’m here. You and Mitch looking domestic as canaries.”

“No guy around the place at the moment,” Lexa started to explain, “Mitch split--”

“The bastard!” Mariah’s eyebrows were up like battle flags. “What, the curse of the McCaskill sisters strikes *again*?”

“No, no, no. He split for Montana for a few days of family stuff, that father of his, is all. He’ll be back as soon as--”

“The *un*bastard!” Mariah momentarily dropped a couple pieces of baggage to make an erasing motion in the air. “St. Mitch! *Good* Mitch!”

“Damn your sweet hide though, Mariah,” Lexa said, laughing but a little spooked at the Mitch sonata, “there’s still no conclusion you can’t broadjump to from a standing start, is there.”

Mariah gave her younger sister a glance so affectionate it all but ruffled her hair.

“Now you’re sounding like our own wild card of a father.”

“Listen, you’re going to take the big bed, upstairs. With Mitch gone, there’s no reason--”