

Advice on the Art of Writing Short Stories

ROBERTO BOLAÑO

Now that I'm forty-four years old, I'm going to offer some advice on the art of writing short stories:

1 Never approach short stories one at a time. If one approaches short stories one at a time, one can quite honestly be writing the same short story until the day one dies.

2 It is best to write short stories three or five at a time. If one has the energy, write them nine or fifteen at a time.

3 Be careful: the temptation to write short stories two at a time is just as dangerous as attempting to write them one at a time, and, what's more, it's essentially like the interplay of lovers' mirrors, creating a double image that produces melancholy.

4 One must read Horacio Quiroga, Felisberto Hernández, and Jorge Luis Borges. One must read Juan Rulfo and Augusto Monterroso. Any short-story writer who has some appreciation for these authors will never read Camilo José Cela or Francisco Umbral yet will, indeed, read Julio Cortázar and Adolfo Bioy Casares, but in no way Cela or Umbral.

5 I'll repeat this once more in case it's still not clear: don't consider Cela or Umbral, whatsoever.

For some certain romantic reasons, a segment of english-language reading population fell in love with Roberto Bolaño in the first few years of this millennium. One invariably glimpsed Bolaño's award-winning 1998 novel *The Savage Detectives* on endtables and nightstands after its translation in 2007, with or without bookmarks. When 2666—the Chilean writer's dizzyingly enormous work on the darkest of events in 1990's Northern Mexico—appeared, it did so posthumously, further elevating Bolaño's literary outlaw mythos. In addition to being a hard-bitten Trotskyist nomad, Bolaño—who died of liver failure in 2003—was said to have been a heroin addict and alcoholic. Neither was the case, writes Hector Tobar in the *LA Times*, quoting a Mexico City-based journalist on the author: "He had a super boring daily life. It was a life built around his own writing rituals and habits."

For all his legendary exploits as a globetrotting journalist and poet, Bolaño also seems to have built his life around reading. "Reading," Bolaño has said, "is more important than writing." He finds much company with this statement among fellow writers. Patti Smith, for example, who urges reading "anything by Bolaño," could also "recommend a million" books to anyone who asks. A much shorter but still challenging list of hers reveals a deep and broad investment in literature. William S. Burroughs, who probably didn't read Bolaño but worked in a similarly hallucinatory vein, taught a class on "Creative Reading" that was only secondarily a class on writing, filled with example after example from writer after treasured writer. The best writing advice writers can dispense, it seems, is this: Read.

Such is the approach of Bolaño himself, in a short, pithy essay on how to write short stories. He begins in a perfunctory way, almost with a sigh: “Now that I’m forty-four years old, I’m going to offer some advice on the art of writing short stories.” The advice, found in the graphic form above on The Paris Review’s Tumblr and reprinted in a non-fiction collection titled *Between Parenthesis*, quickly becomes exuberantly pedantic, permeating the boundaries of its neatly ordered list form with tongue moving from cheek to cheek. Does he really mean that we should read “the notable Pseudo-Longinus” on the sublime? Or to suggest—after insistent reference to several essential Latin American writers’ writers—that “with Edgar Allan Poe, we would all have more than enough good material to read”? Probably. But the gist, with more than enough sincerity, is this: Read the greats, whoever they are, and read them often.

See Bolaño’s complete text here at *Electric Cereal* and an excerpted version below.

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(6) A short-story writer should be brave. It’s a sad fact to acknowledge, but that’s the way it is.

(9) The honest truth is that with Edgar Allan Poe, we would all have more than enough good material to read.

(10) Give thought to point number 9. Think and reflect on it. You still have time. Think about number 9. To the extent possible, do so on bended knees.

(12) Read these books and also read Anton Chekhov and Raymond Carver, for one of the two of them is the best writer of the twentieth century.

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December 12, 2015 at 9:35 pm

Wonderful. Thanks.

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that list is a short story in itself

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Paschoaal says:

May 10, 2016 at 5:26 am

It might be a test. Perhaps you really should read Cela and Umbral.

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