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Becoming the Stranger/Reader

By Erika Duncan

When new people come into a Herstory group and hear us talking about Stranger/Readers and Imaginary Page Ones, they are of course a bit mystified. But working their way through their own relationship to these constructs is the first step in the process. Whether you are a facilitator or a participant, you will have to get the Stranger/Reader concept under your belt to experience the full power of standing in for the “reading other” that each writer most desires to reach.

Thus, in real life I have very definite reading tastes. I love long rambling sentences that circle around and around. Imagery gets to me most effectively if it is slightly surrealistic. Contradictions such as dangerous safety send my heart and mind to racing; and even mixed metaphors (a “no-no” in some schools) do not trouble me, as long as they take me to a new place of perception. My attraction is often to slightly dark works, as long as there is a light shining through. Repetition attracts me, and haunts me. I’ll admit it: I do like to be haunted, although violence without inner life always scares me. I have always been secretly a romantic at heart, although only more recently will I admit this openly. Therefore I am not bothered by what others may read as a sentimentality to be quickly pruned away. I am even a bit Pollyannaish, which is a mixed blessing in most circles, but helps me in the kind of work I do.

A dear friend nicknamed me “Charlie Brown”—always hopeful that things will work out. I’m also fairly gullible, in that I am willing to believe almost anything anyone tells me, which is why as a reader I like to get lost in other people’s visions. Matter-of-fact and linear thinking usually scares me.

When I become someone else’s Stranger/Reader, my own real-life tastes must fall by the wayside, as I embrace matter-of-fact and impressionist thinkers alike. So too must I abandon my own prefer-

Mother/listeners and readers

When one is a mother, one cannot predict the challenges of raising a child whose responses and proclivities may be very different from one's own.

Becoming someone's Stranger/Reader has a great deal in common with good mothering.

I am giving you my own reader's portrait rather deliberately. In order to become the Stranger/Reader for another (or a group of others), you need not abandon your own proclivities. In fact, the better you know yourself as a reader, the less likely you will be to unconsciously try to shape what your students are doing according to your own likes and dislikes.

Therefore take a moment to map out your own likes and dislikes in reading. This will help you to train your quickening so that it comes, not according to your tastes, but according to where each writer is trying to go.

Claiming your own reader's portrait will stand you in good stead, as you ask yourself whether a direction you are tempted to suggest comes from yourself or from what you have picked up from your students.

ences for how lightness and darkness configure themselves, and my own particular interests in subject matter.

- ▶ Should I be a non-believer: For the minister writing about how she received her calling, I must help her to take me on her journey toward faith. Should she "go there" in short choppy sentences, I must retrain my senses to quicken when those sentences are working to take me where she wishes to go.
- ▶ Should I be a doubter of the value of hypnotherapy: I must accompany completely the writer who is telling of one moment being in an ordinary state and the next in another place entirely. I must guide her gently to take me along until I can become her.
- ▶ Should I feel that it isn't necessary to forgive, in order to be happy and whole: I have to be able to help the person writing about a journey where forgiveness is the only answer, even as I help the person next to her write about the healing effects of keeping anger alive.
- ▶ Even if I have never smoked a cigarette or gotten drunk myself: I must be able to help the person writing about getting high to kindle my Stranger/Reader's desire.
- ▶ If I never look around, but only listen: I must help to create a world for the person who looks and never hears what people have to say.
- ▶ If my own love interests go toward women: I must garner ever bit of my Stranger/Reader's potential desire to ask for help imagining desire for men.



Always, the Stranger/Reader must pose as half-desirer/half-doubter, in asking to be won over through whatever means a writer may be able to garner in order to help an audience walk in her shoes.

How then may we do this?

Learning to Listen Differently: The First Step

There is something universal, I believe, in the way that we want to be told stories that can take us as deeply into literary thinking as we wish to go, while keeping the notion of a common ground. This is what builds bridges between us, moving us from being on the outside into starting to care.

When we are too much in the middle of our own story, we cannot see it as narrative. It is as if the forces that connect past and future have been hidden from our eyes. When we begin to connect the

threads through writing, and a tale emerges, we see ourselves no longer as passive recipients but as interesting, active doers and movers, and a whole other understanding emerges.

I see narrative structures as safe houses in which our memories and daydreams can comfortably reside. In the words of Pat Gorman, a Herstory writer exploring her Native American roots: “We write to discover what changed us. We extract the external events that best create dramatic tension to describe the inner journey. And this is our opportunity to invent.”

The more deliberately these “houses” are established, the freer we will be in our openness to surprises, because we will be standing on solid ground.



Below are two related exercises that will help you to get started as a facilitator of a Herstory-style workshop. They both involve listening to other people’s stories with a view as to how they are actually constructed. This is what I will mean whenever I use the word **structure**.

EXERCISE ONE

Strategic Listening for Shape

For at least several weeks before leading your first workshop, pay attention to those overheard conversations we all happen upon, whether in a restaurant—where we are caught alone in one of those accidental moments when we are innocently waiting for our companion to return from the bathroom, and suddenly we are privy to another person’s whole life story—or else in those too familiar hospital waiting rooms, where the tension of dealing with critical matters gives birth to a level of eloquence that has never ceased to amaze me. These are the times when we are privy to intimate details that come to us out of left field. Yet suddenly we find ourselves listening.

There are reasons why one person’s way of storytelling will be more moving than another’s, or why a story will be one moment riveting and the next moment hollow. And yet I believe that within each person’s way is the potential to reconstruct a moving narrative. The more that you are able to understand what causes the fluctuations in your own capacity to be moved WITHIN each overheard story, the less likely it will be that you will favor a single way of telling or a single type of content.

In working with the Herstory approach:

- ▶ We take for granted that some ways of telling stories are more effective than others.
- ▶ We take for granted that for each new participant, the journey will be different.
- ▶ We take for granted that where each workshop member begins and how well she understands the principles of framing a story will have a profound effect on the success of the endeavor.

As you begin to use the opportunities in your daily life to listen for structure and framing, you will be surprised at how quickly you’ll notice what works and what falls flat.

As you start to puzzle out how the stories that come your way might be heightened or deepened, you will gradually become privy to a whole bag of tricks—for rearranging, for speeding up and slowing down, for expanding or contracting a scene.

How to use these listening exercises

These listening exercises are designed to help you to imagine not a single correct way for each story you hear, but many equally vibrant possibilities.

They are meant to stand you in good stead as you prepare to lead your first writing workshops. For the more that you arm yourself with an intuitive knowledge of all that can work in the way of storytelling in a wide variety of contexts, the less likely you will be to impose your own tastes on beginning writers whose ways of approach will be very different from yours.

Because we believe that there is no single correct approach, but that each writer must learn to use her own storytelling proclivities to the utmost, it will be necessary to note patterns in what is likely to work and what is likely to get the writer into trouble across many styles, approaches and ways.

At first it will seem strange to try to separate content and structure, especially if what you are listening to is emotionally moving.

Later, being able to follow the structure will actually help you to absorb the content more fully. The closest analogy I can find to this is what happens when a musician listens to a piece of music. Being able to hear what key the piece is being played in, or where a fugue enters, in no way detracts from the depths of the musical experience. Rather, the converse is true.

Safe playing around with the stories you hear

As the Stranger/Listener coming in midway, you have nothing invested in the emotional content.

Therefore you can play with your thoughts as to the order of the telling.

When does it work to pile one story on top of another, and when does it drive you crazy? Where does an interruption right in the middle of a dramatic moment whet your appetite for more?

Chart what it is that has caught your attention and when your attention wanders away. When can you follow and when do you begin to get lost?

You will learn a great deal by noticing what catches your attention and when your mind wanders away.

Benevolent rearranging

I think that I first learned to be a writer by silently secretly rearranging the stories I overheard, whenever I got bored or impatient.

The touch we are adding in becoming a particular Stranger/Reader, temporarily in the service of each teller, is our acute listening not for what we might want but for what is actually there in the teller—the teller's main thrust—often half-hidden or under-realized.

A new way of reading

In preparing to work with people who may have listened far more than they have read, who may have spoken far more than they have written, you want to remind yourself to use what you are learning in listening to help you study structural possibilities when you read.

Because you will be working with people with very different narrative tastes and proclivities, it is important to let in as many different kinds of reading experiences as you can.

This will ready you for the richness of the experience of working with people who have little in common except for the desire to tell their own stories. It will enable you to help people to help one another shape their writings so that they can be received across the many barricades that usually divide us, be they barricades of ethnic background, class

As you listen, ask yourself: Does the person you are shadowing build her stories more or less chronologically? Or does she pepper her story with what I like to call “Invisible Backstitches,” giving you background as she moves her story forward?

In order to become the true Stranger/Reader, who will be able to dart from one style of telling to another, it will be necessary to note patterns in what is likely to work and what is likely to get the writer into trouble across many approaches and ways.

Does she weave back and forth in time, or does she weave several stories together, so that she is telling two or three stories at once? Or does she nest one story inside another, so that each one becomes its own long saga?

Do thoughts and ideas drive her stories? So that she starts out by musing and then weaves in various tales? Or does she just start telling a story, when suddenly she finds herself speaking about what it all might mean? Does she tease the listener by stopping at the moment of maximum suspense and moving into another sub-story, so that one needs to continue listening in order to return to the first story's climax?

- ▶ Track tales that are much more raw and bumpy than those you would normally like.
- ▶ Track tales that are so smooth they almost drive you crazy with their constant control.
- ▶ Track tales that are much more romantic than those that normally attract you, and then tales that are so skeptical a part of you cringes just to know that the teller might one day tell a story about you.

Whatever the quality of the tale, whether you love it or hate it, when you see an obstacle that seems to get in the way or when you see an opportunity you'd like to seize, I would like you to imagine that you are the puppeteer rearranging the pieces, not in one way, but in many possible combinations. You are trying to hear through the lines, not what most interests you, but what seems to be propelling the teller.

No one will ever know you are listening with the goal of rearranging, so no one will be hurt. For now you are practicing the art of making mental bookmarks. Later on, in our section on working with actual text, we will return to our various storytelling structures in a more analytical way. For now, listen almost playfully as you let yourself notice what works and what doesn't, without yet paying much attention to why. Becoming an imaginary puppeteer in a situation in

which you can do no real mischief, will help you to get used to evaluating your own solutions without jumping to impose them on another before you understand a lot more.

Beauty as It Becomes a Clue

Finally you want to hone your capacity to find beauty even in a halt-ingly told tale, so that when you take these overhearing techniques into consciously helping a speaker shape a story, you will be able to pinpoint the moments where (to be a bit melodramatic) the heart peeps through.



Once you get used to finding them (which happens with the heart, not the mind), you will find that you are able to echo them back to the speaker in a way that will help her to build upon them. (This can happen in conversation as well as in teaching writing. In fact, I think I first discovered this technique when I was trying to dare myself not to be turned off by stories that felt too furious or whiny or boastful.)



Include these moments of beauty in the log I will ask you to set up.



One Herstory facilitator in training asked: “But how can I trust myself to know a moment of beauty?”

I think that we can trust that what we perceive as beautiful may be seen that way also by another, especially if we dare to point it out. Very often when I have expressed my pleasure in a student’s choice of image or way of exposition, I have found that this has liberated her to create more similar images in her own way.

Ask yourself hard questions about beauty and vulnerability. Is it passed over so quickly that you must hold your breath in order to catch it? Try to imagine what would happen if the teller allowed those moments to elongate. As you move into working with writers who will be shy about showing the more beautiful parts of themselves, this work will allow you to detect them more easily, so that you will be able to play them back.

or culture, or be they more subtle and aesthetic.

Remind yourself to use your own reading to help you to hear what spoken structures, once crafted, might someday become.

Daring beauty to be, even when it is quite hidden

I think that I first started to consciously look for moments of beauty when stories were being told in a content and style that defied my own taste. I would look for them when I was bored or irritated by a story that was being told, and this would sustain me so that I never had to reveal my lack of interest or sense of invasion.

Only later, when I began to teach, did I realize how much this search for moments that would move me had aided me in my training.

ONGOING TOOLS FOR FACILITATORS

- ▶ Keep an ongoing log of the things you are learning about storytelling structure. Include phrases or events from overheard stories that you remember, writing down any thoughts that come up about why you remembered each one. Note factors that you feel moved a particular story from here to there.
- ▶ Set aside several pages in your log for moments that are obviously important to the narrator in the stories you are tracking and several more pages for moments that seem less important.
- ▶ Under each category, keep a free-floating diary of when your own caring ebbed or peaked.
 - ▷ When did your response feel out of synch with what the teller obviously felt?
 - ▷ When did it seem in harmony?
 - ▷ When, at an important moment, did you turn cold or even angry?
 - ▷ When did you feel that you were being dared to dismiss or look down on the speaker?
- ▶ Are there narrative patterns that cause these reactions?

As you work with your log, in whatever shorthand you decide to use, make sure that you deal with your own and your speakers' moments of discomfort. Try to guess whether whether they came through embarrassment about revealing beauty, or anger or shame.

How to use the empathy-charting vignettes

The vignettes and reflections in the body of this manual will help you quite specifically to isolate what happens from a narrative point of view when, during a student's most emotional passage, you start thinking about what you are having for dinner or when you will take a pile of checks to the bank.

For now, suffice it to say that more often than not, those of us who weren't heard well early in life replicate those patterns of not being heard later on.

In documenting those moments when you find yourself unable to hear the heartfelt voice of another, eventually you will be able to sort out what went wrong and figure out how to fix it.

This tracking can be compared to dropping a path of bread crumbs, so that you can find your way back.

For now, much more simply, I want to dare you to let yourself know when for one reason or another you stop caring, when a person is speaking or reading to you.

EXERCISE TWO**Tracking the Fluctuations in Your Empathy as You Listen**

Once you have developed your own method of tracking narrative structure, you will want to pursue the same exercises while observing with free-wandering attention what happens to your empathy as a listener. Allowing yourself to know when you are aroused by a moment of beauty and similarly, when you find yourself shockingly indifferent, might well be a first step.

Pursue this empathy-charting work when you are visiting with close friends as well as with strangers. Although with friends you are no longer on your Imaginary Page One, since you already have a lot of history and caring under your belt, track the moments when you come alive as a listener.

Track when you are really moved and why. Try not to let your preferences in terms of content distract you from looking at narrative successes and failures. I do this sort of work best when dealing with content that isn't intrinsically interesting to me.

Track the moments when you feel your mind wander. Try to remember the last images before you drifted away. Then try to reconstruct what was missing in between.

If you put your mind to it, you will generally find that you can retrieve not only what you missed but also what happened within the narrative that jarred you.

Ideally, these listening exercises should not be done a few times and dropped. Rather, they should become a part of your way of life, so that your understanding of the connection between narrative structure and what creates empathy will keep deepening and broadening.

SETTING UP YOUR LISTENING LOG

This will help you to find the spots of promise and power as you move into working with imaging Page One Moments for each of your students and later as you begin to work with written text. It is critical to be completely honest with yourself as you listen and not to judge where your mind wanders when the teller no longer has your attention.

Try not to let your preferences in terms of content distract you from looking at narrative successes and failures. (I do this sort of work best when dealing with content that isn't intrinsically interesting to me.)

Story One

Pick any listening experience where a story goes on for five minutes or more. Working from memory, after you are no longer with the teller, after listening with free-wandering attention:

► Note a moment where you found yourself shockingly indifferent to something that obviously was important to the teller. Try to figure out what bothered you in the telling. Was it the tone? If so, did it feel too cloying, too whiney, or too matter-of-fact?

► Now note a moment where you were genuinely moved. What differentiated that moment from the one where you felt indifferent? Was it filling out a scene? Letting the other characters speak for themselves? Less pressure on the listener to feel what the teller was feeling? Note one or two moments that moved you the most:
