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K. L. Cook  
Cycle

Short Story

### Short Story Cycle: Quotes & Notes

While there are various conventions associated with the genre [of the short story cycle]. . . there is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them without going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved by a single story. . . . The ability of the story cycle to extend discussions—to work on a larger scale—resembles what is accomplished in the novel. But the forms of the cycle and novel are significantly different: only the first is constructed from stories.

—Susan Garland Mann

*The Short Story Cycle: A Genre  
Reference*

*Companion &  
Guide*

Some critics might trace the current rash of story cycles to rather dubious causes. (I don't necessarily share these views, but I've heard them voiced.) (1) Some might say that the story cycle is the perfect genre for a writer who can't plot a novel; a series of stories would be more manageable, less daunting, requiring less courage. (2) Others might say that the story cycle's popularity is due to the proliferation of creative writing workshops which favor the story over the novel for the simple reason that a story can be discussed and evaluated in a short time, and a series of them can be viewed both singly and as a group. (3) Still others might point a finger at cynical publishers who know that story cycles can often be published as novels, which almost always sell far better than collections of short fiction. The most obvious...case in point is Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, which was marketed as a novel despite the author's public disclaimers that it was nothing of the sort. And Harriet Doerr's *The Stones for Ibarra* was made into a novel "after the fact"; having written the stories separately, Doerr provided a thin narrative thread so that the book could be marketed as a novel.

—Richard Russo

In structure the book [*Winesburg, Ohio*] lies midway between the novel proper and the mere collection of stories. Like several famous books by more recent authors, all early readers of Anderson—like Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses*, like Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat* and *The Pastures of Heaven*, like Caldwell’s *Georgia Boy*—it is a cycle of stories with several unifying elements, including a single background, a prevailing tone, and a central character. These elements can be found in all cycles, but the best of them also have an underlying plot that is advanced or enriched by each of the stories.

—Malcolm Cowley,  
Introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*

Although many critics identify her [Alice Munro’s] *Lives of Girls and Women* as a novel, the author herself considers it a set of interrelated stories rather than a single work. She claims to have experimented with novel writing, but finds the short story form more suited to the narrative shape and pacing her style demands. “I no longer feel attracted to the well-made novel,” she explained. “I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected moments of experience. I guess that’s the way I see life. People remake themselves bit by bit and do things they don’t understand. The novel has to have a coherence which I don’t see anymore in the lives around me.”

—From *Contemporary Literary*

*Criticism*, v. 50

on Alice Munro

A group of linked narratives can create an effect you can’t get from a novel or from one story alone. It’s like a series of snapshots taken over time. [Chabon praises Updike’s *Too Far to Go* as an example.] Part of the pleasure is turning to them again and again. The interest lies in what has happened in the interstices.

—Michael Chabon, on John Updike

Taking [Susan Minot’s] *Monkeys*, then, as a model of the short-story novel—not to be followed slavishly, but as an exemplar of basic requirements—we should look for at least these five elements:

- **Fundamental unities** that distinguish connected from collected stories: place, time, cast, theme, tone, style.
- **A framework question** addressed throughout successive chapters and answered by the end, indicating what the novel emerging from these individual stories is about.
- **Provisional rather than complete closure for each chapter's "story,"** creating narrative progression by propelling us, through open-ended interconnections, to the next "story."
- **A recognizable protagonist** (whether individual, family, or group) to empathize with as we realize what is at stake.
- **Final closure** when the framework question is answered and the provisional closures ending previous chapters culminate in a satisfactory overall resolution.

—George R. Clay,  
"Structuring the Short Story

Novel"

Story Cycles are enticing. They're also more difficult than most people would imagine. You don't want to repeat yourself, and you don't want to have the movement of each new story replicate too closely the movement of the last story. You don't want the stories dependent on each other when you're sending them out...nor do you want them to be mirror images when they're sitting next to each other in a book. For me, writing a few connected stories seemed to be a nice bridge between writing stories and writing novels. It also works well because you can present one story in the point of view of one character in a family, then another from somebody else's point of view. This gives you the position, as a writer, of wandering through the house and observing everybody's relationships.

—Antonya Nelson,  
Interview, *The*

*Missouri Review*

Both the carver [sculptor] and writer of linear narratives are first concerned with the form of the work in its entirety. The carver thinks of the seamless smooth movement of the shape to be chiseled out. The writer thinks of the overall movement of the principal narrative vector from its start to its finish, all other issues being subordinated to this overarching concern. In the second case [the writer who doesn't work by linear design], the task of the

artist is not to discover the essential form of the work by whittling away the dross, but to assemble the work out of small component parts. This breed of artists is not so much a sculptor as a mosaicist, assembling fragments of glass and tile to form what can be understood, at a greater distance, as a coherent, shapely image. In narrative art, this mosaic method is the basis for modular design. If linear design can be understood as somehow subtractive, a process of removing the less essential material so as to reveal the movement of narrative vectors more cleanly and clearly, then modular design is additive. The writer adds and arranges more and more modular units which may be attractive in themselves for all sorts of different reasons, but which also must serve the purpose of clarifying the overall design of the text as a whole. In linear design, the integrity of the finished work is obviously the first concern, since the writer is thinking of the work holistically to begin with. In the case of modular design, the writer will, at the outset, approach the raw material in a more fragmentary way. A sense of integrity in the work as a whole must be achieved by symmetrical arrangement of the modular parts. In a modular narrative design, narrative elements are balanced in symmetry as shapes are balanced in a symmetrical geometric figure, or as weights are balanced on a scale. . . . What modular design [he considers the short story cycle the best example of complex modular design] can do is liberate the writer from linear logic, those chains of cause and effect, strings of dominoes always falling forward. Modular design replaces the domino theory of narrative with other principles which have less to do with motion (the story as process) and more to do with overall shapeliness (the story as fixed geometric form). The geometry of a modular design. . . will be defining and confining to some degree. But the gain can be more than worth the sacrifice. The very fixity of the substructure can give the writer more latitude to improvise freely around the hidden armature with plot, character, and voice.

—Madison Smartt Bell,  
*Narrative Design: A Writer's*

*Guide to Structure*

**Short Story Cycles, Linked Stories, Novels-in-Stories:  
A Brief Bibliography**

**Thematically Unified Cycles**

- John Updike. *Trust Me*.
- Russell Banks. *Success Stories*.
- Joyce Carol Oates. *Faithless: Tales of Transgression*.
- Antonya Nelson. *Female Trouble*.
- Hannah Tinti. *Animal Crackers*.
- Joan Silber. *Ideas of Heaven*.

**Cycles Unified by Subgenre or Form**

- Robert Olen Butler. *Tabloid Dreams*.
- Daniel Stern. *Twice Told Tales*.
- Joyce Carol Oates. *The Assignment*.
- Italo Calvino. *Cosmicomics*.
- Lorrie Moore. *Self Help*.

**Historical Epoch/Era-Based Cycles**

- F. Scott Fitzgerald. *Tales of the Jazz Age*.
- Ernest Hemingway. *In Our Time*.
- Adam Braverman. *Mr. Lincoln's Wars*.
- Kate Walbert. *Our Kind*.

**Place-Based Cycles**

- James Joyce. *Dubliners*.
- John Steinbeck. *The Long Valley*.
- James Baldwin. *Going to Meet the Man*.
- John Updike. *Olinger Stories*.
- Edward P. Jones. *Lost in the City*.

### **Culture- or Community-Based Cycles**

- Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*.
- Sherwood Anderson. *Winesburg, Ohio*.
- Russell Banks. *Trailerpark*.
- Gloria Naylor. *The Women of Brewster Place*.
- Garrison Keillor. *Lake Wobegon Days*.
- Robert Olen Butler. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*.
- Crystal Wilkinson. *Water Street*.
- Tim O'Brien. *The Things They Carried*.

### **Family-Centered Cycles**

- William Faulkner. *Go Down, Moses*.
- Louise Erdrich. *Love Medicine*.
- Anne Tyler. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*
- Susan Minot. *Monkeys*.
- Cristina Garcia. *Dreaming in Cuban*.
- T. M. McNally. *Low Flying Aircraft*.
- K. L. Cook. *Last Call*.

### **Central Protagonist/Couple-Centered Cycles**

- F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Basil & Josephine Stories*.
- Ernest Hemingway. *The Nick Adams Stories*.
- John Updike. *Too Far to Go. The Complete Henry Bech*.
- David Huddle. *Only the Little Bone*.
- Alice Munro. *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Rose and Flo*.
- Isabel Huggan. *The Elizabeth Stories*.
- Melissa Pritchard. *Disappearing Ingenue: The Misadventures of Eleanor Stoddard*.
- Justin Cronin. *Mary and O'Neil*.

**Critical Studies about Story Cycles (Select)**

- George R. Clay. "Structuring the Short Story Novel." *The Writer's Chronicle* (December 1998). Vol. 31.3. 23-31.
- Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. Twayne's Studies in Literary Themes and Genres. New York: Twayne, 1995.
- Laura Morgan Green. "The Novel in Stories." *Poets & Writers*. July/Aug. 2001: 16-19.
- J. Gerald Kennedy, ed. *Modern American Short Story Sequences*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Susan Garland Mann. *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion & Reference Guide*. Greenwood Press. Westport, Conn. 1988.

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Short Story Cycle

### **Short Story Cycle Questions for Inquiry**

Throughout the term, as you study examples of the form and start designing, writing, and revising your own cycle, refer to these questions. Write provisional and then revised answers to the questions. By the end of the term, you should be able to answer them all.

#### **Stories, Novels, Cycles**

1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of a collection of stories, a novel, and a short story cycle? What are external/extrinsic indicators? What are the internal/intrinsic characteristics?
2. How are the three forms similar?
3. How are they different? In what ways are the differences important?

#### **“So What?”**

1. What is the value of studying the short story cycle form?
2. What are the limitations, or criticisms, of the form?
3. What are the advantages of this form, especially for the young writer? What are the reasons one might want to write in this form, regardless of experience?
4. Is there a built-in metaphysic for the short story cycle? Are story cycle writers philosophically different from story or novel writers?
5. Who are the practitioners of this form? Are there any great story cycles?

#### **Spectrum of Story Cycles**

1. What is the spectrum of story cycles?
2. What are the distinguishing characteristics of each kind of cycle?
3. What are some published examples of each kind?

### **Writing the Story Cycle**

1. How do you go about consciously designing and writing a short story cycle?
2. What kind of cycle do you want to write?
3. How do you evaluate the “success” of your story cycle? What criteria do you use?

### **Story Cycle Questions: For Study and Design**

1. Are the stories self-contained? Can each be read and enjoyed without having read the others?
2. What is the level of connectedness (or interdependence) among the stories?
3. Does the order or arrangement of the stories matter—in terms of plot, character, theme?
4. Is there an overarching dramatic question—a plot or character issue—that is raised at the beginning of the cycle, carried throughout the book, and resolved at the end?
5. Does the shape of either the individual stories or the cycle as a whole depend on, to use Madison Smartt Bell’s language, linear or mosaic design? Or both?
6. Does each story have, to use George Clay’s terms, provisional closure or complete closure? What are the advantages and/or limitations of each kind of closure?
7. Does the protagonist or repeating characters (if they are present) seem to grow or have a developmental arc? Do they remain static, revealed to the reader in snapshot form?
8. Is the “voice” of the book (point of view, form, genre, tone) more monochromatic or polychromatic? What is the effect of either kind of voice on the unity of the book?

9. Is there a sense of rhythmic patterning that provides a sense of unity? (This patterning may appear in terms of images/symbols, rotation of point of view, sequenced stories, dramatic or thematic counterpoint, or similarity or contrast in form.)

10. Is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?

### **The Metaphysic of the Novel**

“A novel is like a symphony in that its closing movement echoes and resounds with all that has gone before. This is rare in the novella; the effect requires too much mass. Toward the close of a novel, the writer brings back—directly or in the form of his characters’ recollections—images, characters, events, and intellectual motifs encountered earlier. Unexpected connections begin to surface; hidden causes become plain; life becomes, however briefly and unstably, organized; the universe reveals itself, if only for the moment, as inexorably moral; the outcome of the various characters’ actions is at last manifest; and we see the responsibility of free will. It is this closing orchestration that the novel exists for. If such a close does not come, for whatever theoretically good reasons, we shut the book with feelings of dissatisfaction, as if cheated. This is of course tantamount to saying that the novel, as a genre, has a built-in metaphysic. And so it does. The writer who does not accept the metaphysic can never write a novel; he can only play off it, as [Samuel] Beckett and [Donald] Barthelme do, achieving his own effects by visibly subverting those traditional to the novel, working like the sculptor who makes sculptures that self-destruct or the composer who dynamites pianos. I am not saying, of course, that the artist ought to lie, only that in the long run the anti-novelist is probably doomed to at least relative failure because we do not believe him. We are not profoundly moved by Homer, Shakespeare, or Melville because we would *like* to believe the metaphysical assumptions their fictions embody—an orderly universe that imposes moral responsibility—but because we do believe those assumptions.”

—John Gardner, *The Art of*

*Fiction*

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### **Short Story Cycle: Design Worksheet**

1. What is the working title of your cycle?
  
2. What are some of the unifying devices of your cycle?
  - Protagonist (Individual? Composite Character? Group, Family, or Community?)
  
  - Place
  
  - Time
  
  - Point of View
  
  - Tone
  
  - Narrative Strategies
  
  - Theme
  
  - Key or Dominant Imagery
  
  - Other Unifying Patterns/Strategies
  
3. Does your cycle have more of a linear design? If so:
  - What is the overarching framework question or narrative thread (plot line) for the cycle?

- Does each story have complete or provisional closure? Are new questions raised or lines of suspense initiated from story to story? Or is each story totally self-contained?
  
  - Is there a recognizable protagonist (individual, family, or group)?
  
  
  - Is there final closure to the framework question or to the provisional questions? How so?
4. Does your cycle have more of a modular (or mosaic) design? (Read M.S. Bell's definition.) If so:
- What elements provide symmetry and balance?
  
  
  - How do the individual stories/pieces of the book counterpoint each other?
  
  
  - Does the book work like a saga (*Love Medicine*), with the stories easily re-sequenced?

- Is there some kind of narrative thread from story to story? If not, what replaces narrative movement or chronology? Is there some kind of progression from story to story?
  - How do you provide resolution (dramatic and/or thematic) for the book as a whole?
5. Are there other superficial elements (or props) that might provide additional unity?
- Maps
  - Cast of characters
  - Family tree(s)
  - Chronology of events
  - Section breaks (possibly titled) between sequences of stories
  - Listed dates of the action with each story title
  - Listed narrator with each story title
6. If you had to choose an epigraph that would preface your collection and help unify the overall theme or design of the book, what would it be? Would it help to have multiple epigraphs for different sections? (Choose a few possible ones.)
7. Either below or on the back, write a preliminary table of contents with story titles and section breaks.

8. On separate sheets, or the back of this one, type brief narrative synopses (1-2 paragraphs) of the other stories in your cycle.