

# The World's Shortest Stories

- Steve Moss

# 55 Fiction

## INTRODUCTION

How short can a story be and still be considered a story? Charles Schultz had an answer to that question several years ago in his "Peanuts" comic strip. Grabby old Lucy was once asked by Linus to please, please, please tell him a story. Lucy grudgingly obliged. Said she: "A man was born. He lived and died. The end."

That's the shortest story I've ever read. But, like Linus, I was left somewhat dissatisfied.

So maybe the question should be asked differently: How short can a story be and still be considered a good story? What's the briefest possible narrative that still allows for a satisfying read? I think I've found the answer. And since you're holding this book in your hands right now, that means you have, too.

Consider for a moment that the paragraph you just finished reading contains exactly 55 words. It's an absurdly tiny number. No, it's an impossibly tiny number. So how could it allow for any kind of scope or quality? All I know is that's the length of a typical Fifty-Five Fiction story, and that it does. I also know that in the following pages, you'll find murder and suspense, horror and intrigue, love and betrayal, plus distant worlds and inner demons. All in a measly 55 words.

When I announced the first Fifty-Five Fiction contest in the fall

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of 1987, it was a gamble. I wasn't really sure writers could pull it off. Admittedly, most stories sent to us that year weren't very good, but every now and then a tiny gem would shine up from the typewritten page, submitted by someone who truly understood the genre. I've often tried explaining these 55-word creations to people, but most of them think I'm crazy. Now I have this book to show them, a collection culled from the top stories sent to us over the years.

If you've already glanced through these pages, you know what I'm talking about. You've probably also noticed that many stories have something in common besides their stingy word count: the surprise ending. Many writers have sensed that with so little to work with, the successful Fifty-Five Fiction short story demands something extra to create a satisfying payoff, and they have plotted their tales accordingly.

The famous "Twilight Zone" episode featuring Burgess Meredith as a bespectacled bookworm who finds himself the sole survivor of a nuclear holocaust, and who breaks his glasses amidst books aplenty, could easily have been written as a Fifty-Five Fiction story.

Fifty-Five Fiction is storytelling at its very leanest, where each word is chosen with utmost care on its way to achieving its fullest effect. It's what O. Henry might have conjured up if he'd had only the back of a business card to write upon, or what "The Twilight Zone" would have been like if it were only a minute long. It's H. H. Munro's famous mini-short stories written even smaller.

Fifty-Five Fiction is fanciful and murderous, speculative and absurd, creepy and touching, and just plain wild. But most of all, Fifty-Five Fiction is fun, which is exactly what reading and writing are supposed to be. Writers more accustomed to stretching out leisurely across the page would find their attempts at Fifty-Five Fiction frustrating.

James Michener would have a time of it.

But maybe not. Some who've taken the Fifty-Five Fiction challenge have later said that the discipline of making every word count easily transferred to their longer works, and that this tightly focused exercise in literary minimalism ultimately helped them write more judicious longer prose.

That's why Fifty-Five Fiction shouldn't be viewed as little more than short-attention-span fiction for the MTV generation. Instead, it's become a jumping-off point for new fiction writers testing the waters of their imaginations when the water (not to mention that empty page in front of them) seems vast and intimidating. Many who began writing Fifty-Five Fiction have gone on to successfully tackle much longer stories. I'd like to think at least one of them is now finishing up a first novel—and that it's 555 pages long.

The challenge of Fifty-Five Fiction can be daunting. Paring plot and narrative down to their utter essences and thinking hard about each word and judging its appropriateness are part of the Fifty-Five Fiction process. It's difficult to describe to non-writers the intellectual joy of the effort, the emotional rush of creating something small, orderly, and beautiful out of absolutely nothing.

When O. Henry finished writing "The Gift of the Magi," he must have felt something similar. No doubt H. H. Munro did, too, when he completed his classic mini-story, "The Open Window."

One thing I didn't expect was that writing instructors would take a fancy to Fifty-Five Fiction. But they have. I've received letters of praise—and hundreds of student samples—from both high school and college teachers who've been using it regularly and enthusiastically over the years. One creative-writing teacher put it this way: "The students have learned word economy, editing skills, and the basic essentials of the short story in a very simple and easy-to-take manner. And to top it off, it was fun."

But would Linus have been satisfied after reading a Fifty-Five Fiction story? Does such a stingy word count allow for a really satisfying read? You already know what I think.

As James Thomas—whose stories had a limit of 750 words—said in the introduction to his "Flash Fiction" anthology (W. W. Norton & Co.), "Like all fiction that matters, their success depends not on their length, but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance—the extent to which the reader can recognize in them the real stuff of real life."

I don't think I could say it any better.

All I know is that Fifty-Five Fiction writers say it shorter.

Steve Moss

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How hard is it to write a 55-word short story? We bet you've been reading these stories and thinking to yourself, "Hey, I can do that. Give me a pen and paper."

We think you can, too, which is why we've included this handy dandy section of Official Fifty-Five Fiction Rules so you can know exactly how to go about it when the urge strikes.

But be forewarned: Writing a Fifty-Five Fiction story isn't as easy as it looks.

A haiku poem is short. So is a quarterback sneak. But nobody thinks they're simple to execute—it's just that the people who do them well make it seem that way.

Taking a great story concept and developing it within such a limited space is a little like carving a beautiful sculpture from a tiny block of wood. The working range is truncated and intimate, but the goal is no different than if you were creating on a much larger scale: to perfectly merge various elements into a coherent whole that ultimately makes people say, "Wow, that's really great!"

But don't be discouraged by such a lofty goal. Great storytelling starts with fair storytelling and gets better with practice. Ray Bradbury once told an audience that if they wanted to learn how to write, they should compose a short story every day. "If you do that," he said, "by the end of the year you'll have written 365 stories—and, at the very least, three or four of them are bound to be good because it's impossible to write 365 bad stories!"

We've often thought about that when judging our Fifty-Five Fiction Contest each year. It's the perfect way for someone to apply Bradbury's One-Story-a-Day Theory of writing. When you've mastered 55 words, you can go on to 110, then 220, and so on until you've written that great novel that's been inside you, struggling to get out.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Fifty-Five Fiction is the name

of this writing game, a tiny literary genre with a proud tradition stretching back a full eight years to a time when finding good copy to fill our arts and entertainment publication, *New Times*, was tough to do. Out of this necessity rose Fifty-Five Fiction.

The first rule we always tell Fifty-Five Fiction writers may seem obvious, but it's broken more often than you might think. We tell them to remember that we're talking about *fiction*, not essays or poems or errant thoughts. A lot of people have a hard time getting that straight, no doubt because they have a hard time believing that writing something so short is really possible. They usually end up with only part of a story, often with their character stranded in a situation going nowhere.

So although some may have a more complex definition of just what constitutes a "story," for our purposes, a story is a story only if it contains the following four elements: 1) a setting; 2) a character or characters; 3) conflict; and 4) resolution.

For those who think this limiting to their creativity, consider for a moment that:

- All stories have to be happening somewhere, which means they have to have a setting of some kind, even if it's the other side of the universe, the inner reaches of someone's mind, or just the house next door.
- Characters can have infinite variations. People, animals, clouds, microbes. Anything.

• By conflict, we merely mean that in the course of the story, something has to *happen*. The lovers argue. The deer flees. The astronaut waits in anticipation. Even in this last example, something is happening, even though no one is moving or talking. There is conflict, which leads to:

- The outcome of the story, known also as the resolution. This doesn't necessarily mean that there's a moral ("Justice is its own reward," "In the end, love triumphs"), or even that the conflict itself is resolved. It may or may not be.

But what it does mean is that when the story ends, someone has to have learned something. Tony found out his wife wanted to kill him after all; the soldiers successfully eluded the enemy when they thought they'd been discovered; Barbara was shown to be as much of a liar as her father. It's even possible to have none of the characters learn anything. But if that's the case, then we the readers must.

Consider "Bedtime Story" by Jeffrey Whinnore on page 13. Besides having a terrific story idea, Whinnore also goes about telling it well. How he does so is worth examining.

Notice how much he achieves through suggestion. We know the characters are lovers, but the author never says so. We also know there's a gun in the story, but it's never directly mentioned. In fact, Whinnore's tale is actually two stories. The second one—the other conspiracy—reveals itself in the final two words.

You'll also notice that there are no descriptive adverbs or adjectives, and yet we see the entire scene perfectly. The author then stretches the form by having his story start even before his narrative begins, and end beyond his final phrase, making it seem longer than just 55 words.

The main advantage to suggestion is conveying information economically—when the reader knows what you're talking about without your saying so, fewer words are needed. The disadvantage, of course, is losing sight of whether the reader is following you. Too much suggestion becomes obscure and confusing. That's a common error. So is trying to tell too complicated a story in such a tiny space. Fifty-Five Fiction demands a tight focus.

Telling a story in a traditional narrative mode is probably the best approach for new writers, but keep in mind that Fifty-Five Fiction encourages experimentation.

Can an entire story be told with every word starting with the same letter of the alphabet? Sure it can. You'll find it on page 67.

How about revealing a family's ongoing woes through just an answering machine's message? Check out page 125.

And on page 29, lovers meet clandestinely and discover more than they bargained for, in a tale with only one sentence using almost all nouns.

Surprise endings are often found in Fifty-Five Fiction, but they're not a prerequisite for success. They probably turn up a lot because they're easy to work with, and because many writers instinctively aim for the impact of a twist at the end. H. H. Munro had similar instincts in his finely crafted mini-short stories. So did Rod Sterling and Alfred Hitchcock in their famous half-hour TV programs. Pretty good storytellers to emulate.

A few other important points to keep in mind:

- You can write about anything you like, but you can't use more than 55 words. Yes, you can use fewer if you'd like to, but we don't know why anyone would—don't shortchange yourself even more than we already have.

And what, exactly, is a word? Simple. If it's in the dictionary, it's a word.

- Hyphenated words can't count as single words. For example, "blue-green dress" is three words, not two. Exceptions to this are any words that don't become two complete free-standing words when the hyphen is removed. Like "re-entry."

- Also, please note that your story's title isn't included in the word count. But remember that it can't be more than seven words long.

- Contractions count as single words, so if you're really seeking word economy (as you should be), keep this in mind. If you write, "He will jump," it's three words. But if you write, "He'll jump," it's only two. Very economical. By the same token, any contraction that's a shortened

form of a word is also counted as a full word. Like using "em" for "them."

- An initial also counts as a word (L. L. Bean, e. e. Cummings, etc.) since it's basically an abbreviation of a full word. The only exception is when it's part of an acronym like MGM, NASA, or IBM. The reasoning here is that the wide use of these acronyms has in effect made them into single words.

- Remember that numbers count as words, too, expressed as either numerals (8, 28, 500, or 1984), or as words (eight, twenty-eight, etc.) But keep in mind our hyphenated-word rule. "Twenty-eight" is two words when written out, but only one when expressed as 28. Don't cheat yourself out of an extra word that you may need.

- Any punctuation is allowed, and no punctuation marks count as words, so don't worry about being miserly with them if they work to some effect.

There are a few clichés we suggest you avoid. Unless you can come up with really fresh takes on these old chestnuts, stay away from stories where the reader eventually discovers the protagonist is a cat (or some other animal); characters who appear to be having sex, but it turns out they're doing something innocent and mundane, and you just have a dirty mind; and any character who wakes up at the end and says, "Gosh, it was all a dream!" These go in the trash faster than the speed of light, as well they should.

So now that you've digested all the rules and you're putting all those great ideas of yours on paper, what are you going to do with the best ones after you've shown them to friends who all think you're brilliant? Good question. Here's a good answer. Send them to us so we can consider them for our next Fifty-Five Fiction book.

You can submit as many stories as you want, but remember that each story must be typed on its own sheet of paper. That means one story per page.

Make sure your name, address, and telephone number are included on each story, so we can contact you. This information needs to be with each one in case your stories get separated. Too many times, we've been unable to contact authors of great stories simply because they forgot this simple procedure.

So, if you think you've got some winning stories, put a stamp on that envelope and mail them off to us at Fifty-Five Fiction, Dept. 55, 197 Santa Rosa St., San Luis Obispo, CA 93405. Unfortunately, we can't acknowledge receipt of any work, so please send photocopies, not originals. If any of your stories are selected, one thing's for certain: You'll be hearing from us.

And remember: Just 55 words.

STEVE MOSS

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