

## IN DEFENSE OF TELLING: HOW TO PUT IDEAS INTO YOUR SHORT FICTION

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SYBIL BAKER

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I really began thinking about the “vision thing” after the 2004 American elections. During that time, with so many of my fellow writers and teachers in despair over the direction our country was headed, I recalled a passage from one of my favorite short stories, “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon.” In the story, a French film director is in a bar talking to a group of young African Americans who are traveling around Europe. He tells them his opinion about the United States: “I cannot help saying that I think it is a scandal—and we all may pay very dearly for it—that a civilized nation should elect to represent itself a man who is so simple that he thinks the world is simple” (Baldwin, “Morning” 182).

I’ve yet to read a recent story that resonates as much for me about the state of America today as that story by written James Baldwin and published in 1960. When I recall Baldwin and some of my favorite classic writers such as Ernest Hemingway, John Cheever, Flannery O’Connor, and Donald Barthelme, I still think one thing: those writers had vision. Yet many fledgling writers, constrained by the adage “show don’t tell,” are often afraid to articulate a personal vision or philosophy in their own short fiction. I hope this essay will provide some theoretical grounding and practical tools to help those interested in bringing ideas into their short fiction. First I will examine *why* much of contemporary American fiction privileges the psychological over the philosophical; then, using classic American short stories I’ll show ways to incorporate your vision into your writing and participate in a literature of ideas as well as emotions.

## A Brief History of Ideas in the American Short Story

John Updike writes in his introduction to the *Best American Short Stories of the Century*, “Whatever statistics show, my firm impression is that in my lifetime the importance of short fiction as a news-bearing medium—bringing Americans news of how they live, and why—has diminished” (xxii). The reasons for this diminishment are often the subject of the contemporary short story itself. First movies, then TV, and now the Internet take center stage as “news-bearing media.” In turn, they have also become the “idea-bearing” media in American society while concurrently short fiction has increasingly criticized the commoditization of ideas or ignored them altogether.

If we look at the history of short fiction in North America, this outcome is not surprising. As Updike notes of the “minimalist” stories that became in vogue in the 1970s, “Such writing expressed post-Vietnam burnout much as Hemingway spoke for the disillusioned mood after World War I. The reader’s hunger for meaning and *gloire* is put on starvation rations; the nullity of quiddity is matched by the banality of normal conversation” (xxii).

I believe this shift from creating stories with “meaning” to writing stories about the quotidian life that often held no “meaning,” was not only the result of post-Vietnam burnout, as Updike notes, but also reflects an increasing—and welcome—interest in marginal voices of personal experience, in the stories of women, minorities, immigrants, gays, and what Raymond Carver refers to as a “submerged population...people who don’t always have someone to speak out for them” (Grimal). So while our short fiction is more diverse than ever, post-Vietnam burnout has also resulted in many American writers turning increasingly inward. This isolationist policy has led to an increasing preoccupation with the dysfunctional self and its relation to families, lovers, and society.

In a 1986 interview Carver was questioned about his influence on the new generation of “hot writers” (in this case Jay McInerney, David Leavitt, and Bret Easton Ellis). When asked what ideals this new generation expressed, Carver says, “If we’re referring to sociopolitical ideals, I’d say these writers are absolutely indifferent to any kind of engagement, pressure, or political struggle. Instead, they write about themselves, their psychological problems, their relations with their peers. They have no political message to convey, not even a negative one” (Del Pozzo).

In a post-modern world where meaning is relative and arbitrary, in a burned-out, jaded society, where 18-year-olds have “seen it all,” the notion of writing about stories with ideas, of the writer having a philosophical vision that drives her fiction on the surface seems naïve, anachronistic, and even dangerous. Jean Paul Sartre’s support of Stalin is an example of how politics and art don’t mix. And while Ezra Pound is considered to be one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, his fascist ideas, many argue, would have been better left unexpressed.

Yet the fallout of that abdication of ideas in fiction is too real. Today, a writer’s choice to “write about themselves, their psychological problems, their relations with their peers” *exclusively* is the choice that now seems to me to be naïve, anachronistic and even dangerous in our post-9/11 society. The era of “indifference” for the writer is over. No one can argue that the burnt-out post-

Vietnam era produced some classic short fiction led by Carver himself. But all great eras must come to an end, and I believe that we are in a new era, an international post-9/11 era where writers should not only write about the psychological world of the self, but allow room for ideas of the world as well.

But many of us avoid bringing ideas into our fiction for fear we'll be hot-winded bores. I believe our avoidance stems from our aversion to that four letter word: t-e-l-l. We're taught from workshop 101 to show and not tell until it's practically a Pavlovian response. We can sniff out a scene that's being told and not shown like a dog tracking its own urine.

As writer David Jauss once mentioned to me, with a generation raised to write book reports telling about one's summer vacation, this retraining of the writer to show rather than tell makes perfect sense. And "showing" is a relatively straightforward concept that provides almost immediate and dramatic improvements in a beginning writer's work. As Updike points out, "minimalism gave college instructors in the proliferating writing courses a teachable ideal: keep it clean, keep it concrete. The dictum is congenial, bespeaking no-nonsense American pragmatism" (xxii).

Not all students are happy with this teachable ideal, however. In her paper at a Graduate Humanities Conference in 2003, Sarah Read, an MFA student at the University of Utah, says:

In the fiction workshop, as a corporate body, we believe that fiction should not be driven by ideas; fiction is not about abstractions or theories, fiction is about the world of the senses. Yes, fiction writers are reporters who dare not say what they think for fear of scaring away the wary reader who does not want and does not expect to be hit over the head by the dogma of the author... I am not alone in my quest to point out that fiction writers (especially beginning fiction writers) are dumbed-down and silenced by a taught craft which disempowers writers from putting themselves, and their thoughts, boldly down on the page by telling it straight. (Read)

Encouraging students to tell more in their fiction seems at first glance like pure madness. Creative writing teachers already spend much of their time reading fictionalized "school reports," earnest philosophizing treatises disguised as fiction, and stories with "why can't we all just get along" Rodney King themes. The last thing they want to do is encourage their students to write more of the same.

Yet, after much thought, reflection, and soul searching, at the risk of being branded as a heretic, I beg to disagree. I think it's time that we examine the meaning of existence beyond the private problems of self so that our short fiction speaks for ourselves, our nation and the world. Tall order? No doubt. But I think we can do it, or at least die trying. I think it's time that we have a vision in our writing that is based on not only emotion but on ideas. And that might mean, God-forbid, that we do a bit of telling.

There is a caveat of course: you must tell well.

## The Singular Effect of Emotion and Idea in Fiction

As Edgar Allen Poe says, all the elements in the short story should contribute to a singular effect. If we look at the stories that made the *Best American Short Stories of the Century*, (which include classics by Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Connor, and Cheever, and more recent writers such as Grace Paley and Tim O'Brien) they have not only conveyed a singular effect of emotion, but also a singular effect of the idea. These singular effects usually exist through the felt sense, through senses that are felt as an effect of the story. These effects, I believe, can be effects of ideas as well as emotions.

Read says:

I am a writer because I have things to say about the world. And then I am taught by the craft of my art that I cannot say these things that I have to say, or that if I want to say them I have to disguise my ideas behind character development, plot, scene and good dialogue. I have to sneak my ideas in through the back door of narrative; **through the felt sense**. Thankfully, I believe that there is an alternative to the limited philosophical flexibility of showing, even in fiction: *the alternative is telling that can evoke the felt sense of an idea as vividly as showing can evoke the felt sense of an emotion*.

Our stories don't have to have only an emotional effect. Stories that linger the most are the ones that leave me with an emotion first and an idea second. Think of a story with a combined effect of emotion and idea as like drinking a nice glass of wine. The instant emotional rush from reading a good story is like that rush of wine on your tongue, but the idea lingers on, just as a good wine has a strong satisfying finish that remains after the wine has been swallowed.

Let's look at how this one-two punch effect of emotion and idea works in classic twentieth century short stories. Since I quoted Updike's preface, I'll start with stories by Hemingway, O'Connor and Cheever from *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* that I feel evoke both a felt sense of an emotion and an idea. I'll then examine a story by Donald Barthelme, a writer who is known for his innovative use of ideas in his short fiction. Finally I'll revisit Baldwin's story, which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Although I'm not examining any recent fiction, that doesn't mean that there aren't stories being published today that aren't fully engaged in the world of ideas. I do believe there are, but I'm more concerned here with what is considered "the best" of our mainstream literary fiction.

### Show ideas through dialogue and action ("The Killers" by Ernest Hemingway)

"The Killers" reflects Hemingway's idea of the "Code Hero," a person who according to Philip Young is "a man who lives correctly, following the ideals of honor, courage and endurance in a world that is sometimes chaotic, often stressful, and always painful" (Young). "The Killers" concerns Nick's first knowing confrontation with evil. Two paid assassins enter the café Nick works

at, looking for Ole, a former prizefighter. When he doesn't show up, the killers leave, and Nick is sent to warn Ole that the men intend to kill him. Ole, in his boarding house room, turns his head to the wall, seemingly resigned to his death, no longer willing to "fight" for his life. Nick then returns to the café and announces to the owner George that he is going to leave town because he "can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful" (Hemingway 76). What is so awful to Nick in the story is not just the evil of the killers, but of Ole not fighting against or confronting death, the way a Code Hero should. In this story, the characters represent different ways of dealing with evil. The cook wants to look away and not see evil, while George acknowledges evil but wants to ignore it. Ole gives in to his fate at the hands of evil. Nick sees evil and tries to do something by warning Ole, but in the end runs away from it. According to Hemingway, none of the reactions in this story are those of a Code Hero, who would simply confront death directly.

By using the distancing third-person point of view and narrating the story mostly through dialogue, Hemingway heightens the allegorical aspect of the story while diminishing the emotional content. By appearing to only "report" the events of the story, the actions and dialogue of the characters carry the meaning. Nick's action at the end of the story is in response not only to his emotional reaction of seeing evil but it is also a philosophical action, a running away from the idea of evil.

If Hemingway had only addressed this notion of the Code Hero in this one story, the reader might attribute the ideas presented as those of the characters. But by repeating his ideas in other stories, Hemingway elevates his ideas into a philosophical vision of how to live life.

## **Convey ideas through recurring images, symbol, parable, and point of view ("Greenleaf" by Flannery O'Connor)**

Similar to "The Killers," Flannery O'Connor uses violence as way to illuminate the "extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (O'Connor, "Work" 107). O'Connor clearly states her own strategy for writing about her deeply held Catholic beliefs. "I have found...from reading my own writing that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. I have also found that what I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil" (Weber).

While Hemingway's "The Killers" evokes ideas mostly through dialogue and the actions of the characters, O'Connor's "Greenleaf" uses an image and point-of-view change to evoke the idea of grace at the end of the story. Although most of the story is told from the third-person point of view of Mrs. May, the view is ironic and detached, since Mrs. May views the world with suspicious and intolerant eyes. She defends and blames her shiftless sons and is jealous of her worker—one of Mr. Greenleaf's sons. When Mr. Greenleaf's son's bull escapes and grazes on her pasture, she demands that Mr. Greenleaf shoot it. At the end of the story, Mrs. May is alone in the pasture with the bull that eventually gores her. The story ends:

She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.

Mr. Greenleaf was running toward her from the side with his gun raised and she saw him coming though she was not looking in his direction. She saw him approaching on the outside of some invisible circle, the tree line gaping behind him and nothing under his feet. He shot the bull four times through the eye. She did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on his head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear. ("Greenleaf" 368)

The story ends with the emotional effect of a violent and sudden death to a character we did not like a lot, and with the idea of final grace, which permeates all of O'Connor's fiction. Because the story ends concretely with the image of Mrs. May "bent whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" the sense-emotion and sense-idea of a final grace are conveyed.

## **Address ideas directly in dialogue or through internal thinking ("The Country Husband" by John Cheever)**

Another way to introduce ideas in a story is to have other characters be the mouthpieces for them. In the preface to the *Collected Stories of John Cheever*, Cheever writes of his subject matter:

Here is the last of that generation of chain smokers who woke the world in the morning with their coughing, who used to get stoned at cocktail parties and perform obsolete dance steps like 'the Cleveland Chicken,' sail for Europe on ships, who were truly nostalgic for love and happiness, and whose gods were as ancient as yours and mine, whoever you are. The constants that I look for in this sometimes dated paraphernalia are a love of light and a determination to trace some moral chain of being. Calvin played no part at all in my religious education, but his presence seemed to abide in the barns of my childhood and to have left me with some undue bitterness. (Cheever, "Introduction" ix-x)

John Cheever develops this idea of a "moral chain of being" in "The Country Husband." This story chronicles the events of Francis Weed, who realizes he is living a trapped and stultifying life in Shady Hill, a town in the suburbs outside New York. Francis falls for the babysitter, Ann Murchison, who awakens all that had been lost in him. While talking to a boy in the neighborhood named Clayton, Francis discovers to his horror that the boy is engaged to Ann. Clayton tells Francis and his wife Julia that he is unimpressed with Shady Hill:

And all the dovescotes are phony,” Clayton said. “And the way people clutter up their lives. I’ve thought about it a lot, and what seems to me to be really wrong with Shady Hill is that it doesn’t have any future. So much energy is spent in perpetuating the place—in keeping out undesirables and so forth—that the only idea of the future anyone has is just more and more commuting trains and more parties. I don’t think that’s healthy. I think people ought to be able to dream big dreams about the future. I think people ought to be able to dream great dreams. (“Country” 339)

Unable to face the truth of Clayton’s statements, Francis tells his wife Julia that, “Clayton was lazy, irresponsible, affected, and smelly” (Cheever, “Country” 340). Later when he is asked to help Clayton get a job, Francis refuses. Then faced with his wickedness and thinking back over his life:

...he wondered how he could have avoided arriving at just where he was...The feeling of bleakness was intolerable and he saw clearly that he had reached the point where he had to make a choice. He could go to a psychiatrist...he could go to church and confess his lusts; he could go to a Danish massage parlor in the West Seventies that had been recommended by a salesman; he could rape the girl or trust that he would somehow be prevented from doing this; or he could get drunk. It was his life, his boat, and like every other man, he was made to be father of thousands and what harm could there be in a tryst that would make them both feel more kindly toward the world. This was the wrong train of thought and he came back to the first, the psychiatrist.” (Cheever, “Country” 345)

Cheever gets across his ideas of what life should be (people ought to dream great dreams), through Clayton, and what life becomes and the choices one must make in this “moral chain of being.” Francis no longer dreams great dreams and gives up his “love of light,” but in his own “moral chain of being” finds in his woodwork therapy “true consolation in the simple arithmetic involved and in the holy smell of new wood” (“Country” 346).

Cheever uses two foils, Clayton and Francis, to evoke the conflict of living a moral life and chasing dreams with abandon. He does this through interior reflection (Francis) and through dialogue (Clayton). The idea in the story is that life is often not the dream it could be, but one must still make moral choices to live in it.

## **Foregrounding philosophical ideas (“The Golden Shower” by Donald Barthelme)**

Although Barthelme’s “A City of Churches” was included in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, I’m going to examine another of his stories to show how foregrounding an idea can also work in fiction. While stories that highlight philosophical ideas are usually associated with European or South American writers, they can still be found in American short fiction. Donald Barthelme’s short story “Shower of Gold” is essentially a story about the meaning of life. The character,

Peterson, a “minor” penniless artist “sells out” by agreeing to appear on an existentialist quiz show for \$200. Throughout the story the philosophical question “Who Am I?” is posed, along with the notion of the absurdity of life. This absurdist story is peppered with quotes or aphorisms by Martin Buber, Nietzsche, and Pascal, among others. The juxtaposition of the high-minded philosophy against the everyday drudgery of low-brow culture keeps the story grounded in that American “pragmatism” Updike refers to. The story ends with Peterson on the quiz show describing the meaning of life:

“In this kind of world,” Peterson said, “absurd if you will, possibilities nevertheless proliferate and escalate all around us and there are opportunities for beginning again...don’t be reconciled. Turn off your television sets,” Peterson said, “cash in your life insurance, indulge in a mindless optimism. Visit girls at dusk. Play the guitar. How can you be alienated without first being connected? Think back and remember how it was.” (Barthelme 16)

The TV crew threatens Peterson to stop talking but he ignores them and continues. “‘My mother was a royal virgin,’ Peterson said, ‘and my father a shower of gold. My childhood was pastoral and energetic and rich in experiences which developed my character. As a young man I was noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in form express and admirable, and in apprehension...’ Peterson went on and on and although he was, in a sense, lying, in a sense he was not” (16).

Barthelme ends the story exploiting the tension between the post-modern notion of absurdity of life and the more old-fashioned notion of connectedness and optimism. The story ends though with the more optimistic tone, that Peterson “was not lying” about a world where it is possible to begin again.

Barthelme’s own ideas about art reflect his approach to this story and his others. In his introduction to Barthelme’s *Sixty Stories*, David Gates quotes Barthelme: “I believe that my every sentence trembles with morality in that each attempts to engage the problematic,” [Barthelme] said (xviii). “The change of emphasis from the what to the how seems to me to be the major impulse in art since Flaubert, and it’s not merely formalism, it’s not at all superficial, it’s an attempt to reach the truth, and a very rigorous one” (xviii). With its foregrounding of ideas, “Shower of Gold” reflects Barthelme’s attempt to reach the truth in his short fiction.

## **Incorporate ideas through direct telling, either by the narrator or one of the characters (“This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” by James Baldwin)**

Another way to incorporate ideas is through telling, a useful short story tool that I believe has been suffering under not so-benign neglect. In her paper, Read quotes poet Roger Mitchell from *The Practice of Poetry*: “Mitchell claims that ‘Show, Don’t Tell’ is an aesthetic reaction to the didactic literature of the late nineteenth century. While this aesthetic value was a necessary antidote in the

beginning part of the 20th century, now, he claims, we are apt to think of thinking, propounding, generalizing and telling as crimes against art. We are, he says, ‘Legatees of the Aesthetic movement a hundred years after its demise’ (Read). I agree with Mitchell and Read that it is time to bring telling back to the short story.

To address the notion of “telling” I’d like to return to Baldwin’s story that I quoted at the beginning, “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” (which did make it to *Best American Short Stories* in 1961). The main character is a black American actor-singer who has been living in France for the past twelve years. Narrated in first person and present and past tense, the main character’s interior ruminations closely parallel Baldwin’s own ideas on the life of the artist. This 52-page story chronicles the night before the narrator, his Swedish wife, and biracial son are going to America for an extended journey. The narrator goes out for drinks with Vidal, a French film director, and they meet some college-age black Americans traveling around Europe. The narrator also encounters an old Algerian acquaintance, who is later accused by the Americans of stealing one of the girl’s wallets. These external circumstances are the conditions for the narrator to ruminate on race, expatriation, Americans, freedom, and identity. These thoughts closely resemble Baldwin’s own in his essay “The New Lost Generation,” published in 1962.

For example, when speaking of Paris, the narrator says “And I love Paris, I will always love it, it is the city which saved my life. It saved my life by allowing me to be who I am” (Baldwin, “Morning” 157). Compare this to Baldwin’s own opinion about the artist, “In my case, I think my exile saved my life, for it inexorably confirmed something which Americans appear to have great difficulty accepting. Which is, simply, this: a man is not a man until he is able and willing to accept his own vision of the world, no matter how radically this vision departs from others.” (Baldwin, “New” 280).

And this passage about Americans from the story could as easily have come from the same essay: “There was an eerie and unnerving unreality about everything they said and did, as though they were all members of the same team and were acting on orders from some invincibly cheerful and tirelessly inventive coach” (Baldwin 160). In his essay Baldwin makes a similar comment, saying “There are long moments when this country resembles nothing so much as the grimmest of popularity contests” (Baldwin, “New” 280). For Baldwin, the “telling” in his essay feeds his fiction, and vice versa.

I’d like to return to the French character Vidal, whom I quoted a few paragraphs earlier. Vidal says to the group of African Americans, “I have never really understood Americans, I am an old man now and I suppose I never will. There is something very nice about them, something winning, but they seem so ignorant—so ignorant of life. Perhaps it is because we in Europe, whatever else we do not know, or have forgotten, know about suffering. We have suffered here. You have suffered too. But most Americans do not yet know what anguish is. It is too bad, because the life of the West is in their hands” (Baldwin, “Morning” 192). Again, these mirror Baldwin’s own thoughts at the end of his essay. “Europeans refer to Americans as children in the same way that American Negroes refer to them as children, and for the same reason: they mean that Americans have so little experience—experience referring not to *what* happens, but to *who*—that they have no key to the experience of others. Our current relations with the world forcibly suggest that there is

more than a little truth to this” (Baldwin, “New” 280). Here Baldwin uses Vidal as a fictional character to represent Europeans’ opinions of Americans.

Baldwin used so much “telling” of his ideas successfully in his story by incorporating several techniques. First, most of the essay-like telling is precipitated by a concrete event in real or past time. Second, the telling contributes to the present-time tension of the narrator’s coming to terms with returning to America. Finally, the told parts of the story diminish as the present action intensifies until the last part of the story is shown almost entirely in present time. The last scene of the story ends with a concrete image that is an objective correlative for all the previous telling. The narrator has come home early in the morning and wakes his son Paul who has been sleeping at the neighbor’s, Mme. Dumont, to go to the apartment together. Mme. Dumont asks Paul,

“Ah, you are going on a journey, how does it feel yet?”

“He doesn’t know yet,” I tell her. I walk to the elevator door and open it, dropping Paul down to the crook of my arm.

She laughs again. “He will know later. What a journey! *Fusqu’au nouveau monde.*”

I open the cage and we step inside. “Yes,” I say, “all the way to the new world.” I press the button and the cage, holding my son and me, goes up.” (192)

By ending with the conflicting images of the cage and the positive image of going “up” Baldwin brings the idea “sense” to the reader along with the emotional sense. In this way, the telling feeds into the showing at the end of the story. Baldwin shows that when used judiciously and effectively, telling can be a useful tool in a short story.

These examples show that just like trying to achieve an emotional effect in our stories, achieving an “idea effect” requires a large and varied writer’s toolbox. In examining the ideas in these stories, I’m also struck by some commonalities among them. These are:

- The stories include a high-stake event that forces the character to consider the philosophical side of life.
- The authors repeat the idea in other stories, elevating it to theme, which ultimately becomes a “vision” in their fiction.
- The ideas are made concrete through the sense effects of images and symbols.
- Stories still have emotional resonance, i.e., they have a singular effect of emotion *and* idea.
- The stories—and the ideas—are not Pollyannish or diminish the harsh realities and complexities of the world their characters live in.
- A character’s crisis or dysfunction is seen more as a philosophical crisis (how should I “be” in the world) than as a psychological crisis (why am I so messed up?).

I think this last point bears more examination. It seems that in more recent American fiction, the emphasis has often been on a character’s psychological crisis rather than philosophical.

This may be because as individuals we feel we have suffered and have been wronged by our circumstances, society, and/or family. Yet despite our individual pain, perhaps it *is* still true that, as Baldwin's Vidal says, "most Americans do not yet know what anguish is. It is too bad, because the life of the West is in their hands." Since 9/11, it feels that the life of the world—not just the West—is in our hands. Perhaps after 9/11, Americans have experienced this kind of suffering and anguish Vidal speaks of; if not, certainly we have inflicted enough of it on others.

We are writers in the most widely read language in the most influential country in the world—yet we still complain that nobody reads us. The truth is, we have access to publication and readers that those in other parts of the (especially non-English speaking) world can only dream of. Our stories are taught in schools and universities, not just in the States but around the world. We have book clubs, writing groups, blogs, webzines, publishing cooperatives, and access to easy and affordable self-publishing. Fame and fortune as a writer may be as elusive as it always has been, but as more people around the world learn English and become connected through the Internet, we have increasing chances to be read.

Perhaps, then, what we Americans really are complaining about then is that as writers we just don't feel important. If that's the case, I urge to you put your vision into your fiction and make it important. Your readers, even if they amount to half a dozen, will respond in kind.

And finally, having a vision and letting that guide your writing is just plain good for you. Like Barthelme's Peterson, we can choose how we want to see the world, as one that is alienating and absurd—or as one of connection and value. Perhaps the first is more accurate, but in this case, is that important? Studies report that optimists live longer and healthier lives, even if their fellow pessimists' view of the world is actually more realistic. In the same way, one writer's little ideas might not change the world, a country, or even one person, but does that mean that she shouldn't try? Maybe your personal vision won't, to paraphrase Rick in *Casablanca*, amount to a hill of beans in this crazy mixed up world. But you'll feel better for trying to illuminate your personal and philosophical truth, for doing something enlarging rather than diminishing, for challenging yourself, pushing yourself, for seeing your efforts as contributing to the conversation. And who knows, developing a personal vision and incorporating ideas into our fiction might even make us better writers.

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*Sybil Baker's novel The Life Plan is forthcoming from Casperian Books in early 2009. Her fiction and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous journals, including, most recently in Alehouse and A Woman's World Again (an anthology). She is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Before that she lived in Seoul, South Korea, for twelve years.*

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