
September 9, 2013

Douglas Glover: Building sentences

By Douglas Glover, Special to National Post

English was my worst subject (next to Health) in high school right through to my second year of university when I stopped taking English. I'd fallen...

Douglas Glover published his first novel, *Precious*, in 1984. He is the author of three works of literary criticism, including *The Enamoured Knight*, a recent book on Don Quixote, and nine books of fiction, including *16 Categories of Desire*, *A Guide to Animal Behaviour*, *The Life and Times of Captain N.*, and *Elle*, winner of the 2003 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction. His new collection of short stories, *Savage Love*, will be published by Goose Lane Editions this month. Glover was born and raised in southwestern Ontario and now lives in Fredericton, where he is writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick. He will be guest editing *The Afterword* all this week.

English was my worst subject (next to Health) in high school right through to my second year of university when I stopped taking English. I'd fallen afoul of the empty rule syndrome. Don't use the pronoun "I" in an essay; don't begin sentences with "but" or "because"; write paragraphs to the topic sentence-body text-conclusion pattern (even if it bores you to death to say the same thing three times); vary sentence structure. The trouble with these rules is that no one told me why any of them would be especially useful.

Vary sentence structure was a rule I puzzled over for years. No one explained grammar to me well enough to make a connection. At first I thought, well, I can write long and short sentences, something like Hemingway. Then I practiced emphatic placement of important material (at the beginning or the end of the sentence, I was told) and inversion (writing the sentence backwards - kind of fun). None of this got me anywhere because I could not connect the spirit of a sentence, what emotional and factual impact I intended, with the idea of sentence structure.

I puzzled through instruction books. I discovered the wonderful distinctions between simple, compound and complex sentences and the even more mysterious cumulative and periodic sentences. I practiced writing periodic sentences until I was blue in the face without actually being able to discover how that made them interesting for readers. They weren't very interesting to me. And my stories did not seem any better for having good topic sentence paragraphs, long and short sentences, and a scattering of lovely periodic sentences.

The rules were still inanimate, void of life. The nexus of intention and form escaped me. Above all the whole idea that you had to know what you were going to write before you wrote it was like a lock on my soul. It made writing drudgery.

I was writing fiction all the while and making other discoveries, for example, the fairly elementary fact that stories need drama, that they eventuate out of conflict. Not just conflicted characters, mind you. You need a character in conflict with other characters in an ongoing action. The spirit of conflict is what drives a story, a desire meeting a resistance. Once you have a desire (motive) and a resistance, a certain story logic follows. Spirit and form fuse. I understood this in terms of a story as a whole before I began to see that the same

principle applies in sentences.

One day I happened to read an essay called "On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature" by Robert Louis Stevenson. He was talking about sentences but instead of repeating the platitudes, he showed how to construct sentences on the basis of conflict. Instead of just announcing a single thesis, a sentence begins by setting out two or more contrasting ideas; the sentence develops a conflict, intensifying toward a climax, a "knot" Stevenson calls it, and then, after a moment of suspension, slides easily toward a close. Suddenly, I understood both how to write those lovely lengthy compound-complex sentences and also how to write paragraphs that had nothing to do with topic sentence-body-conclusion patterns (because you could construct a paragraph the way Stevenson constructs his long sentences). Suddenly writing a sentence became an exciting prospect, a journey of discovery, a story with a conflict and a plot the outcome of which I did not know at the beginning.

Simultaneously (really this all seems to have happened in a moment, a flash of personal insight) I was studying Alice Munro short stories, trying to understand why her sentences were under contract at *The New Yorker*. What I finally noticed was Munro deploying the principle of conflict in much the same way Stevenson had, turning her clauses and sentences on the word "but" or some cognate structure (what I call a but-construction).

Here's an Alice Munro passage from "Lives of Girls and Women." "My mother had a book of operas. She would get it out and follow the story, identifying the arias, for which translations were provided. She had questions for Fern, but Fern did not know as much about opera as you would think she might; she would even get mixed up about which one it was they were listening to. But sometimes she would lean forward with her elbows on the table, not now relaxed, but alertly supported, and sing, scorning the foreign words." Four sentences, three but-constructions, and a complete inversion, at the end, of the reader's opinion of Fern.

"But" introduces the conflict, incites the plot, and opens the sentence up to a logical but unpredictable development. Not only that but the "but" creates content where there was none. It creates what I call aesthetic space into which the writer pours newly imagined, perhaps entirely surprising material. You don't have to know what you're going to write ahead of time if you understand that the sentence is an adventure not a fact, that it is less about communicating than entertainment (in a deep sense), and that by creating then resolving an antithesis, the sentence invents something new, a fresh thought.

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September 10, 2013

Douglas Glover: Lists

By Douglas Glover, Special to National Post

The first technique I learned and applied consciously was the list

Douglas Glover published his first novel, *Precious*, in 1984. He is the author of three works of literary criticism, including *The Enamoured Knight*, a recent book on Don Quixote, and nine books of fiction, including *16 Categories of Desire*, *A Guide to Animal Behaviour*, *The Life and Times of Captain N.*, and *Elle*, winner of the 2003 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction. His new collection of short stories, *Savage Love*, will be published by Goose Lane Editions this month. Glover was born and raised in southwestern Ontario and now lives in Fredericton, where he is writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick. He will be guest editing *The Afterword* all this week.

The first technique I learned and applied consciously was the list. This was in an early story "Pender's Visions" that begins with a line – "Pender is a bottle, a glass, a table, a gun, a house." The line becomes a refrain through the text, only to modulate in the last section of the story into "Pender, a bottle, a glass, a table, a gun, a house, a world..."

This was, as I say, a first attempt (no apologies for being young), but you can see the rhythmic effect of a long series that becomes a structural effect by the repetition of the line throughout the text, and then becomes a thematic effect by the modulation of the series at the end. The modulation is especially significant because a series (of vaguely like entities) creates reader expectation, and the reader always enjoys having his expectations tweaked.

Rabelais was a gargantuan list-writer. In an early chapter of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, he gives a paragraph long list of plant matter the boy Gargantua uses to wipe his butt. "Then I wiped myself with sage, with fennel, with dill and anise, with sweet marjoram, with roses, pumpkins, with squash leaves, and cabbage, and beets, with vine leaves, and mallow, and *Verbascum thapsus* (that's mullein, and it's as red as my _____)–and mercury weed, and purslane, and nettle leaves, and larkspur and comfrey. But then I got Lombardy dysentery, which I cured by wiping myself with my codpiece."

This is complex and hilarious, hilarious because it is a long silly list that contains some very odd choices. Pumpkins? Note also that list makers pass on conventional punctuation and grammar. Instead of a series of items separated by commas right to the end, Rabelais modulates to comma-and breaks, then reverts to the earlier convention, then goes to comma-and to the close of the sentence. A lot of "ands." Rhythm is everything in a list, but you don't want the rhythm to send the reader off to sleep.

Rabelais also disrupts the list with the Latin name for mullein and inserts a comical parenthetical (breaks voice, as it were) and comments directly to the reader, creating a syntactic drama that breaks the rhythm temporarily. Then he adds a but-construction (see my previous column) that gives the list a plot. Instead of an endless repetition of the same wiping act, the boy gets dysentery (with an ethnic slap at Lombards). Then we come back to wiping.

This is brilliant list writing because it's outrageously funny, rhythmic, and has plot. The basic principles are all there: list, rhythm, disruption (by changing up series members, by grammatical disruption, by authorial interruption, by but-construction), and plot.

Here's another practice list from a somewhat later story of mine, "Heartsick." An 83-year-old, love-obsessed patient in an old-folks home in Austria is explaining to her psychiatrist why she is obsessed with the 16th century condottiere Maleteste Baglione. "Old Maleteste (she must have said), old Bad Balls, old scamp, old scalliwag, scapegrace, turncoat, rake-hell, old ame-de-boue, old passe-partout, old rip, old fallen angel. Old white-livered poltroon. Old pessimist. Old shadow-shuffler. Old passion pit, old lust pot, old leader of men and molester of young horses. A man, in short, of incalculable zeal and confused purposes. A man, in short...."

Notice again the unconventional list punctuation, the rhythmic change-ups, the comic and surprising juxtapositions, the internal rhymes, and parallel constructions. And at the end the comic list becomes a thematic list. The last four words, emphatically repeating the word "man," and turning a list of comic condemnation into a generous and compassionate summation on what it means to be human.

My little journey comes full circle when I introduced Rabelais as a character in my novel Elle. Here is Elle reporting Rabelais' judgment on the current state of publishing (not much different from our own). "He is already tired of amateurs, retired explorers, soldiers, prelates, ambassadors, midwives, courtesans, tennis players, lovers, swordsmen, cooks, kings (not to mention the king's relatives), who all their lives read nothing but a breviary, account books, a dozen letters and an almanac or two and then sit down to write a book as if their opinions were worth more than an eel's whisker to anyone but themselves."

Obviously, you can use lists, like but-constructions, to enliven sentences and paragraphs no end (they don't all have to be comic, but it's always salutary to remember that the earliest novels, the works of Rabelais and Cervantes, were comedies). But you can also deploy a list as a larger structure, almost as substitute for plot. I recommend especially two list stories: Steven Millhauser's "The Barnum Museum" and Leonard Michaels' "In the Fifties."

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September 11, 2013

Douglas Glover: Parallel construction

By Douglas Glover, Special to National Post

Form never limits a writer; it creates openings for fresh invention

Douglas Glover published his first novel, *Precious*, in 1984. He is the author of three works of literary criticism, including *The Enamoured Knight*, a recent book on Don Quixote, and nine books of fiction, including *16 Categories of Desire*, *A Guide to Animal Behaviour*, *The Life and Times of Captain N.*, and *Elle*, winner of the 2003 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction. His new collection of short stories, *Savage Love*, will be published by Goose Lane Editions this month. Glover was born and raised in southwestern Ontario and now lives in Fredericton, where he is writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick. He will be guest editing *The Afterword* all this week.

In the first column¹, I showed you how to build a dramatic sentence by juxtaposing contrasting elements and creating a conflict or argument that resolves. A quick and dirty (but mostly elegant) way to do this in narrative is to use the but-construction; fill your sentences and paragraphs with the conjunction but or a cognate. You can even use the but-construction to develop story ideas: Anna Karenina falls in love a soldier named Vronsky, but....

In my second column², I talked about the list device; how a simple list creates rhythm, forward momentum and reader expectation that can be rewarded or subverted. You can introduce dramatic and comic variation by playing with the list items, and you can interrupt or syncopate the list by varying syntax and punctuation – all of which create opportunities for narrative fun and energetic prose.

Parallel construction was another one of those structures English teachers taught me in high school without also telling why it was in the least useful or beautiful. Drone, drone, eyeballs rolling back in my head; another C- on that test. Later I learned the lesson. Here is an example from Mark Anthony Jarman's great short story "Burn Man on a Texas Porch."

"I'm okay, okay, will be fine except I'm hoovering all the oxygen around me, and I'm burning like a circus poster, flames taking more and more of my shape—am I moving or are they? I am hooked into fire, I am hysterical light issuing beast noises in a world of smoke."

What you have here are two sentences built on a series of parallels that invert briefly at the parenthetical em-dash and then modulate into a variant (I'm, I'm, I'm, am I, I am, I am). The simple meaning of the sentence is that the narrator is on fire. But Jarman uses parallels to throw the sentence forward in a series of waves of energy, each surge encoded with another grotesque and moving image of self-incineration. The parallels delay the end of the sentence (as the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky tells us, delay is the first problem in writing a story) and create a passionately dramatic telling. Instead of mere description, the sentences become a poem.

Each new iteration of the parallel creates more of that mysterious thing I call aesthetic space, a blank spot into

which the author has to imagine new and surprising words. Form never limits a writer; it creates openings for fresh invention. It also creates an opportunity for what I call narrative yoking, syntactically juxtaposing two or more ideas to create astonishing new connections, or psychological parallelism.

Here is a bit from the novel *Prochain Episode*, by the Quebecois modernist genius Hubert Aquin. Aquin made mad fun out of shifting from one meaning level to another with parallel constructions, shifting gears, as it were, at the parallels. "I side-slip in my memory, just as I side-slipped in my Volvo in the pass through the Mosses..."

And again: "Laughter rose from the other table as I relaxed after my exhausting race by looking into the inert depth of the lake, by waiting to kill the time of a man whom I knew only by his ability to be someone else."

Here is a passage of multiple parallels from *The Loser*, a novel (Glenn Gould is a character) by the brilliantly eccentric Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard. Using successive parallels, he links the concepts of cage, catastrophe and perversion.

"So I go from one cage to the next, Wertheimer once said, from the Kohlmarkt apartment to Traich and then back again, he said, I thought. From the catastrophic big-city cage into the catastrophic forest cage. Now I hide myself here, now there, now in the Kohlmarkt perversity, now in the country-forest perversity."

And from the same novel, an example of psychological parallelism: Bernhard here contrasts Wertheimer and Glenn Gould by juxtaposing content within syntactic parallels. "Wertheimer always set about his life with false assumptions, I said to myself, unlike Glenn who always set about his existence with the right assumptions."

Finally here is a run of parallels for drama, humour, and in this case narrative compression from the beginning of my own story "Tristiana" in *Savage Love*.

"He started by killing the lambs, stuffing their skins in the cracks between the sappy logs. Then he kilt the ewes, one by one, then he kilt the ram, then he kilt the ox and the riding mule which was starving also. Then he kilt his wife. And then his dog, regretting of the dog more than the rest because it was a pure Tennessee Plott Hound."

The lesson is to inject conflict, rhythm, plot and energy into your sentences by deploying relatively simple forms: but-constructions, lists, and parallels. Never leave a lame, crude sentence snoozing on the page when there is the possibility of dramatic elaboration.

References

1. arts.nationalpost.com/2013/09/09/douglas-glover-building-sentences
2. arts.nationalpost.com/2013/09/10/douglas-glover-lists

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September 12, 2013

Douglas Glover: Epigrams

By Douglas Glover, Special to National Post

Epigrams and aphorisms are always subverting the common understanding and reader expectation; their nature is to be provocative and ironic

Douglas Glover published his first novel, *Precious*, in 1984. He is the author of three works of literary criticism, including *The Enamoured Knight*, a recent book on Don Quixote, and nine books of fiction, including *16 Categories of Desire*, *A Guide to Animal Behaviour*, *The Life and Times of Captain N.*, and *Elle*, winner of the 2003 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction. His new collection of short stories, *Savage Love*, will be published by Goose Lane Editions this month. Glover was born and raised in southwestern Ontario and now lives in Fredericton, where he is writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick. He will be guest editing *The Afterword* all this week.

Writers create drama in sentences and paragraphs by using grammatical forms to juxtapose material with different shades of meaning. If you say, "Usually Mel's mother reminded her of a giraffe, but today she seemed more like an elephant," you force the reader to compare elephants, giraffes, and mothers and the differences between them. Power lies in the differential relation.

Here is Keats on modern love: "And what is love? It is a doll dress'd up..." – a line of poetry that forces the reader to measure the distance between his idea of love and a dressed up doll. And here is an aphorism from my story "Bad News of the Heart": "And what is love? An erotic accident prolonged to disaster."

In his *Historie of Serpents* (1608), Edward Topsall wrote: "Some learned Writers..haue compared a Scorpion to an Epigram..because as the sting of the Scorpion lyeth in the tayle, so the force and vertue of an Epigram is in the conclusion."

Aphorism, epigram and apophthegm are words that refer to roughly the same set of constructs: short, witty statements built around at least one balanced contrast. I taught myself to write them after reading Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. Someone called Durrell's style lapidary; after I looked up the word, I wanted to be lapidary, too. The Greeks wrote epigrams as epitaphs, to be carved on stones over the graves of heroes, hence the term lapidary, words worth being carved in stone for the ages.

The easiest way to teach yourself how to write aphorisms is to collect an assortment from your favourite writers, group them into formal types, and map the types. "Love is an erotic accident prolonged to a disaster" is a definition type. You get a lot that begin: love is, life is, women are, the world is, and so on. "The world is but a school of inquiry." (Montaigne) "Life is always better under the influence of mild intoxicants." (Glover, "Woman Gored by Bison Lives") Here is one I stole from a woman I dated briefly and put into a story: "Love is like the telephone – more than one can use the line."

The predicate contrasts with the subject of the sentence, or, to be more precise, it contrasts with the common understanding of the term in the subject. Epigrams and aphorisms are always subverting the common

understanding and reader expectation; their nature is to be provocative and ironic.

A simple and fun type opens with the barefaced comparison of two or three classes: There are two kinds of _____; the one _____, and the other _____.

"There are two positions available to us—either crime which renders us happy, or the noose, which prevents us from being unhappy." (de Sade)

And here is one I wrote on the same pattern (and sent in an email to a recalcitrant student): "There are two kinds of readers; the adventurers who glory in the breathtaking audacity and risk of a well-turned aphorism and the weenies who, lacking courage themselves, find it affront in others."

There is a type of aphorism that goes straight to the heart of the form and begins with the word difference. "The difference between pornography and literature is that in pornography everyone has orgasms all the time. There is no gap between desire and consummation. In literature there is always an element of frustration, displacement, delay and incompleteness (even if somebody does eventually manage to have an orgasm)." (from *The Enamoured Knight*)

Aphorists often write in bunches. They pick terms or term pairs and churn out variations, eventually throwing away the weaker attempts. For example, I have done a lot of form/content aphorisms. A few survived the cut. "Faith like form is content-independent." "Nostalgia is form; hope is content." ("Dog Attempts to Drown Man in Saskatoon") Both these aphorisms are easily imitated forms. For example, X like Y is _____. Men like cacti prefer to keep even their loved ones at a distance.

The aphorism is a form of thought, at once artificial and inventive. It was Nietzsche's favourite form; he called his little essays, *Versuche*, attempts, trials, stabs, but their form was epigrammatic. Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* is a book of extended aphorisms in the Nietzschean mode. The French-Romanian author E. M. Cioran has published several books of aphorisms, notably *The Trouble with Being Born*, as did Steven Heighton just last year – his *Workbook: memos & dispatches on writing*. The sections of my novel *The Lite Times of Captain N.* called "From Oskar's Book about Indians" are extended aphorisms based on the term pairs oral/literate and European/native.

Aphorisms are a form of thought, though experiments. They have dash and panache. They render the author authoritative. Nietzsche called them "the forms of eternity."

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