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The Art of Flash Fiction and Handmade Books

At the art college where I teach, I include flash fiction as part of my Bookworks course. Handmade books naturally need short texts and I encourage my students to write their own. Art students tend to be visually and physically oriented, so I send them the link to the *Safety Pin Review*; each issue is one thirty-word story painted on a black cloth patch that is worn by an “operative” for a week—pinned to his or her back with safety pins—and documented. Both art and writing are ultimately about the same thing: seeing and looking carefully. Art students can be wary of words yet willing, but afraid, to write, so flash, particularly as a thirty-word story, seems to be a welcoming place to start.

Reading is the prelude to writing, so I ask them to read several issues, then choose one and copy it over by hand. My hope is that the physical act of writing with a pencil can help integrate the story into their bodies. I also ask them to attempt one of their own. We talk about why they chose each story. Did it make them think? Move them, emotionally? Maybe they liked the concept or loved the words. We talk about the gaps: what the reader has to infer or imagine, how explanations are usually absent, how information is revealed or hidden. The gaps are like juxtapositions in art: when you put two objects together, the viewer automatically tries to make a meaningful connection. The same thing happens in flash and can occur between two words or among many sentences.

We take their new stories apart by arranging them on a 5 x 6 grid and putting one word in each large box. At this micro level we decide if each word is the strongest, freshest word it could be. We look at layers within the words. The word *see* for example has a different emotional impact than *look*, *examine*, *understand* or *ogle*. They write other words into the boxes. Copying over happens again as they try to pick out the words that seem either precise or that generate an image or mood. Later, I may suggest that they substitute imaginative and absurd words, like their own *Mad Libs*, to see how the stories can change. Occasionally, they like the new stories better or these lead to longer pieces. The hope is that the exercise softens any barriers they may have felt and generates a new excitement for writing.

We step back and look at the overall message and meaning of the original stories. Are they saying what they wanted to say? In art, this is like the composition. We ask of artists to provide an entry point: the first place the eye should go. We ask the same of the writer. The beginning should grab, the ending should leave a mystery. The take-away should not be confusion, but satisfaction or the evidence of change or movement. Perhaps sentences should be relocated, the order revised.

The sentences are like lines, guiding the eye around, keeping the viewer on the page. Zooming in close to just the sentence level is next, and I explain that reading aloud is the only way to find out if the words flow well; if they stumble as they read they should change the words so the rhythm works. Misreading words distracts the reader. Copy over again. Now, we may be ready to decide how to

divide up the sentences, one or two to a page, and to use these stories in a handmade book. If the stories stand strongly on their own, I may encourage them to submit to the review. We look at how the turning of a page works with memory and can change the meaning, stop the flow, conceal secrets or provide suspense.

In a book the words nestle in a place where we can linger. Written on a black patch it is more like a painting, presented to us quickly and all at once. Books are where we investigate and explore, where we go to escape or to have our imaginations tickled. By making flash into books, into sensory objects, we create our own tiny, tangible worlds for readers to wander with us. In the case of the *Safety Pin Review*, the tiny story created wanders into our collective world, to be experienced differently as it moves around and into each new context. All in just a few powerful, colorful words.