

Trade Paperback / eBook
 ISBN: 978-1-941411-19-3
 eISBN: 978-1-941411-20-9
 Price: \$15.95 / \$9.99
 Trim: 6" x 9" / 256 pp

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Distributed to the trade by
 Consortium Book Sales
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Reader's Guide

from Amy Gustine
 author of *You Should Pity Us Instead*

Author Asks:

1. At the end of "All the Sons of Cain" R's mother sees men praying on the beach. She hopes "her boy is among them." Is this her son? Or the boy she has been staying with in Gaza? Do you feel it could possibly be both? Why or why not?
2. What is the significance of the fact that R's mother adopted him after an earthquake in "old Byzantium" (modern-day Istanbul, Turkey, formerly called Constantinople) left him unidentified and homeless?
3. Names play a role in "AKA Juan." What do you think the variations of Lawan's name mean to him? To his family? Do you judge people based on their names? Why or why not?
4. In "AKA Juan" Lawan observes that when he is carrying Gloria without someone watching he feels differently than the way he feels when his siblings are watching. Why do you think he feels differently depending on who is watching? Does this issue of being observed play a part in Lawan's relationships with anyone else in the story?
5. In "Coyote" Cory is afraid of many things she fears will hurt her son. One of those things is the coyote who is coming into her yard, but she also fears the neighbors. In what ways are the neighbors similar to and different from the coyote. Do you see a meaningful distinction between her fear of one and her fear of the other? How do you feel toward Cory? Sympathetic? Frustrated? Scornful? Pitying?
6. In "Coyote" what significance is there to the fact that the story ends with her husband asking, "What do you think they're talking about over there?"
7. I had written eight of these eleven stories over the course of several years before I thought about their common thread. One day, while considering whether or not they would make a good collection, it occurred to me (newsflash!) that the parent-child relationship was central in every story. With that in mind, I wrote the last few stories. Was it obvious to you when you read the collection that the stories shared this relationship as a central feature? Looking back now, do you see it or do you feel that there is some other common thread that stands out more?
8. If you had to write a whole collection about a particular relationship (spouses, boss-employee, grandparent-grandchild, friends, neighbors, co-workers, fathers and

sons, mothers and daughters, doctors and patients, etc.) which relationship would it be and why? Can you spin out any initial ideas about this relationship that the stories could explore?

9. Do you have any idea why the stories are in the order they are in? Do you think that “All the Sons of Cain” makes a good opening story and “Half-Life” a good closing story? Why or why not?

10. If you had to retell one of the stories from a different character’s point-of-view (e.g. tell “Coyote” from the husband Scott’s perspective), but without substantially changing the events in the story, which story would you retell and from whose perspective? Why?

11. One of the big secrets to both fiction and nonfiction that writers rarely mention is the humble section break. A section break is the extra white space between blocks of texts. Like a period separates a series of words into discrete sentences, and the paragraph separates groups of sentences into ideas, the section break separates groups of paragraphs (or sometimes only one sentence) into visually separate units of texts. In novels the next level of separation would typically be a chapter break, but in stories (which don’t have chapters) the “section” is the largest unit of division. How sections are divided contributes to the rhythm of a work, which is part of a work’s “voice.” But it’s not just a musical or voice-related tool. It can do many things, such as control the flow of information to the reader, organize time in a narrative (past, present, future) and pace a narrative by allowing a writer to “skip” transitions in time or idea. In fact, choosing how to begin a section and how to end one is an art in and of itself. Choose a story in the collection and read it while paying attention to where the section breaks are.

- a. Try to figure out what purpose each break serves (hint: not every break has the same purpose).
- b. If you took the break away and combined the two sections, how would that affect the reading of the story?
- c. Sometimes important events are not shown or dramatized in a work of fiction but happen “off stage” (in the section break as it were). Does anything notable happen “off stage” (during the section breaks) in the story you chose to analyze?

Writing Exercises:

Strangers on a Train

Create two characters who don’t know each other and are both in compelling—but totally unrelated—situations. Make them meet and see what happens. This is what inspired the story “When We’re Innocent.”



The Job

Identify a job that suggests to you a problem and write a story about a character experiencing (and trying to solve) that problem. Choose a job in which the problem is not practical and easily solved, but rather ethical, psychological or cultural, and intractable. (e.g. a criminal defense attorney who is defending a guilty person). One way to identify jobs is to think about the “hidden” jobs behind news stories. When you read about the BP oil spill, imagine the person who might have been involved in designing or controlling the parts that failed and led to the spill. This exercise often involves research on jobs, which will give rise to all kinds of interesting plot and character possibilities.

Animal Hoarder

I often wondered about the seeming paradox of the “animal hoarder”—someone who keeps far more animals in their home than they can care for properly. These people clearly care deeply for the animals and yet are considered to be abusing them. I wrote “An Uncontaminated Soul” about a woman with far too many cats to explore this dynamic imaginatively. Think of a person or type of person who doesn’t “make sense” to you and write a story that reveals them in a surprising way.

Further Reading:

1. In *Narrative Design* Madison Smartt Bell explains how stories are structured by analyzing several real examples. A great place for the student of fiction writing to start learning about form.
2. *House of Sand and Fog* by Andre Dubus III The literary page turner is my favorite type of book because it has it all: great language, complex character, difficult choices, and high suspense. This book is one of the best examples I’ve ever read. It pits two flawed but sympathetic people from very different backgrounds against each other in the most every day situation: arguing about who owns a house. On this seemingly small stage big themes of class, patriotism, world history, religious and personal identity play out.
3. *Gods and Monsters* by Christopher Bram This is another wonderful example of what happens when a writer with great skill and sympathy puts two disparate characters into conflict. It has a very simple plot overlaid with finely tuned psychology and characterization developed via brilliant dialogue and—one of the hardest things to pull off—compelling dream sequences.
4. *Await Your Reply* by Dan Chaon is a suspenseful literary novel that makes brilliant use of section breaks. In addition, the novel has a sophisticated overall structure (the order of information and events) that allows Chaon to tell a



story that would be impossible to tell in a straightforward, chronological way.

5. *The Collector of Hearts* is a collection of stories by Joyce Carol Oates which showcases this incredibly prolific writer in two of my favorite stories, both about abused children who have grown up but are still dealing with their abusive parents. In “Schroeder’s Stepfather” Oates demonstrates the power that information has in a story—what the reader is told and when they are told it. “Death Mother” is remarkable for its psychology, particularly the juxtaposition of the daughter’s inner hatred and her outward gentleness toward her mother.
6. “The Beautiful Days” by Michael Byers and “Brokeback Mountain” by Annie Proulx are fantastic example of short stories that cover several years.
7. “Why the Sky Turns Red When the Sun Goes Down” by Ryan Harty is a touching story that uses an unrealistic (science-fiction) element without losing that sense of reality that makes me relate to a character.
8. The story “Blind Jozef Pronek” by Aleksander Hemon—because it’s both tragic and funny, like life. That’s a voice you don’t hear often enough in American fiction.
9. In college I took several courses in philosophy and I still get inspired by abstract philosophical considerations, particularly ethical questions. *The Consolations of Philosophy* by Alain de Botton is a group of essays in which de Botton reflects on life’s common hardships and how they can be alleviated by following the lead of some of history’s most insightful people: Socrates, Epicurus, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer. This is a wonderful introduction to philosophy for casual readers. As far as fiction goes, considering these common hardships, and the different ways past geniuses have approached dealing with them, can provide a deep, resonant undertone to your work.

