

## Short Stories that Resonate (Ashley Bernier)

For me, a great short story is all about *connections* and *layers*. These are the stories that pull me in as a reader, and the stories I try my best to create as a writer. Here are some notes from my personal process.

### -Begin with the ending in mind

-Beginnings are important, sure. But what about endings? I spend a lot more time worrying about the ending line than I do the beginning line. Because if the beginning is the hook that pulls your reader in, then the ending is an even greater hook—meaning that if you do it well, your story and your writing become memorable. It means your readers might look you up and look for more.

-So what makes an effective ending? For me, it's a mix of callbacks, theme, and an emotional punch.

### -Callbacks and Theme

-No matter the tone of the story, whether it's light and sweet or dark and twisty, or sardonic and funny...you can pull in callbacks. A callback is like a recurring joke, element, or phrase that shows up a few times throughout the story. When these are done well and imbued with significance, they can make for a story that feels tight and connected. When I write, I try to sprinkle callbacks throughout each piece. With crime fiction, these callbacks can be helpful to establishing a theme OR with providing the breadcrumbs for your sleuth to solve the mystery.

### -Theme

-Not every short story has to have a theme. But I tend to love themes, and they can serve any story well, even short ones. Personally, I like to include big overarching themes. For example, in my short story *Rise*, the 'surface story' was about a stolen johnnycake recipe. (*Johnnycakes are a Caribbean dish. They're fried dough, usually eaten as a breakfast staple, snack, or side.*) At one point in the story, a character talks about the dough needing to be beaten up and kneaded a little bit so it can have a chance to rise. This directly relates to other themes in the story about characters 'rising' up to overcome their circumstances...of becoming something *more*. So at the end of the story, when my MC lets her friend experience the pain of not getting what she wants right away without having to work for it, that theme of rising, of being 'kneaded' or 'beaten up' a little bit so SHE could have a chance to become something more ; comes

into play again. I try to include a big theme like that in every story I write, even the ones that aren't explicitly about food.

#### -Layers

-While layers are easily accomplished in longer works with a greater word economy, they can be achieved in short stories as well. I like to think of the crime first, and then the theme, and what connections can be drawn between the two. I approach writing short fiction by asking what the *big story* is that I want to tell, and how the crime and character's unique situation work together to tell it. From there, it's easier to layer the 'surface story' about solving a crime with the deeper, bigger story about how this rocks the characters' world.

#### -Final Lines

-Consider writing a final line that's meaningful—whether funny, shocking, heartfelt, or heartbreaking. A strong emotional punch at the end is something your readers will take with them.