



Soizick Meister

# The ANATOMY of a FLASHBACK

Use it sparingly, but when you do, do it skillfully. Here's how.

By Peter Selgin

**W**ARE ALL LIKE Scheherazade's husband," E.M. Forster reminds us, "in that we all like to know what happens next." *What happens next* in a story is called a *scene*. The word comes from the Latin "scena," or stage, by way of the Greek word for a temporary tent or shelter forming the background for a dramatic perfor-

mance. Without scenes to house them, our stories remain at best synoptic, at worst naked abstractions. They are left out in the cold.

Strung like beads along a thread of causation, scenes add up to plot. There are two methods of relating scenes, summary being the narrative method, scene the dramatic one. Summary is expedient, scene elaborate; summary tells, scene shows. Gatsby flinging his silk shirts "in many colored disarray"

across his bed to impress Daisy—that's a scene. Rose of Sharon breastfeeding the dying man at the close of *The Grapes of Wrath*—that's a scene. What we remember most in great stories are the scenes. They are what Scheherazade spins under threat of death.

Narrative's suitcases, scenes hold not only action and dialogue—the prime elements of dramatic writing—but summary, description, background, stream of consciousness—even other scenes, or

flashbacks. Dislodged from scene, even our most “vivid” descriptions go begging, while our characters wander the stage like actors in search of a play. Like gangrenous limbs, our narratives go cold, shrivel and die. When narrative detaches itself in this way from scene, the result is called a *digression*: a passage that snatches us so irrevocably out of a moment that, like lovers interrupted mid-coitus, we never return to it intact.

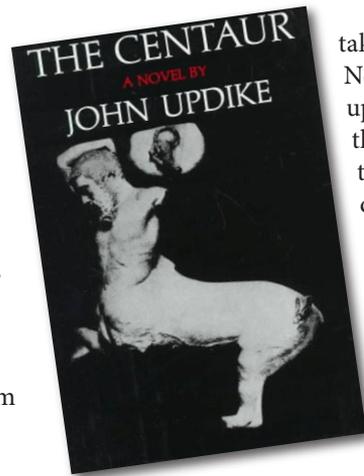
A flashback is a digression that, if skillfully done, works. But very often they don't; they break the backs of the scenes they're meant to ride on. If, after four pages chronicling the origins of the gin blossoms on Aunt Stonemaiden's nose, we've entirely forgotten her storming into the parlor with a meat cleaver to castrate her dissolute nephew, something has gone wrong. Like the caboose on a train, the flashback has come uncoupled. It is no longer part of the scene, but a distraction from it.

Yet when handled expertly, even long flashbacks holding not just one but mul-

**John Updike offers a masterful flashback—journeying through six distinct layers of time—in his early novel *The Centaur*.**

tiple scenes can work, and not just well, but superbly. Why and how do they work? What keeps them from being digressive? To find out, let's tour through one gorgeous flashback, with how-to steps along the way. Step 1 being:

**1 Have a strong scene to depart from.** In his brilliant early novel *The Centaur*, John Updike interrupts a tense, carefully built-up scene in which Peter, his adolescent narrator-protagonist, is being driven to school on an icy winter morning by his self-deprecatory father (who teaches history) to



take readers on a side trip to New York. The detour burns up 750 words (or roughly three pages) and tunnels through no fewer than six distinct layers of time.

Such long, complicated flashbacks are often called “portmanteau,” after those Victorian suitcases of leather or cloth that carried so much. But before we get to the flashback, let's dip into the main

scene itself, in which, despite their tardiness, Peter's father picks up a hitchhiker. Space prevents my quoting Updike whole. Here's my truncation:

“I was living with a guy up in Albany,” the hitchhiker said reluctantly.

... “A friend?” [my father] asked.

“Yeah. Kinda.”

“What happened? He pull the old double-cross?”

In his delight the hitchhiker lurched forward behind me. “That's right, buddy,” he told my father. “That's just what the f— — sucker did. Sorry, boy.”

On behalf of his son, dad accepts the apology, adding that Peter “hears more horrible stuff in a day than I have in a lifetime.” We are still in the main or “primary” scene. Updike has gone to great pains to construct a tense situation in which the consequences of his characters' tardiness are well established. With the reader's involvement thus secure, Updike has not only bought himself some narrative “slack,” he's obliged to milk things a bit. Hence the hitchhiker, a “benevolent digression”—benevolent for the reader, but not to poor Peter:

... I vividly resented that [my father] should even speak of me to this man, that he should dip the shadow of my personality into this reservoir of slime. That my existence at one extremity should be tangent to Vermeer [Peter is smitten with this artist] and at the other to the hitchhiker seemed an unendurable strain.

Will the hitchhiker turn out to be truly evil? Will Peter and his father get to school on time? If not, will Peter be sus-

## BEFORE AND AFTER

### Flashback helps illuminate the past

#### Problem

My short story “Boy-B” is about a man visiting his twin who has survived a suicide attempt. The twist is that the suicidal twin has always bullied and otherwise dominated the brother. I needed a flashback to compress the twins' past, and to express the full dynamic of their relationship in concise yet vivid terms.

#### Solution

The flashback I came up with begins after the narrator, a struggling painter, has gone to sleep in his brother's show-piece Victorian house, and ends as he wakes up to the smell of bacon frying. Here's part of it.

In sixth grade my brother and I pulled the ol' switcheroo. Mr. Barnes, my regular teacher, was sick that day, and we had a new substitute. Due to overcrowding, class was held in a so-called portable unit, one of a dozen

one-room buildings erected in the parking lot. As the substitute took roll Lloyd sat at my desk. When my name was called, he got up, went to the window, opened it and jumped out. The substitute was still recovering from this act of gross impertinence when she heard a knocking coming from the supply closet. She opened the door and I calmly stepped out. She ran off to get Mr. Cleary, the vice principal, and we never saw her again.

This story represents one of the few moments when, instead of fighting each other, Lloyd and I pooled our resources to triumph over the outside world. Otherwise we were by no means the Doublemint Twins. We did not walk around in matching sweaters with matching tennis rackets slung blithely over our shoulders. As far back as I can remember we were adversaries ...

—Peter Selgin

pendent? Will his father get fired? All this Updike gives us to chew on. As if our teeth aren't busy enough, he tosses us a flashback. But unlike dogs, readers are fussy: They won't chase any bone. Our flashbacks should have some meat on them, and more: They should be earned.

**2** **Make sure flashbacks are motivated.** Since long before Proust bit into that tea-soaked cookie, authors have used mnemonics—sensory phenomenon that assist or help to assist memory—to motivate flashbacks. Rather than write (in essence), “For no good reason at all, Jack remembered the time when ...,” they use material within the primary scene as kindling to fuel their flashbacks. Updike being Updike, he does so brilliantly:

But relief was approaching. ... We passed a trailer truck laboring toward the crest so slowly its peeling paint seemed to have weathered in transit. Well back from the road, Rudy Essick's great brown mansion sluggishly climbed through the downslipping trees.

Here comes the flashback. Note how deftly Updike slips into it by means of not one but two mnemonics, first a sign, then a smell. The best flashbacks are always motivated by sensory stimuli.

Coughdrop Hill took its name from its owner, whose coughdrops (“*Sick? Suck an Essick!*”) were congealed by the million in an Alton factory that flavored whole blocks of the city with the smell of menthol. They sold, in their little tangerine-colored boxes, throughout the East; the one time in my life I had been to Manhattan, I had been astonished to find, right in the throat of Paradise, on a counter in Grand Central Station, a homely ruddy row of them. ...

From a strip of wintry Pennsylvania

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**When handled expertly, even long flashbacks holding not just one but multiple scenes can work, and not just well, but superbly.**

## WORKOUT

**WRITE A SCENE** of 500 to 1,000 words in which a character is going from Point A to Point B. He (or she) may be traveling on foot or by car, or by some other means. Whatever the means or destination, there should be some urgency attached to the journey. Into this scene, introduce a flashback of about 250 words. The flashback should be motivated by and should relate thematically to the present scene. For an extra challenge, have the scene within the flashback include some dialogue.

—P.S.

road we're transported to Grand Central Station and to what I'll call “Level II” of Updike's scene, “Level I” being the primary ride-to-school scene in which the flashback is embedded. Note the sly insertion of that “had been,” the past perfect tense, which tells us, lest there be any confusion, that we've dipped into another layer of time.

**3** **When writing in past tense, to make it clear that you're writing a flashback, dip into the past perfect.** Once having established the temporal shift, you can drop the perfect tense—as Updike does promptly. From here the flashback descends, elevator-like, through layers of scene. The same paragraph continues:

... In disbelief I bought a box. Sure enough, on the back, beneath an imposing miniature portrait of the factory, the fine print stated *Made in Alton, Pa.* And the box, opened, released the chill, ectoplasmic smell of Brubaker Street. The two cities of my life, the imaginary and the actual, were superimposed ... a hollow mile beneath the ceiling that on an aqua sky displayed the constellations with sallow electric stars ...

The elevator has dropped to Level III, to a scene in which father waits as son buys cough drops in Grand Central Station. A minor scene, true, but a scene, leading us deeper into the flash-

back. Same paragraph:

... Up to this moment my father had failed me. Throughout our trip, an overnight visit to his sister, he had been frightened and frustrated. The city was bigger than the kind he understood. The money in his pocket dwindled without our buying anything. ...

This brings us to Level IV, wherein the New York trip is first broadly summarized. From there the focus tightens on Peter's devoutly wished-for encounter with his two favorite Vermeers.

... That these paintings, which I had worshipped in reproduction, had a simple physical existence seemed a profound mystery to me: to come within touching distance of their surfaces, to see with my eyes the truth of their color, the tracery of the cracks whereby time had inserted itself like a mystery within a mystery, would have been for me to enter a Real Presence so ultimate I would not have been surprised to die in the encounter.

Arguably we've descended to Level V, Updike having sketched a conjectural scene where boy confronts Dutch Master. On this illusion the next short, blunt sentence comes down like a sledgehammer:

My father's blundering blocked it.

If the rules of Fiction 101 say, “never put a flashback in a flashback,” Updike's hammer does a good job of smashing that, too. Having paid this hypothetical visit to Vermeer's masterpieces, we're now reeled back to the hotel room where Peter's been stuck the whole time.

We never entered the museums; I never saw the paintings. Instead I saw the inside of my father's sister's hotel room [Level VI]. ... Aunt Alma sipped a yellow drink and dribbled the smoke of Kools from her very thin red lips. She had white, white skin and her eyes were absolutely transparent with intelligence. ...

Though they belong to a flashback, the details here are as rich as can be; nothing is spared.

Well, almost nothing.

... They talked all evening of pranks and crises in a vanished Passaic parsonage whose very mention made me sick and giddy, as if I were suspended over a canyon of time ...

**4 Summarize dialogue.** Within a flashback, it's best to avoid *direct* dialogue in favor of summarized or *indirect* dialogue. Dialogue broken into paragraphs undermines not only a flashback's integrity but its humility, suggesting that the flashback has staged a palace coup and usurped the primary scene.

... During the day, Aunt Alma, here as an out-of-town children's clothes buyer, left us to ourselves. The strangers my father stopped on the street resisted entanglement in his earnest, circular questioning.

Here (still in the same paragraph) Updike switches gears again, backtracking to the day that has led to this evening in the hotel. The elevator goes express, ascending up through generalities—

Their rudeness and his ignorance humiliated me, and my irritation had been building toward a tantrum that the cough drop dissolved.

—back to the scene in Grand Central Station. Did your ears pop? No wonder, since we're suddenly back on Level II!

I forgave him. In a temple of pale brown marble I forgave him and wanted to thank him for conceiving me to be born in a county that could insert its candy into the throat of Paradise ... and even now, two years later, whenever in our daily journey we went up or down Coughdrop Hill, there was for me an undercurrent of New York and the constellations that seemed to let us soar, free together of the local earth.

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**Ask: Does the flashback deepen our understanding of a character or a relationship? Does it provide needed background? In the end, it comes down to what a story needs.**

Now, with a new paragraph of but two sentences, the flashback screeches to a halt, landing us back on Level I:

Instead of breaking, my father by some mistake plunged past the Olinger turnoff. I cried, "Hey!"

From here the primary scene takes over again and continues nine more pages to its resolution. Updike knows he has exhausted the good faith (read: tension) accrued within the primary scene; he's milked it to the limit, and possibly beyond. Does he get away with it? I say yes, but then I've read the scene in its entirety and in its proper context; you haven't. That Updike writes some of the best prose around doesn't hurt, either.

**5 Keep flashbacks to one paragraph.** Yet while in flashback even Mr. Updike doesn't risk breaking into full-blown dramatic scene. We remain listeners, not spectators. Nor does he allow himself more than a single paragraph, however long.

Which brings me to my final breakable rule, one that embraces nearly all I've said.

**6 Within flashback, summarize, don't dramatize.** Once transported via flashback into a new scene containing action and dialogue, the reader typically either forgets the primary scene or resents the "bait and switch." When flashbacks take over, it sometimes indicates that our primary scene is in fact a *framing device*, a vessel into which we've poured the story we *really* wanted to tell. Such framing devices tend to be both awkward and unnecessary, suggesting two remedies: a) get rid of the frame, or b) lose the painting and make the frame the subject.

**7 Avoid flashbacks—unless your story demands them.** Not to discourage, I've saved this advice for last. But the burden of our narratives—and on Scheherazade's head—is one of *forward movement*. By all means use flashbacks, but for good reason: not because you want to use them, but because your story demands them. Ask: Does the flashback deepen our understanding of a

character or a relationship? Does it provide needed background? In the end, it comes down to what a story needs.

And what will keep King Schariar's sword off our necks. #

### **Peter Selgin**

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## RESOURCES

**THOSE WISHING** to subject themselves to works that flout every single rule I've set down with such piety may wish to dip into Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, a novel consisting entirely of flashbacks—or, if you prefer, flash-forwards, since the chapters may be read in any order.

Likewise, in his novel *Tristram Shandy*, Lawrence Stern makes mince-meat of chronological order, writing his preface halfway through his narrative when the main characters are asleep. Elsewhere, having asked to digress for half an hour, he does so for five minutes longer, forcing him to accomplish "in five minutes less than no time at all" all that his digression has left undone.

You may also want to pick up James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, with this warning: Since the novel has no beginning or ending—or rather, since the beginning *is* the ending and vice-versa—you may never put it down.

For the less iconoclastic among you, for examples of extraordinary flashbacks I recommend Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, specifically the sections where the spy Caravaggio turns up (though the novel as a whole is infused with flashbacks). Then, of course, there's that early flashback in *Lolita*, in which Humbert's fixation with the ur-Lolita, Annabel, is recounted. And no survey of flashbacks is complete without *The Great Gatsby*, which holds at least two great ones, including the one where we learn how Daisy and Gatsby first met.