

## “Unreal to Real – Stories from the Graveyard”

*Creative Writing Workshop held at 826 Valencia*

*Taught by Scott Lambridis & Angie Needels*

*Limited to 15 students, ages 11-14*

*July 25<sup>th</sup>, August 1st, & 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Wednesdays, 5:30-7:30PM*

What is the line between the unreal and the real? Where do stories come from? How do you turn an idea into a tale? How do some of the best stories start? This workshop will answer these questions through a variety of brainstorming and story seeding exercises that will show you how to stretch your imagination and harness it into a reality of words and images.

Using the lives of characters buried in a fictional graveyard as a framework, small student groups will create their own one-page story while we build a similar piece together as a class. These stories will be submitted for inclusion in 826's Quarterly and published in OLOGY magazine.

## Class structure

There are many ways to conceive a story, and many ways to grow an idea. In this workshop we are going to focus on numerous brainstorming techniques in a collaborative environment to cultivate ideas that will be used to fill out a *Story Map Worksheet* which in turn will be used to complete a piece of flash fiction.

### ***Class 1 (structured) - Introduction and worksheet activities***

The first class will proceed as follows:

1. Introductions – First we meet all students, teachers, and assistants in the workshop.
2. Review of student expectations – It's important for a teacher to get a feeling for what the students are expecting of the structure of the classes and what they are hoping to get out of it.
3. Review of class goals
  - a. What is the purpose of this course? This course will teach you ways to come up with ideas and turn them into concise and compelling stories.
  - b. What is the end product? The goal of this class is for each student to create a one-page piece of flash fiction based upon the concept of God's Acre's "stories within stories" through the use of a story map and brainstorming techniques while the class as a whole creates one together.
  - c. What is God's Acre "stories within stories" concept and why are we using it? God's Acre is a book we have created whereby a grave keeper tells stories about the people buried in his cemetery. We are focusing on this concept because it provides a starting point with a few constraints, namely that we already know the character is dead and buried in a cemetery. Constraints are very helpful in creativity since there is nothing more challenging than the infinite amount of possibilities of a blank page. The constraints also help give focus to the students. We can present the published book itself also as an example of the benefits of using this system.
  - d. What is flash fiction and why are we focusing on flash fiction? Flash fiction refers to an ultra-short story. It is a great place to start exploring creative writing because it limits the length you have to write and forces the most important elements of storytelling (character, drama, and resolution) to be hinted and implied through the writing. It forces you to "show and not tell", a benchmark of engaging writing. A quintessential example is Ernest Hemingway's 6-work gem: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."
  - e. What is a story map? Why are story maps useful? A story map is an excellent compositional tool for before sitting down to write your first draft. It encourages brainstorming and non-linearly thinking and essentially takes care of the most difficult aspects of the foreboding first draft. It also forces you to see the story through the eyes of the character first and gets you used to the idea of building the character's past and then weaving it into the narrative.
  - f. How will we fill out the story map? We will walk through about a dozen brainstorming techniques, each of which will allow you to fill in one spot on your story map. Brainstorming techniques are crucial for tackling problems that will arise, and is also extremely fun. We will do this individually and collaboratively since collaboration is also a fun and useful tool.
4. Create 2-3 person teams with one student assigned as the scribe, and one as the spokesman. We will also identify the entire classroom, including instructors, as an additional team.
5. Hand out worksheets that we have created. All of the following exercises will be guided by the idea of hyper-dramatic writing and telling a complete story with the fewest words, literally confined to one page. The goal ultimately is to show them that anything is possible, even when you give yourself contextual boundaries, but that there are methods for turning "anything" into "something".

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6. The remaining work time will be split between class exercises and team work based on the story map and brainstorming worksheets. We will work through the exercises with the class as we build a God's Acre story together as a collaborative author, and then split into teams to practice developing their own individual stories within each team.
7. By the end of the first class we aim to have most of the story map filled out. Students will be instructed to try to finish them up over the course of the week.

### ***Class 2 (adaptable guide) - Finish worksheets and write first draft***

The second class will proceed loosely as follows:

- Finish story maps and answer any questions - The first part of this class will be used to finish up any spots left open in the story maps and address any questions related to the brainstorming techniques previously covered.
- First draft - In the second part of this class the students will use their story map to create a rough first draft of their one-page piece of flash fiction. The first draft is where the writer discovers, through the act of writing it, which parts of your map they're going to end up focusing on. The first draft is a fun exploration of the character and his current predicament that we have already laid out and is accomplished simply by sitting down and writing and not really worrying where it will go.
- By end of the 2nd class both the classroom and each team will have a completed story outline and have started their draft. Students will be encouraged to finish this draft over the week if it's not yet complete, and to start thinking about revisions. Instructors will be on-site to assist as needed.

### ***Class 3 (adaptable guide) - Revisions***

The 3rd workshop will be the easy part, revisions! Instructors will be on-site to assist and answer questions as needed. By the end of this class students will have completed their own pieces of flash fiction, and the class team will have completed its own. These stories will be submitted for inclusion in 826's Quarterly and published in OLOGY magazine.

## Activities & Materials

### **Story Map**

The primary worksheet will be a story map. Since we are focusing on flash fiction, this will actually be more like a character map. The character map will look like the following. This worksheet does not have to be filled out in any particular order and students will be encouraged to fill it out as we go through each brainstorming exercise.

- Character name
- Character's profession – often related to a skill the character will use.
- First character detail – description of an object, event, or person from the character's past. This will be used to describe the following:
- First death detail – description of an object, event, or person in the current story. This will be used to flesh out the first character attribute.
- Second character detail
- Second death detail
- Third character detail
- Third death detail
- Character's death
- Epitaph – will also be the starting line, and generally serves to guide an "Aha" moment at the end on behalf of the reader.

In filling out the story map we will talk about the use of analogy and metaphor as a way to build character and back-story, how gradually revealing information and using repetitious phrases can create drama, and how a character's personality is revealed by having the character show us his history rather than the author telling the reader. We will talk about how to create a multi-dimensional character by weaving descriptions and associations into explanations of a current setting in a casual and seemingly unintentional way. (i.e. "When I was 5 my grandmother would smack my hands every time I touched the glass storefront of the ice cream shop." versus "As the cop slammed my body against the ice cream shop's glass I winced doubly. First, for the bruise that Laura left on me, and second, for the sting of my grandma's switch across my knuckles in kindergarten every time my hungry eyes fell upon an ice cream shop.")

## **Brainstorming Activities**

These activities are aimed to show how many ways you can come up with ideas related to your story and character. The students will use each activity to fill out one of their map spot, though the order is theirs to decide. Activities will be no longer than 15 minutes in length apiece and will include:

1. The title before the story – sometimes story ideas can come from a simple word or phrase that would serve as your perfect title. Maybe you keep it, maybe not, but it can certainly help spark ideas. What are some of the best titles of movies, books, or song's you can think of? Do you have any of your own? You can either get an idea from someone else's title, or get your story idea from your own title. (i.e. "The left was rotten and the right not quite ripe", "He played London tricks with pants macabre", "Franco's dead, Spain rejoices", "Stories within stories, human lives", "The man who wasn't there", "Jitterbug perfume", "Still life with woodpecker", "Life of the Gallows")
2. Interesting names can spark stories – What's the funniest name or nickname of a person you've ever heard or can think of? What's the most daunting name you've ever heard or can think of? If you can't think of any, try jumbling the letters in someone's name. If you still can't think of any, try looking in a natural field guide for an animal or plant name. (i.e. Big Walker T, Mister Cleanjeans, Barron Storey).
3. Dictionary – great words or phrases alone can spark a story. Science textbooks are great for this. (i.e. pulsar, "throw out a window", phobias, proboscis, pineal gland's connection to circadian rhythms)
4. Death as an insight into life –What would be the most pleasant death you can think of? Most ironic? (i.e. riding a missile, burning alive, getting shot by a stray bullet while jumping to death off a building, being buried alive, cat swallowing a Christmas ribbon)
5. A place can tell a story – What is the strangest place you've ever been to? What is the most pleasant place you've ever been to? What is the scariest place you've ever been to? Can you think of a way to make them stranger, more pleasant, or scarier? Where is the coolest vacation or trip you've ever taken or heard of? If you could go anywhere in the universe right now where would you go? What place would you like to see firsthand? (i.e. Badlands, Clockwork Orange home, the Louisiana swamp, a Thai temple, the moon, the inside of a pulsar, a Chicago speakeasy in the 1920's)
6. Tabloid time – What's the juiciest piece of gossip you've ever heard? If you could make up a lie about a family member, friend, or celebrity what would it be? What historical or local event do you think is really interesting? (i.e. Japanese city holding a Yakuza retirement day, a man found with 50 ravens in his apartment, a young couple running off to elope)
7. What if? – What idea has always struck you as amazing? What if something you've always assumed was true wasn't? (i.e. a wind powered car, the universe may eventually collapse, taste buds are the only nerve cells that regenerate)
8. Nothing's stranger than nature – What creature (animal, plant, or otherwise) can you recall having the most memorable feature, such as defense mechanism or courtship dance? (i.e. a snake can unhinge its jaw, you can find harpoons from the 1800s inside whale stomachs, bees navigate by ultraviolet light, a spider's silk is the strongest fiber known to man, a horse will eat itself to death, moths get caught in bug zappers because they use the moon to navigate)
9. Where'd that come from? – Pick an object in the room that stands out to you as being out of place. Where might that object have come from? What's the most innocuous object in the room? What might be its secret history? Do you see an object you never realized was there before? (i.e. a clock with fish for hands, a bottle of shampoo, a kazoo)
10. Who's telling this story anyway? – Who could be telling the story and how is the story being delivered? Students will investigate different and unique narrative points of view such as the following. Is the main

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character telling the story as its happening? Is someone who was there talking about it? Is it told in the past or present tense? Is the story in the form of a letter or email or voicemail message? Is the voice omniscient? Did the voice simply hear this story as gossip? If the narrator isn't the character, what relation could the narrator have to the character (parent, friend, etc.) Is the grave keeper telling the story? Did someone find an object and is telling the story of the object? Is it a myth or fable? We will also investigate the ideas of meta-layering and fictional biographies. (i.e. God's Acre, The Dude, CLAV)

11. Every picture tells a story – how images can spark story ideas and story pieces can inspire imagery. We will provide some pieces of artwork for the students to look at, as well as encourage them to think of images they've found to be particularly inspiring. (i.e. What's behind Mona Lisa's smile? The image of the dragon is the main character's tattoo...where and when did he get it?)
12. Using music to inspire writing – how music can spark story ideas and tones and vice versa. We will provide a few small snippets of music for the students to listen to, as well as encourage them to think of pieces they've found particularly inspiring. (i.e. The character's childhood alarm clock always played "Here comes the sun" and now he shudders every time he hears it. The keyboards in a different piece might sound like a bunch of crickets in the grass, playing in unison.)
13. In the recesses of recess – Students can "do anything" for a five minute break at scheduled times, but they have to return to class with something they can use in the story. (i.e. the idea of their character dying of boredom during this very workshop!)
14. Collaboration – students will pair up and solicit each other's help on filling out the last part of the story map.

## **Sample Flash Fiction Story**

"Scratches"

When Johnny got a ferret for his thirteenth birthday he was too kind a boy to ask what it was and simply assumed his mother thought she was buying him another cat. It certainly scratched like his beloved Jasper did before he died. After accidentally pricking himself on a spine of his mother's favorite cactus plant Jasper ran into the killing fields of highway 89. Since then, Johnny had developed a weak heart.

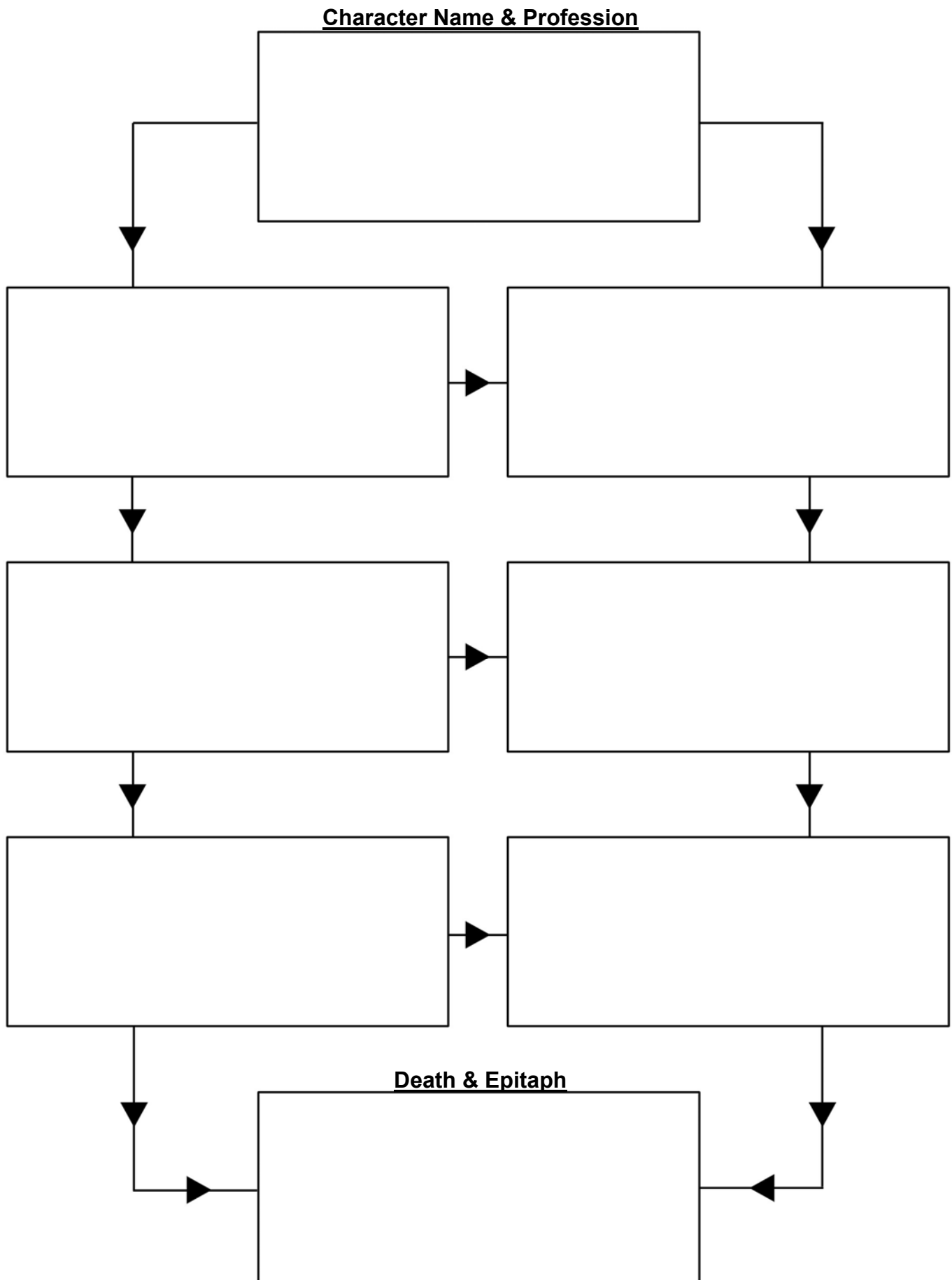
Johnny's step-father complained about the smell as soon as his mother brought it home. Johnny liked the smell though, despite his heightened sense. It was pungent enough to take him somewhere else, somewhere beyond the seeming perfection of his suburban surroundings. Johnny's step-father said the ferret would be a lot cuter if it smelled less like a skunk, but Johnny wouldn't let him take the ferret away.

On the fifth day Johnny and his mother went to show their doctor the raised spots and beautifully sinuous markings the ferret left on his skin. Puffed and raised like the Braille Johnny read with his mother every night, the doctor claimed Johnny was just very sensitive. Johnny's step-father called the ferret a mongrel with dirty nails, but Johnny wouldn't let him take the ferret away.

On the tenth day Johnny lay still as the ferret scratched and scratched at the door, sending his mom's dreams into haunting places where her marriage was more than its de facto state. His step-father roused first, found him, and saw the extremely exacerbated swelling. The ferret hissed at the man and jumped over to his usual spot atop Johnny, not letting either of them be taken away.

It stopped hissing when his mother came in and touched the edges of the swellings, now almost an inch tall. She traced the Braille-like words with her fingers, reminding herself of the giant wooden letter blocks Johnny loved in the years before she realized why he never made sentences. He loved the geometry of the letters, the dotted mirror of which lay now on his cold skin. She never told her husband, but she swore she could read Johnny's words in the ferret's scratches. She read Johnny's love and hopes for her. She read the passages from the stories she read him in her unpublished book. She read Johnny's instructions on how to find the life he knew she truly wanted. She silently thanked the ferret and told him she would never let anyone take him away.

On the fifteenth day, Johnny's ashes were carried in the soil of a six inch potted cactus pot in his mother's left arm, and a suitcase in the other, containing, amongst many things, the manuscript to a book she had finished years ago. At her feet, attached to a small red leash hooked around her left arm, was the ferret who was quiet and not scratching for once, being occupied by the task of suckling the meat off of the middle aged make finger held between his two small front paws. Though he struck her when she protested, she didn't let her husband take the ferret away.



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## Section 2

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Section 3

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Section 4

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► Unreal to Real: Stories from the Graveyard – Brainstorming Worksheet ◀

Section 5

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Section 6

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Section 7

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Section 8

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Section 9

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Section 10

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**First Draft**

**► Unreal to Real: Stories from the Graveyard ◀**  
**Final Story**