

Short Story, Big Impact **By Anna Hackett**

Short stories pack a big punch! In today's busy lifestyle, readers are looking for convenient reads of the perfect length to squeeze in between work, family, emails and the internet. So what exactly is a short story and why write one? And how can writing a short story help with crafting full length books?

Short, shorter, shortest: Types of short stories

Short stories are just stories with fewer words than full books, right? Yes, but that doesn't even touch on the variety of short stories out there. They can range from a few hundred words up to 40,000, close on the heels of reaching a category length book. Here are the types:

Flash fiction: less than 1,000
Short short: 1,000-2,500
Short story: 2,500-7,500
Novelette: 7,500-17,500
Novella: 17,500-40,000

The current market offers plenty of opportunities for short stories: from magazines, to e-book novellas to anthologies.

Why write short stories?

There are lots of reasons to write short stories. A big one is being able to write a story right at the good bit, that intense moment when everything happens. You can reach THE END in only days or weeks rather than months. There's an intensity to short stories that can't be matched in a longer book—every word counts.

But there are other reasons a serious writer should consider: short stories can provide a path into the publishing world, a way to build writing credits or advance your career as part of an anthology. I'm example of the first and second. I currently write paranormal short stories for Silhouette Nocturne Bites. Writing short stories—something I never saw myself doing—gained me an editor and this year I was thrilled to have three Bites released.

Many successful authors also participate in anthologies. These collections of short stories from multiple authors are a great way to build a readership, especially for newer authors paired with successful names. More often, publishers are also offering short story prequels before full book releases or short stories that compliment an author's full length series.

Many authors leave learning to write short stories up to the day they participate in an anthology...and find they need a whole different set of skills to write these smaller, tighter pieces.

Keeping it tight: Structure and Pacing

It's easy to assume if you can write a full story, you can write a short story...just use less words. Many of the elements *are* the same: interesting premise, characters readers care about, theme, plot and emotion. How you deal with them in a short is a little different.

More often than not, short stories are character-driven. There's just not enough room for a plot-driven story. There's no space for sub-plots or even a long time period. The best short stories tend to happen over a very short time. All my Bites occur over the span of a day or two.

Let's look at structure. In a longer story, there's rising action until you reach the climax (or black moment) then falling action to the resolution. During the rising action, there are usually a lot of try and fail attempts by your characters to get where they're going. The two steps forward, one step back or peaks and troughs leading to the climax. In a short story, there's no room for that. You have less of the try and fail. You need to start your story just before the big bang and then toss your reader right into the good part of the story.

In my first Bites, *Savage Dragon*, the story starts with modern day dragon knight Rordan colliding with the heroine, Kira on the hunt for a vicious wild dragon. Together they enter his mountain lair and in facing him, have to confront their turbulent past. Since Rordan killed Kira's brother—another dragon gone wild—the plot is intricately entwined with the emotional, internal conflicts of the characters.

Like I said earlier, every word counts. Pacing in a short is vital. You need to get off to a quick start. There's no room for waffle, too much description or too many characters. Every single word has to move your story and characters forward. It's a skill to get the right balance of description—you want to give the readers enough to know what's going on, but not so much that it slows the story down.

Here are a few paragraphs from the opening moments of my Bites, *Taken by the South Wind*. It shows the hero's power, gives some of his backstory, a description of the setting and what he's there for:

He lifted one hand and waved toward the night-shrouded buildings. The wind hurried to obey his order, searching for any sign of the prey he hunted.

The wind was his to command. Like his father and grandfather before him, he was a WindKeeper, one of four brothers gifted with the power of the wind. Since the day he'd reached manhood and inherited his power, he'd been the Keeper of the South Wind.

His warm breeze brought back the blaring horns of the frantic Rome traffic, the laughter of late night diners, the exclamations of wandering tourists and the whispers of lovers.

It also brought him the taint of his foe.

Painting your characters quickly

Short stories can never have too few characters but there's always the danger of too many. There's limited room for secondary characters. In my Bites, I usually have the hero, heroine and sometimes a villain. Apart from that, not many other characters get a name or description. It's also important not to introduce too many different points of view. I stick to only the hero and heroine's POV, but many short stories only offer one character's POV.

In shorts, you have to learn to paint your characters quickly. There's no time to spend letting your readers get to know them over chapters. Your descriptions need to show more about your characters than just what they look like. A few sentences should do double duty and give looks, personality and more.

Here's the description of the hero, Rafe Donovan, from my Bites, *Wind Kissed, Fire Bound*:

The horse was stunning. And the man riding him even more eye-catching. Man and beast moved like one through the cobbled street. The big chocolate-colored stallion tossed his head, willful and wanting his own way. Full of fire. But the man controlled the horse with ease, and despite her best effort to fight it, Livia's eyes were drawn to him. To the powerful, jean-clad thighs gripping the horse, the muscular shoulders filling out a white T-shirt. The thin tattoo of flames banding one strong bicep, the fascinating face—all angles with a jagged scar on his jaw. The dark hair—not long, not short—teased by the morning breeze. The smoke gray eyes locked on her.

He's the perfect match for the uptight heroine, Livia Cavalli:

She had the body and the posture of a ballerina, her back ramrod straight. The top two buttons of her fitted white shirt lay open, offering a teasing view of pale skin and delicate collarbones. Buff-colored jodhpurs hugged long legs that were tucked into knee-high black boots. Give her a whip and she'd ignite a man's darkest fantasies.

I find short stories let you bend one rule you have to be very careful with in longer books and that's backstory. In a short, a flash of well-balanced backstory helps build your characters and their motivations fast and effectively.

A handful of sentences show the internal conflict of Rordan from *Savage Dragon*:

Regret flashed before Rordan clamped down on it. He crouched, scooped up a handful of the rich soil and worked it through his fingers. He'd been killing wild dragons longer than he cared to remember. He'd become so ruthless, so efficient at it, and this would be another kill to add to a long list. His fingers clenched into a fist. Another friend he'd be forced to destroy. Another kill to push him closer to the edge.

How do short stories help craft full length novels?

So if short stories are so different from fulls, how can they help craft longer stories?

Firstly, they teach you to write tight, to weigh each word and make them count. You learn to be ruthless and delete what doesn't move the story forward.

Secondly, you learn to describe your characters quickly, a skill that's useful no matter the length of your story.

Lastly, I think they help a writer learn to write emotion. A story without emotion will never connect with the reader. Short stories are more intense, character-driven and start right before the climax. Because of that, they force a writer to get right to the emotion. If you're someone who's been told your stories don't have enough emotion, try writing a short one to help you perfect the skill.

Anna's Nocturne Bites are available at www.eharlequin.com and other online booksellers. Her current release, *Taken by the South Wind*, is the second story in her WindKeepers series. For more information on her stories, visit her website, www.annahackettbooks.com.