



# Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form

*Madison Smartt Bell*

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## **Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form** Madison Smartt Bell

Focusing on the big picture as well as the crucial details, Bell examines twelve stories by both established writers (including Peter Taylor, Mary Gaitskill, and Carolyn Chute) and his own former students. A story's use of time, plot, character, and other elements of fiction are analyzed, and readers are challenged to see each story's flaws and strengths. Careful endnotes bring attention to the ways in which various writers use language. Bell urges writers to develop the habit of thinking about form and finding the form that best suits their subject matter and style. His direct and practical advice allows writers to find their own voice and imagination.

## **Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form Details**

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# **From Reader Review Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form for online ebook**

## **Renée says**

I used this book in an upper-level undergraduate fiction workshop, and it worked very well to help show students how to respond to stories as writers. My students quickly found Bell's analysis of the short stories to be the most interesting and helpful aspect of their reading for class. I noticed that they were more confident in their responses to readings and to each other in workshop, as they modeled their critiques after Bell. This led to interesting discussions of narrative forms, points of view, etc. I felt it set a good foundation for these students as they continue to respond to fiction, both within workshop settings and beyond.

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## **Cynthia Rosi says**

If you want to understand how to dissect your work so that you can improve it, or you're wondering how to contribute to a writer's workshop in a meaningful way that helps the writer to move forward in their work, then this is the book for you. At the half-way point I stopped the book and applied Smartt Bell's technique to a short story I thought was finished. Through this magnifying glass I analyzed the story, found its flaws, and revised it into a stronger and deeper piece. I would recommend this as a craft book for any writer who wants to improve.

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## **Steven says**

This is just a brilliant book, teaching more than anything, how to read like a writer. Bell takes twelve stories and subjects them to a close reading and analysis. His basic technique is to present the story, followed by an analysis section that examines the story from the perspective of plot, character, tone, point of view, time management, dialogue, imagery and description, suspense, and design. Although, depending on the story, not all of those topics are addressed. He follows the analysis with endnotes where he provides commentary on specific points in the story (for Gaines' "The Sky is Grey" there are 202 notes!). So you get to read twelve great stories and then read a detailed analysis of how they are put together and how they work. This gives me a great technique for studying my favorite stories, the ones I most want to learn from. Bell also prefaces the analysis with two chapters, "Unconscious Mind," where he addresses writing in general, and "Linear Design," where he addresses form and structure. He concludes with a closing chapter that pulls back from the microscopic textual analysis to return to the themes he discussed in the first chapter. There is also a brief glossary of terms. The stories analyzed are also quite varied, so this is a great book to read to get out of a rut.

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## **Judith Shadford says**

Learned a lot about structure and the manipulation of craft. Bell is smart and thoughtful, a good reference for future issues/problems. But a straight-the-way read through book--gets a little tiresome, not least because of his encyclopedic, exhaustive practice of line-noting each of the 12 short stories and adding the line by line commentary at the end of the section. The analyses are excellent, but it becomes pedantic and just a little

boring.

Good addition to the library, but not to the heart.

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### **Michael says**

The passionate writer and reader will appreciate Bell's analytical perspective. And while the twelve stories chosen for analysis are good stories (some stand out over others) and Bell's "reverse-engineered analysis" reveal craft albeit arbitrarily--as Bell admits, it is Bell's introductory ("I. Unconscious Mind") and concluding ("IV. A Philosophy of Composition") chapters that particularly resonate. In short: the creative process is an altered state of consciousness to be tapped into and trusted.

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### **I?ja Rákoš says**

Good exercise in close reading and textual criticism; it really got at the engineering of story-writing in a helpful way for anyone interested in the craft behind the work. The book consists of a number of short stories treated as if being read in a Creative Writing class - workshopped, they call it. You won't like every story, but you will come out with a good deal of practice in making, and expressing, the distinction between "I don't like" and "why I don't like".

You will, of course, fair reader, also like, very much, some of the stories and the lesson above, in reverse, will be just as valuable.

One criticism: occasionally the associations made/drawn from the stories (as defined by Madison Smart Bell) felt forced, and somewhat prescriptive. Still, the analysis was strong, appropriate, and - repeating myself - very helpful.

Recommended to writers, writing students, and readers with the time and interest in slowing the reading down to a crawl.

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### **Jennifer says**

"Bell uses form and structure—what he calls narrative design—to guide his book, analyzing stories that are linear and stories that are nonlinear, or “modular” as he calls it. Having some sense of the different ways stories can work and unfold, he believes, gives the writer just a steady enough footing to free him- or herself up to focus on the exciting aspects of writing—“the unconscious mind,” imagination, creativity—which are much harder to teach but too often devalued in the craft-based study of fiction. I really like this, not only as a unique strategy for a writing book, but also because I’m kind of a structure/form enthusiast. I find it to be one of the most exciting aspects to reading and writing, so it’s nice to see a whole book devoted to it. I should also add that one of the pleasures of Narrative Design is seeing Madison Smartt Bell relentlessly breakdown a story. There are myriad DFW-style endnotes to each professional piece, which illustrate beautifully to students how to read like a writer, and that, as I see it, is one of the most important things we can teach aspiring writers."

—Andrew Malan Milward is an assistant professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi’s Center for Writers, where he is also the editor-in-chief of Mississippi Review. He is the author of story

collections *The Agriculture Hall of Fame* and *I Was a Revolutionary*.

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### **Abigail says**

Not what I was looking for but still enjoyed the first couple chapters.

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### **Greg says**

Bell gives a great crash-course in close-reading---not always so much for structure as for consistency in theme and imagery. But the book feels a little hampered by story selection. Bell looks at a number of stories by students of his, written in workshops he was running, and, despite his many assertions to the contrary, these stories are almost universally mediocre. I wish Bell devoted a greater portion of his efforts to the work of veteran writers---the best analyses offered here are of stories by Mary Gaitskill, Peter Taylor, etc.

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### **James says**

One of my mentors in grad school introduced me to this book. It was (and continues to be) useful to me because of Bell's descriptive approach to form, which develops from the relationships of a story's various elements. Structure must be organic and intentional, and there's no single correct way to determine a story's structure. In addition to some useful advice, the book includes some terrific stories, which Bell uses to demonstrate his ideas about narrative design.

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### **Lyle Almond says**

Ok, the author's choice of stories to study craft was sometimes a bit challenging. The lengthy notes after each story was a good bridge between narrative and analysis but varied between being a necessary crutch and entirely superfluous. It's probably one of the better introductory books on analyzing craft writing, but I haven't read enough to make a valid comparison.

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### **Billie Pritchett says**

In *Narrative Design*, writer Madison Smartt Bell takes short stories and shows you how the characterizations, dialogue, and backstory and present action, among other elements of fiction, all contribute to the overall design of each short story he analyzes. Great idea! And thanks to this book, I discovered Mary Gaitskill's and Ernest Gaines' writings. But frankly I think most of the story selections are bad. For instance, Bell uses at least two stories from his students' work. He also once uses one of a great writer's (Peter Taylor's) lesser stories ("A Wife of Nashville"). The positive side of the book, however, is that Bell did get me thinking about the way a story is put together. On the downside, in addition to the poor story choices, it's hard for me to shake the critical voice in my head, now Bell's voice, to make sure every word and sentence in the story you write count. This book will not make writing enjoyable, but it may make you a bit more

obsessive about writing.

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### **Dennis says**

#### **Essential**

This collection of stories and the technique for understanding their craft is essential for any writer. The author takes care to dissect each story with an organized approach that works well for students. The book is divided into section on linear stories and modular stories and the two are well defined in analysis. An excellent read.

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### **Ann Douglas says**

A really helpful guide to analyzing short fiction. The footnotes accompanying each short story are invaluable. It's the closest thing to a short fiction class you're likely to find in book form.

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### **Anne says**

This book is brilliant. The short stories are, on the whole, excellent and worthwhile even outside of the collection and with Bell's commentary and analysis, making sure the reader really gets why these stories are good, I find myself with a whole new level of appreciation for the intricacy of a good short story. It's the kind of writing book that makes me want to write instead of making me dig my heels in. Structure is so much more important, I think, than people often realize (and than I realized before reading this). And come on, who doesn't think that cover design is awesome? No one, that's who.

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