

S U D D E N F L A S H Y O U T H

65 Short-Short Stories

EDITED BY

Christine Perkins-Hazuka,
Tom Hazuka, and Mark Budman



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Currents

HANNAH BOTTOMY VOSKUIL

Gary drank single malt in the night, out on the porch that leaned toward the ocean. His mother, distracted, had shut off the floodlights and he did not protest against the dark.

Before that, his mother, Josey, tucked in her two shivering twelve-year-old granddaughters.

“I want you both to go swimming first thing tomorrow. Can’t have two seals like you afraid of the water.”

Before that, one of the girls held the hand of a wordless Filipino boy. His was the first hand she’d ever held. They were watching the paramedics lift the boy’s dead brother into an ambulance.

At this time, the other girl heaved over a toilet in the cabana.

Before that, the girl who would feel nauseated watched as the drowned boy’s hand slid off the stretcher and bounced along the porch rail. Nobody placed the hand back on the stretcher, and it bounced and dragged and bounced.

Before that, Gary saw the brown hair sink and resurface as the body bobbed. At first he mistook it for seaweed.

Before that, thirty-five people struggled out of the water at

the Coast Guard's command. A lifeguard shouted over Jet Ski motors about the increasing strength of the riptide.

Before that the thirty-five people, including Gary and the two girls, formed a human chain and trolled the waters for the body of a Filipino boy. The boy had gone under twenty minutes earlier and never come back up.

Before that, a lifeguard sprinted up the beach, shouting for volunteers. The two girls, resting lightly on their sandy bodyboards, stood up to help.

Before that, a Filipino boy pulled on the torpid lifeguard's ankle and gestured desperately at the waves. My brother, he said.

Before that, it was a simple summer day.

"Currents," by Hannah Bottomy Voskuil. Copyright © 2004 by Hannah Bottomy. First published in *Quarterly West*. Reprinted by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

About the Author

HANNAH BOTTOMY VOSKUIL's work has appeared in several anthologies including the *The Seagull Reader, 2nd. Ed.*, and *Flash Fiction Forward*. Voskuil's short stories have appeared in literary magazines such as *Quarterly West*, *South Dakota Review*, and *The South Carolina Review*. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.

SUDDEN FLASH YOUTH
A SAMPLE FROM THE TEACHER'S GUIDE

**Table of contents, introductory letter, definitions of terms,
teaching techniques**

**PLUS a close reading of and lesson plan for “Currents” by
Hannah Bottomy Voskuil**

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Introductory Letter:

Dear Colleague,

Sudden Fiction Youth is the anthology I dreamed about as an English teacher. This unique book combines the subject matter of childhood/adolescence with the brevity of the flash fiction genre. These stories have immediate appeal to young readers, but through their richness of style and depth of meaning they transcend popular fiction. These stories are literary fiction, and they afford the classroom teacher with sophisticated material in terms of voice, structure, figuration, and theme. However, because of the 1,000-word limit, language is much less problematic. Using these short shorts, a teacher is able to discern and address problems with decoding and vocabulary within a matter of minutes, leaving the class ample time to explore the more compelling textual issues. For example, instructors may wish to point out the various choices a writer makes and how each of these choices contributes to the creation of the unique thing that is that story -- how changing just one element (narrative voice, setting, characterization) alters the story's identity and its experience for the reader. In addition, so-called reluctant readers with life experience/street knowledge are much more likely to join in

conversations such as writer's choice if the length of a story does not intimidate them.

Using any one of these tightly crafted gems, a teacher can create a lesson that includes pre-reading activities (vocabulary, journaling, "quick shares"), an oral reading, even a close reading, and still have time for in-depth exploration of text. Even in a 45-minute class, students will have the opportunity to thoroughly engage a story without the intervening homework assignment to complete the reading (which all too often is not done), or lose momentum because discussion of textual issues is postponed until the next class meeting. With *Sudden Flash Youth* these factors don't exist.

The teacher's guide that follows explains techniques that I developed, borrowed, and modified for a high school creative course; also included are traditional literary teaching methods I used in 7th through 12th grade English classes. During the years I stumbled around trying to bring a workshop-based writing course to the secondary level, I realized that the best way to teach students to appreciate literature is to let them write their own fiction. And the best models? Flash fiction pieces that explore youthful experience in an honest, nuanced, sometimes hurtful, but always beautiful way.

Inspired by these brief, complex glimpses into the human experience, my students created their own stories by blending experience and imagination. Afterward, like all fiction writers, they faced the challenge of structuring their texts. Each student, regardless of reading level, eagerly tinkered with voice, perspective, time, figuration, sensory detail, and meaning. A few talented students did come

close to writing literary fiction, but all gained the ability to “read like a writer.” Their experiments in writing gave them a deeper understanding and appreciation of the choices a writer makes in order to bring the elements of fiction together to produce a story. Students began to understand that elusive concept that fiction is not truth in the historical sense, but in the literary sense; and plot, character, even theme are constructs, not givens. The only drawback: the dearth of flash pieces focused on the youthful experience. How I yearned for a text like *Sudden Flash Youth!*

Ideas for vocabulary, journals, class discussions, Socratic seminars, and writing prompts are included in this guide as are the techniques I used in high school writer’s workshops. Of course, this guide is only a guide in the most simplistic sense. It will undoubtedly work best after you have personalized it to fit your style and your students. One thing I do know for sure, the tiny treasures in SFY allow you to give your students a taste for literary art even as the teaching day becomes more and more cluttered with mandated test practice and school-wide initiatives imposed from district/state/national levels. Although I wince to apply such an overused cliché to such a teacher-friendly text, *Sudden Flash Youth* really will help you work smarter, not harder.

Have fun with these brilliant, sudden flashes of youth!

Christine Perkins-Hazuka

Teacher's Guide Notes

Definitions/Notes Used in This Guide

Mood – The overall feeling of the story created by the authors diction. Mood can be describe in a single word; other times two or more words are needed to convey mood.

Narrative Form – Realistic Fiction (including historical, romance, suspense), Fantasy/ Fairy Tale/Fable

Narrative Voice – First, second, third person narrators

Theme -- A sentence that gives the story's attitude toward the story's topic, revealing a truth about life. Many readers don't distinguish between the topic and theme, but I find the difference useful for readers who are hesitant about "boxing in" a story according to its "lesson," which school teachers sometimes equate with theme.

Tone – The way a writer feels about a subject. Tone is communicated through the narrative voice by the author's diction.

Topic -- A one-word/short phrase descriptor of the main idea; some of the recurring topics are "Family Matters," "Metamorphoses," "Identity," "Mortality," "Loss," "Escape," "Outsiders," "Other Worlds," "The Unexpected," "The Absurd."

Traditional Teaching Techniques for Literary Analysis

Pre-Reading Activities

Quick Write -- Establish connections: reader to story; story to story; story to life

Literary Focus -- Highlight a literary element (point-of-view, genre, figurative language, etc.)

Reading Skills – Teach a specific skill, such as recognizing foreshadowing clues and using them to make predictions

Vocabulary – As needed, explain certain words; e.g., “riptide” in “Currents”

Post-Reading Activities

First Thoughts – Journals

C.S.I. Confusing, Surprising, Interesting: One way into a story for readers who “don’t get it.”

Students select one of the above labels as a way to explain their first reaction to the text. First students pinpoint the specific place in the text that produced their reaction. Students should be pushed to explain why they are confused, surprised, or interested by quoting specific words/phrases/passages. Learning the definition of a specific word or phrase can turn confusion into interest. Pinpointing the source of surprise often leads to understanding irony.

S.E.A. -- Sympathy, Empathy, Antipathy: A technique that helps readers understand their emotional reactions to characters.

Students pick characters that evoke one of these emotions and then explain how the text elicits, perhaps manipulates, their sympathy, empathy, and/or antipathy for the chosen character.

First Thoughts (continued): A quick alternative to journaling is the “popcorn” technique. Each student has up to 30 seconds to share immediate reactions to text. The time limit helps vocal students from dominating the first stages of discussion when readers are formulating and adjusting personal responses to text. Popcorn is a useful technique in 45-minute periods.

Story Check -- Recall questions about setting, plot, character

Critical Thinking -- Questions that explore the elements that “drive” a given text: character motivation, structural device, narrative voice, perspective, mood/tone, diction, figuration, meaning, title, and possibly authorial intent and the author vs. reader debate over who makes meaning

Extended Interpretations -- Reader connections to other texts and real life as well as reader predictions beyond the text

Process Writing Assignments -- Traditional analytical assignments such as definition or compare/contrast essays, as well as creative writing assignments that use the text as a model

Reading Like a Writer Techniques

Ultimate Question: What crucial choices did the author make about literary elements that create the unique experience of a given story?

1. Setting – Time and Place: Ask students to imagine the story told in a different time (e.g., present rather than past or vice versa), or a different era (e.g., 21st century instead of the 1970's). Does place play a pivotal role in plot (as in "Currents")? How would changing the place affect the story?
2. Narrative Voice: Imagine the difference if the story is told in third rather than first person (as in "'") What would be lost? Consider the effect of the unusual second person narrator in "Current," and imagine the difference if the author had chosen first or third person narrative voice.
3. Characterization: What happens if the number of character is altered? Would a male protagonist have worked as well as a female one or vice versa? What if the narrator had given fewer visual details or more? What would change? What do these details contribute to the story?
4. Title: How does the title contribute to the meaning/experience of the story? How does it connect to the imagery? What other titles could the author have chosen?

Writer's Workshop Guidelines

NOTE: Before I conduct workshops on student writing, I do two things: first, the class workshops a published flash fiction story; second, the students workshop one of my own amateur pieces of 1,000 words or less. In both instances, I stress discussing what words before suggesting constructive criticism. I model listening and note-taking while my own story is being discussed in order to illustrate the importance of allowing the workshop group to proceed without debating the author. Beginning with a published work is ideal for this lesson since the author isn't present to interfere. Once the readers have ended their conversation, the author may respond by simply thanking his readers for their feedback or thanking them and *briefly* responding to specific questions about the text.

- The process I follow in the creative writing course includes the following:
1. Students draft five to six Sloppy Copies (200 words or more) modeled upon flash fiction stories we have studied.
 2. Each student chooses one Sloppy Copy to "finish." This is the First Draft. There is a general rubric based on the literary elements, textual structures, and styles of the models.

3. Students choose at least one reader from the class who gives feedback on content and style. Students also choose a different peer to serve as editor. An outside editor may also be used, but it is not the teacher. Editors proofread for mechanical errors. There are style/content rubrics and mechanical rubrics that readers and editors follow.
4. A portfolio of all Sloppy Copies, plus the First Draft, Revised Draft (possibly more than more), and the Polished Draft are submitted for a grade. This grade is 75% of the course; the other 25% is based on workshop participation and reader/editor feedback.

This guide offers ideas for Sloppy Copy drafts based on stories in SFY.

Lesson Plan for “Currents”

Story: “Currents” by Hannah Bottomy Voskuil

Topic: Mortality, Loss, Human Connection (also Insider/Outsider)

Theme: People, including youngsters, deal with the tragedy of unexpected death in various ways: isolation, perseverance, compassion, physical anguish

Outstanding Literary Features: simple, matter-of-fact language, repetition, rhythm, metonymy

Narrative Form: Realistic Fiction/Suspense

Narrative Voice: Third Person

Mood: Urgent, tragic

Tone: Objective, journalistic, matter-of-fact

Structure: Manipulation of setting, both time and place, title (“currents” functions in numerous ways

SFY Connections: “The Flowers” (See **Process Writing Assignment** below)

Pre-Reading Activities

Quick Write -- Describe a time in which you or someone you know (could be another story or film as well as real life), experienced a frightening event in a familiar place. Were you able to “get right back on the horse” and place yourself in the environment and confront your fear?

Literary Focus -- Resolution and climax placed at the beginning of the story. Notice how tension is built as the plot devolves: series of flashbacks, repetition of key phrase (metonymy), connection of title to structure.

Vocabulary -- “Riptide”: a current that pulls material back into the ocean, revealing other layers of matter

Reading skill -- Define and identify the climax; understand its role in this story

Post-Reading Activities

Journal: CSI or SEA

Story Check:

1. Where is the story set?
2. How many characters and who are they?
3. How do the different characters react differently to the tragedy?

Critical Thinking*:

1. Why is setting crucial to this story?
2. Whose story is this? Defend your choice.
3. What is the climax? How does the author keep the reader engaged after the climax is known?
4. How is the title connected to the structure of the story?
5. How does the racial angle effect/affect the tone, perhaps even the theme of the story?

*Critical Thinking Questions may be adapted as Essential Questions for Socratic Seminar.

Extended Understanding:

1. What does this story say about the variety of human response to death, especially the death of a young person?
2. Which character’s reaction is most like yours? Which is least? Explain. Describe a situation in real life or in fiction (TV, film, as well as literature)

in which human beings were forced to deal with death, in particular, the death of a young person.

Process Writing Assignments:

1. Essay: Compare/contrast character reaction to death in “Currents” with the reaction of the protagonist in “Flowers.”
2. Memoir: Write your own first experience with death.
3. Creative Writing: Tell the story of the next day’s events from the point of view of one of the witnesses to the accident.

Reading Like a Writer:

1. What choices did the author make in terms of setting and character to produce the maximum emotional impact.
2. How would the story be different in first person?
3. How would it be different if told in chronological order?
4. How would it be different if one of the girls had died?

Close Reading

Employing the objective tone of a news reporter, Hannah Bottomy Voskuil plunges the reader immediately into the tragedy of her story “Currents” by showing us the last scene first. Gary, the father of twin girls, sits in darkness of his beach-side porch, which “leans” toward the ocean. His mother, Josie, has inadvertently turned off the “floodlights,” but Gary does not “protest against the dark.” The unusual use of the word “leans” suggests that the sea exerts its inexorable pull even on an inanimate object such as the porch, while Gary’s acceptance of darkness later takes on metaphorical weight. At this point the reader might very well be wondering why this man is drinking alone and why his mother is so “distracted” that she has left him in the dark – a darkness that soon will come to represent the black hole we associate with mortality.

The image of Gary's solitary drinking is followed in the second paragraph by the picture of his mother, so "distracted" that she has taken no note of her son, and we soon find out why: she is inside the beach house comforting her two "shivering" twelve-year-old granddaughters with a gentle admonition: "I want you both to go swimming first thing tomorrow. Can't have two seals like you afraid of the water." It is now clear that something terrifying has happened in the ocean. The members of Gary's family have reacted in very different ways to the terror, and this difference is one of the threads moving through the plot.

Voskuil begins this second paragraph with two words that will be used effectively to begin each section of the story: "Before that." Like the cresting of a wave, this simple anaphora, repeated nine times, sucks the reader further and further into a plot whose climax, the discovery of a boy's body, comes in the middle of the story.

Voskuil next sketches the scene of one of the twins holding the hand of a "wordless Filipino boy," whose brother, we will learn shortly, has drowned. The detail that "his was the first hand she'd ever held" adds poignancy to the image. The wordless boy and the inexperienced girl are facing the ultimate human experience, death, with only the comfort of touching hands. Nevertheless, it *is* comfort that perhaps surpasses verbal expressions of sympathy and grief. Hand imagery will be used again and again to represent horror and hope. One twin is connected physically to a boy's hand (in a gesture of compassion) while the other twin is so repulsed she vomits in the cabana. And what has caused this extreme physical response? We are told that before she "heaved over a toilet," she has seen the dead

boy's hand slide off the stretcher and bounce and drag and bounce against the porch railing. This metonymic image of death is made more pathetic by the apparent difference in class and ethnicity. Although the gulf is breached by various expressions of grief, it does exist and adds another layer of sadness to the story.

To compound this dehumanizing of the dead boy, the next section informs us "before that" Gary mistakes the boy's bobbing hair for "seaweed." The word "bobbing" has just enough of a comic sense that the image becomes doubly horrifying. Again, the up and down motion of the language echoes the movement of waves.

The plot picks up speed when we learn that thirty-five people struggle against the water, the Coast Guard issues a command, and the lifeguard shouts at jet skiers. The "riptide's" strength has increased to an even more dangerous level. The warnings are too late to help the boy, who "had gone under twenty minutes" before that. Nevertheless, the image of Gary and his girls taking part in the struggling human chain (yet another hand image) produces a moment of human connectedness that is more urgent and powerful because we know it is futile.

The fast pace continues with the contrasting images of the next section: the shouting, sprinting lifeguard whose actions rouse the girls from "resting lightly on their sandy body boards" ("sandy" and "body boards" themselves suggesting mortality). One feels that these girls will never again rest lightly on a beach. These details subtly remind us of the girls' nearness to death, and by inference, our own.

The penultimate image again employs metonymy as the brother pulls on the "torpid lifeguard's ankle." Voskuil uses the word "torpid" to connect another

character to mortality while the desperation she gives to the brother's gesture toward the sea adds startling contrast and a last touch of pathos.

Voskuil's ending is starkly perfect: "Before that," it begins, "it was a simple summer day." We are thereby forced to face the fact that at any time, death may intrude even into the most pleasant of human experiences, i.e., a day at the beach, tainting the lives of survivors. Fewer than three hundred words earlier, we have seen Gary, numb with alcohol, sitting without protest against the night's darkness. Now we know that this darkness is also the blackness of mortality, and the leaning porch reminds us that even as the ocean beckons with the promise of pleasure, swiftly moving water beneath the surface threatens destruction. As readers, we are gripped by the powerful "riptide" that is "Currents."

