

For sale by Ernest Hemingway

You should note, my favourite story - *Quantum of solace*, by Ian Flemming - shares only a name with the recent film and according to Wikipedia is the most un-James Bond story written by Flemming (*not least because it is delivered in the style of Somerset Maugham*). *Quantum of solace* however is twenty-three pages long and not as short as I would like in this instance.

The shortest story ever written is attributed to Ernest Hemingway - the actual conditions of its conception are vague, unproved and have now attained legendary status through the internet, I readily accept that it may not actually be his. It is however, just six words long.

For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.

This style is now popularly referred to as flash fiction, before that it was described as being an example of the theory of omission - or as Hemingway called it, the iceberg theory, in writing. What is on the surface is nothing more than a suggestion of a greater story below.

This Iceberg theory developed from Hemingway's experiences as a journalist, he observed that the real story is the one that floats beneath the surface. In his writings this became a theme.

I like *For sale*, not just for its startling brevity, but because of the author's assured stance - The responsibility for appreciating the story rests on the reader to work out what fits the spaces in between. The reader has to rise to Hemingway's level, he will not explain the story to you.

I find movies, TV and other modern media function rather canine in their need to attract my attention. The game, it seems, is to do everything possible (*nuzzle a wet nose into my hand persistently or stand right in front of where I am walking*) until I give in and throw a stick.. *wait for it to be returned .. throw it again...* and on, until one of us is bored. The immediate option.

In writing and media this is seemingly achieved by sacrificing every piece of narrative intellect towards this aim. The easier it is to digest the idea, the quicker we will get involved, the quicker we can move then onto the next big thin — *walk ...did you say walk... I'll get the lead.*

Short stories can be thought of as more feline, they do not care for you, they exist on their own terms. If you show them attention then that is fine, otherwise piss off until it is time to eat.

A good story for me involves not just a strong narrative, but something that expands my knowledge of the world and engages me to think about what has been written. I find this in the stories of both my favourite writers.



Ian Fleming

Ian Fleming's writing is incredibly economic - no, not even remotely like the films, except perhaps *Thunderball* - and, one has to remember, these tales of international intrigue come from a time when travel was still exotic, which is part of Bond's charm. However Fleming rarely bothers to describe a foreign scene in detail, leaving the rest up to the reader, or as he has done in the chapter excerpt below (From *The man with the golden gun*) only describes Savannah La Mar by telling you what it isn't.

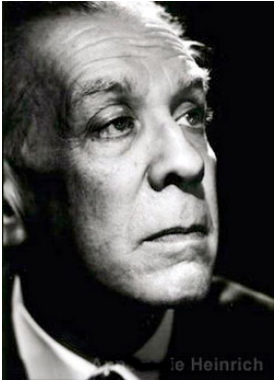
5. No. 31/2 Love Lane

The south coast of Jamaica is not as beautiful as the north, and it is a long 120-mile hack over very mixed road surfaces from Kingston to Savannah La Mar. Mary Goodnight had insisted on coming along, 'to navigate and help with the punctures'. Bond had not demurred.

Spanish Town, May Pen, Alligator Pond, Black River, Whitehouse Inn, where they had luncheon -the miles unrolled under the fierce sun until, around four in the afternoon, a stretch of good straight road brought them among the spruce little villas, each with its patch of brownish lawn, bougainvillaea, and single bed of canna lilies and crotons, which make up the 'smart' suburbs of the modest little coastal township that is, in the vernacular, Sav' La Mar.

Except for the old quarter on the waterfront, it is not a typically Jamaican town, nor a very attractive one. The villas, built for the senior staff of the Frome sugar estates, are drably respectable, and the small straight streets smack of a most un-Jamaican bout of town planning around the 1920s. Bond stopped at the first garage, took in petrol and put Mary Goodnight into a hired car for the return trip. He had told her nothing of his assignment and she had asked no questions when Bond told her vaguely that it was 'something to do with Cuba'. Bond said he would keep in touch when he could, and get back to her when his job was done and then, businesslike, she was off back down the dusty road and Bond drove slowly down to the waterfront. He identified Love Lane, a narrow street of broken-down shops and houses that meandered back into the town from the jetty. He circled the area to get the neighbouring geography clear in his mind and parked the car in a deserted area near the spit of sand on which fishing canoes were drawn up on raised stilts. He locked the car and sauntered back and into Love Lane. There were a few people about, poor people of the fisherman class. Bond bought a packet of Royal Blend at a small general store that smelled of spices. He asked where No. 31/2 was and got a look of polite curiosity. 'Further up de street. Mebbe a chain. Big house on de right.' Bond moved over to the shady side and strolled on. He slit open the packet with his thumbnail and lit a cigarette to help the picture of an idle tourist examining a corner of old Jamaica. There was only one big house on the right. He took some time lighting the cigarette while he examined it.

The story was written in 1964, the year he died. At this time books and film served a similar function - providing a window to experience the wider world for the masses. Think about it, in 1964 the only people who knew what Savannah La Mar looked like had been there, Flemming probably had (*he lived in Jamaica*) and it is likely that this is an accurate description. In keeping with Hemingway, he describes the scene as he sees it and expects you to come up to his level to understand it. There are no allowances.



Jorge Louis Borges

Though Borges' writing is saturated in ideas, it is delivered in as an economic style as Flemming's. Only with Borges there are multiple threads of imagination left dangling for you to revisit over multiple readings.

Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius is the first story in his most famous collection *Labyrinths*. I have been reading it for nearly twenty years, over and over, the only book that I do this with. This is the first page.

Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopaedia. The mirror troubled the depths of a corridor in a country house on Gaona Street in Ramos Mejía; the encyclopaedia is fallaciously called *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (New York, 1917) and is a literal but delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1902. The event took place some five years ago. Bioy Casares had had dinner with me that evening and we became lengthily engaged in a vast polemic concerning the composition of a novel in the first person, whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers - very few readers - to perceive an atrocious or banal reality. From the remote depths of the corridor, the mirror spied upon us. We discovered (such a discovery is inevitable in the late hours of the night) that mirrors have something monstrous about them. Then Bioy Casares recalled that one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men. I asked him the origin of this memorable observation and he answered that it was reproduced in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, in its article on Uqbar. The house (which we had rented furnished) had a set of this work. On the last pages of Volume XLVI we found an article on Upsala; on the first pages of Volume XLVII, one on Ural-Altaic Languages, but not a word about Uqbar. Bioy, a bit taken aback, consulted the volumes of the index. In vain he exhausted all of the imaginable spellings: Ukbar, Uqbar, Ooqbar, Ookbar, Oukbahr. . . .

There are thirty characters in the 5,600 word story. Five are fictional constructs. The rest, appearing in fleeting sentences are nearly all historical figures of some importance. They act to reinforce the fantasy around the reality.

Reading a Borges story requires a great deal of post-research, that is half the fun. With the internet it is now easier to keep up with the great librarian story teller and guardian of many untold stories from antiquity.

To tackle the mysteries of the first page:

- Ramos Mejia is a suburb of greater Buenos Aires¹
- The Anglo-American Cyclopedia did actually exist and the volumes are accurate²
- We all know of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- A Heresiarch is a heretical religious leader³
- Upsala is Sweden's principle university city⁴
- Bioy Casares - was a friend of the author⁵

Uqbar⁶, Orbis Tertius and Tlon⁷ though are fictional elements.

Wikipedia has a very comprehensive page on this story.

The delight in reading the story is the same as *For Sale*, my intellect is pushed by the space between and deliberate lack of explanation left by the author. This is to say nothing of the exquisite image left by the sentence:

We discovered (such a discovery is inevitable in the late hours of the night) that mirrors have something monstrous about them.

¹ Researched for this presentation - google maps

² <http://www.williams.edu/philosophy/faculty/awhite/borges%202.htm>

³ noun - the founder of a heresy or the leader of a heretical sect - online dictionary

⁴ It also has a Goth-rock bar called Fedrico Fellini even though the city is the birthplace of Ingmar Bergman!

⁵ Researched for this presentation: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolfo_Bioy_Casares

⁶ Researched for a previous short story assignment.

⁷ Researched for this presentation: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tlön,_Uqbar,_Orbis_Tertius