

THE SCIENCE OF EVOCATION HANDOUT

2016 AWP CONFERENCE

Some Characteristics of Books that Have Affected People Over Time

- **Mystery.** There was often some mystery or question. Sometimes the mystery involved contradictions or information that could not be fully known so that the mystery could never be completely solved, but the character or narrator came to a fuller understanding of the issues or event over the course of the story.
- **Ambiguities and multiple perspectives.** Many stories involved central ambiguities that stuck with the reader as a reminder that situations are rarely “all good or all bad,” or are the product of many competing interests, perspectives, and human imperfections.
- **Time.** Going forward or backward in time was frequently involved. In fiction a character often literally goes back or forward in time, in nonfiction there can be multiple stories—one in the past, and one in the future, or a projected future, or some showing of how one time has affected the present or multiple other time periods. *Examples: Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Silent Spring.*
- **Insider/Outsider Issues.** Main character and/or the narrator are frequently outsiders or wrestling with feelings of being an outsider.
- **Immersion in and/or coping in unfamiliar world.** If characters are not outsiders, then they are often in world set apart from “normal” adult society.
- **Affinity with narrator, central characters, or strong relationship with subject matter of nonfiction book.** In fiction, identification with one or more of the central characters plays a significant role, although the identification can be with a past self (child self) or future self (aspirational self). In nonfiction, the reader's affinity is often with the narrator who is acting as an interesting “guide” into a strange land that will broaden or deepen the reader's understanding of the world.
- **Race and Gender.** In this American sampling, race was factor in nearly half of the choices. Acting outside of societally prescribed gender role also a common theme.
- **Resonance of developmental issues, family, and/or cultural dynamics between reader and work.** The developmental stage of the reader turned out to be very important. Many of the childhood books involved small beings overcoming great odds or power differentials. Many of the books that were read as an adolescent involved insider/outsider issues, standing up for ones values, or hypocrisy. In

adulthood, hypocrisy became betrayal of the social contract. The reader's family and cultural dynamics also played a large role and tended to be seen as resonating with or confirming the reader's internal experience.

- **Assigned books discussed in class.** Many of the books that were identified as having long-term impacts were books that had been assigned in school. This gives me hope about the importance of school reading—whether the teacher is reading to the children, the children are reading to each other, or the book is discussed in a class or seminar. The attitude and enthusiasm of the teacher and class discussion also seemed to enhance the effect and memory of many books identified.
- **Sensory vividness and lyricism.** Sensory detail and sound and lyric quality of writing were usually not mentioned at first, but upon being asked to describe a memorable scene in their selections, subjects often identified vivid detail or sensory experience. When the reader began describing sensory detail the experience of the story seemed to return to the reader.
- **Insight or transformation in way of seeing world.** Many people said that the reason the books that they named affected them was because it changed their way of seeing the world. Most of the time the “revelation” did not come out of character's mouth so much as from story itself.
- **In Creative Nonfiction, it appears that specific sentences live in the unconscious rather than in conscious memory.** Readers remembered specific lines in nonfiction works less than one third of the time, although they often felt *as if* they could or should remember specific lines.
- **Metaphors and Motifs.** Readers frequently remembered central metaphors in the books that continued to affect them, or oriented their descriptions around a metaphor in the book.

Additional Characteristics that Keep Readers Reading

We also asked readers to describe what they found compelling about the two narrative books (fiction or nonfiction) that they had most recently read or were reading to identify qualities that incited readers to keep reading. Many of the same qualities described above were named, but also:

- **Surprise and suspense.** Readers like not knowing what was going to happen next or being surprised by twists in the plot or the ultimate conclusions. However they do want to know what's going on and who is who after an initial willingness to suspend confusion and annoyance in the belief that these things will unfold. Not surprisingly, surprise and suspense was not mentioned as often as mystery in books that readers had read some time ago, because the surprise and suspense were relieved/ended by the reading of the book.
- **Repetition.** Readers frequently identified recurring situations, dynamics, or lines whose meaning enlarged or changed over the course of the book. Over time the specifics of these seem to be blurred

and re-identified as “different perspectives” or a central metaphor when asked to describe affecting books that were read at least one year before the interview.

- **Language.** Lyrical or artful language and figurative speech tended to be recalled and recited as one of the reasons the reader found the book compelling much more frequently when the reader was describing a very recently read book.
- **Context and Recognition.** When describing books that they were currently reading or had very recently read, readers often related the context or situations in the book to their own lives or experience. Over time this seemed to be consolidated into the category of “different perspectives” and “affinity with character or narrator.”

List of Sensory Perceptions

1. Sight Foveal (shapes and forms, detail)
2. Sight Peripheral/Motion
3. Macular Vision (colors)
4. Sound
5. Smell
6. Touch
7. Taste
8. Temperature
9. Balance and Verticality
10. Pressure
11. Electromagnetic senses and vibration
12. Pain
 - a. Ache
 - b. Throb
 - c. Pierce and Stab
 - d. Burn
 - e. Hot and cold simultaneously
 - f. Sharp (slap)
 - g. Tearing and ripping
 - h. Grinding
 - i. Numbness
13. Thirst
14. Hunger
15. Itch

16. Proprioceptive Awareness (spatial awareness of self and movement in space)
17. Internal movement of muscles and tissues
18. Muscle power (muscle strength and strain)
19. Oxygen/carbon dioxide ratios
20. Synesthetic responses

EXCERPTS

Mystery, Multiple Senses:

Her last summer was full of heat and drought. Amid the late terse calls of gathering birds, pine branches cracked overhead as squirrels collected nuts for their stores. The irrigation ponds had been pumped down to nothing and still there wasn't enough water for the corn. The apples reddened small, the honey darkened to a flavor deeper than I'd ever tasted, and by September the air smelled of ripe grapes on one wind, and o another of the dust that swirled in back of the pickups.

Jane Brox, *Clearing Land*

Multiple Senses, Place, Time, Pattern Completion Teases:

Sunday afternoons in the hospital were the stillest and longest—formless hours to be gotten through. With all the departments closed, there was none of the week's bustle. The familiar nurses were off, leaving us in the hands of unsympathetic aides who didn't care if we entertained or not. In the stillness, the traffic on the street below sounded louder. There were more of the other patients' visitors to watch, obscure relatives who made the trip from out of town bring useless flowers and ornately wrapped toys. But I grew tired of scrutinizing them, grew to recognize the swirling patterns and dynamics of every family that walked into the ward complaining of how hard it was to park around here, how long the elevators took. Some older brother or father would find a surgical mask and put it on and laugh, believing he was the first to discover this antic. I'd sit on my bed looking for words hidden in a jumble of letters or vainly attempting to put together an incomplete jigsaw puzzle I'd found in the game room. The stiff sheets made the bottoms of my feet red, and I was always in trouble for not wearing my slippers when out of bed. A tart smell drifted down the hall from the sluice room, where they cleaned the bedpans and kept the sterilizer.

Lucy Grealey, *Autobiography of a Face*

Multiple Senses, Place, Contradiction, Pattern Completion:

As I ate the food in my brown paper bag, which crinkled loudly in the silence, I'd look at the drawings his own young children had made. They were taped to the wall near his desk, simplistic drawings in which the sky was a blue line near the top and the grass a green line near the bottom and people were as big as houses. I felt safe and secure in that office, but I also felt lonely, and for the first time I definitively identified the source of my unhappiness as being ugly. A few weeks later I left school to reenter chemotherapy, and for the first time I was almost glad to go back to it.

Lucy Grealey, *Autobiography of a Face*

Place (Inside/Outside), Sensory Detail especially respiration/involuntary nervous systems

Then it was real quiet again. Except that dog. Old Andy, he danced a long time. They must have had a real mess to clean up. Every few minutes the doctor came to the door and stepped outside, and stood there with his stethoscope in his hand. I wouldn't say he was enjoying his work—kept gasping, like he was gasping for breath, and he was crying too. Jimmy said, “get a load of that nance.” I guess he reason he stepped outside was so the others wouldn't see he was crying. Then he'd go back and listen to hear if Any's heart had stopped. Seemed like it never would. The fact is, his heart kept beating for nineteen minutes.

Truman Capote *In Cold Blood*

Place, Multiple Senses, Time Travel, Conflation of verbs that describe pain and objects.

I hear a roar, a high windy sound more like air than water, like the run-together whaps of a helicopter's propeller after the engine is off, a high million rushings. The air smells damp and acrid, like fuel oil, or insecticide. It's raining.

I'm in no danger; my house is high. I hurry down the road to the bridge. Neighbors who have barely see each other all winter are there, shaking their heads. Few have ever seen it before: the water is *over* the bridge. Even when I see the bridge now, which I do every day, I still can't believe it: the water was over the bridge, a foot or two over the bridge, which at normal times is eleven feet above the surface of the creek.

Now the water is receding slightly; someone has produced empty metal drums, which we roll to the bridge and set up in a square to keep cars from trying to cross. It takes a bit of nerve even to stand on the bridge; the flood has ripped away a wedge of concrete that buttressed the bridge on the bank. Now one corner of the bridge hangs apparently unsupported while water hurls in an arch just inches below.

It's hard to take it all in, it's all so new. I look at the creek at my feet. It smashes under the bridge like a fist, but there is no end to its force; it hurtles down as far as I can see till it lurches round the bend, filling the valley, flattening, mashing, pushed wider and faster, till it fills my brain.

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* [151]

Multiple Senses, Use of Sensory Verbs, Place

It was too late for my mother to go back to work, so she went home early with me. Marian smelled a story and pressed my mother until she got it. We were sitting at the kitchen table, and as she listened to my mother Marian began looking back and forth between us and giving hard little shakes of her head as if to clear it of water. Then her eyes came to rest on me and did not

move. When my mother came to the end, indignant all over again at the way I'd been treated, Marian asked me to leave them alone.

I listened from the living room. My mother argued at first but Marian overwhelmed her. This time, by God, she was going to make my other see the light. Marian didn't have all the goods on me, but she had enough to keep her going for a while, and she put her heart into it, hitting every note she knew in the song of my malfeasance.

Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life*

Contradiction to Incite Pattern Completion / Understanding:

She was a stupid woman, and an aggravating one, and although I did not like her physically I grew to be deeply fond of her and even admiring of her. For years we wrote long and affectionate letters, and on the few times I returned to Dijon we fell into each other's arms... and then within a few minutes I would be upset and secretly angry at her dullness, her insane pretenses, and all her courage and her loyal blind love would be forgotten until I was away from her again."

The Gastronomical Me, M.F. K. Fisher [89].

Fisher's description of her former landlady consists of three sets of contradictions. Contradiction heightens interest and engagement as one tries to come up with a coherent whole or "figure it out:"