occasionally gets a grudging pass, because at least it teaches one about period dress and "customs." But Oz, Eight Chimneys, the City of the Dead—get out of here! What's the value in spending a chunk of your life in a place that doesn't exist?

And here comes Flannery O'Connor again, preaching to our choir: "The truth is not distorted here," she writes, "but rather a distortion is used to get at truth." We exit these Oz places with a renewed sense of wonder, and with an altered understanding of our own lives and bodies and boundaries; with a looser relationship, too, perhaps, to that undulating set of memories and perceptions and sensations, the engulfing sum, of "everyday reality." As Shirley Jackson, another engineer of impossible architectures, writes as she opens a door onto infinite corridors in "The Haunting of Hill House": "No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream."

ENDINGS:
Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow

ELISSA SCHAPPELL

"GREAT IS THE art of beginning," Longfellow said, "but greater the art of ending."

It's true. Beginnings, like first kisses, need only seduce us with their potential, clearly establish the theme, cast, and tenor of the affair to come, whereas the ending must realize the story's potential, deliver on the checks the beginning has signed, and do so in such a memorable way that the reader is left wanting more. For we may forget how a relationship began—we were drunk, it was wartime, it began slowly—but rarely do we forget how it ended—with a slap, a kiss tasting of tears, a farewell wave from the back of a camel. It's the end of the story we're focused on when we recount these tales of betrayal, lost love, infidelity, isn't it?

The ending bears all the weight of the story, its task nothing less than imbuing the story with meaning and making it unforgettable. The ending must fulfill the reader's expectations

by answering the questions that have been raised in the reader's mind (or at least some of them), and it has to make sense, but at the same time, it should be unexpected. I don't mean I want a surprise—I mean, even if I know how the story will end, I want to be surprised by the way I get there. The writer has done his job, novelist David Leavitt says, when the reader's reaction to the ending is "Oh my God," followed by "Of course."

Obviously, endings are hard. Every writer struggles with them. Ernest Hemingway revised the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times. When asked in an interview what the problem was that had him in such a swivet, he answered, "Getting the words right."

Oh, is that all?

If beginnings are characterized by a lot of throat clearing and exposition, and the middle is where the writer hits his stride, endings—the knowledge that the end is near, *The C on my A-B-C narrative arc looms!*—strikes panic in writers' hearts. You have to understand your story to end your story. Endings are harder than beginnings because they must grow organically out of the rest. They must, as Anton Chekhov says, "artfully concentrate for the reader an impression of the entire work."

Of course, certain genres require specific closures. Mysteries, crime novels, ghost stories, bodice rippers, all by their very nature promise a neat resolution. Once the reader knows "who done it" and how; what, pray tell, ate those Eagle Scouts; and who will end up in whose arms, there is no reason for the author to stick around. Indeed, it's best just to tidy up quickly and get out of there as elegantly as possible. Part of the pleasure of reading these genres is knowing exactly what sort of ending we

can expect, and that our desires will be satisfied. But in fiction writing, it is often less clear to the writer how an ending should be resolved. Here are some common approaches—both ones to aspire to and ones to avoid—when writing an ending.

The Doogie Howser Ending

THE PRESSURE TO tell readers what we want them to know is strong. Oftentimes, this anxiety manifests itself in the last paragraph of the piece being written in the form of summation, telling our readers what we fear we haven't shown them, or what Rob Spillman, the editor of *Tin House* magazine, calls a "Doogie Howser at the typewriter" moment. *Doogie Howser, M.D.* was a television show in the early nineties starring Neil Patrick Harris as a relentlessly perky teen doctor. At the close of every episode, Doogie would sit down at the typewriter and bang out the takeaway ("Today I learned that friends are invaluable"), just in case you missed it.

The cure for Howsering is simple: amputate the offending paragraph or paragraphs and be done with it. I realize that sounds heartless and cruel, but buck up, darling. You're in grand company. William Faulkner was speaking from experience when he advised writers to "murder your darlings." Understand that most early drafts are greatly improved by tearing off the first and last pages. If excising the last paragraph or page doesn't reveal an ending that feels true, then go back. Retrace your steps and return to the place where you last felt a pulse, where the language felt alive,

and you felt engaged. If that's not your ending, it will at least point you true north.

The Overly Symbolic Ending

It isn't uncommon for an author, anxious about his woefully unsatisfying ending, to attempt to seduce readers by getting them drunk on poetics, overripe similes and metaphors, and the low-hanging fruit of symbolism, in the hopes that some über-image will emerge to which the reader can attach profound meaning. That said, ending with a resonant image, one that hearkens back to the beginning or middle of the story, can be an effective way to illuminate your story's theme.

Amy Hempel's "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" opens with the narrator in a hospital visiting her best friend, who is dying of a terminal illness. Despite intimations that the best friend has been sick for a while, this is the first time the narrator has been able to force herself to come. The only way she can cope is by cracking jokes and sharing trivia. One anecdote the nameless narrator shares is about the first chimpanzee to learn sign language. "'Did you know that when they taught the first chimp to talk, it lied?'" she says. The best friend laughs gamely; however, when the narrator asks if she wants to hear the rest of the story, warning her, "'it will break your heart,'" the friend demurs.

At story's end, after the best friend has died, the narrator, filled with grief, claims she can remember nothing about this time, only the trivial details. She closes:

> In the course of the experiment, that chimp had a baby. Imagine how her trainers must have thrilled when the mother, without prompting, began to sign to her newborn. Baby, drink milk.
>
> Baby, play ball.
>
> And when the baby died, the mother stood over the body, her wrinkled hands moving with animal grace, forming again and again the words, Baby, come hug, Baby, come hug, fluent now in the language of grief.

This bit of trivia brings the story full circle. The reader couldn't have predicted that the chimp, referenced only twice earlier, would be the image Hempel would use to finish the story; but by ending with the bereft chimp unable to process such an overwhelming loss, Hempel communicates the depth of the narrator's grief, the universal grief we all experience, without sentimentality, leaving the reader positively devastated.

So go for it. Just remember that should you choose to end your story with a killer image, one you hope will pull the story together and resonate for the reader, be subtle. Be wary of being heavy-handed and always be on guard for the cliché—the train leaving the station, the reunited lovers riding off into the distance, the character gazing at the sunset/sunrise/moon. Of course, there are exceptions. In one of the greatest endings in all of literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* famously leaves Nick Carraway contemplating Gatsby looking out at the green light at the end of Daisy's dock across the Long Island Sound, the last line serving as a

coda: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

In that moment, the story expands, and we can imagine the whole world breathing.

The Epilogue Ending

In the way that a coda, intended to elegantly enhance the theme of the story, can in the wrong hands hit the reader like a cudgel, so it is with epilogues. While I do not shudder the way I do when I see that a novel has a prologue, the sight of an epilogue always fills me with skepticism. Epilogues must be more than a double ending, or a hint at a sequel. If you feel compelled to pen an epilogue, make sure that it springs organically from the text, that it enhances your theme, and that it adds a new dimension to the story.

The inclusion of an epilogue permitted Margaret Atwood to provide two endings to her feminist dystopian satire *The Handmaid's Tale*. The plot of the novel, set in a not-so-distant future America where white racist religious fanatics exert complete control over the lives and reproductive rights of women, ends on an ambiguous note, the reader unsure of the fate of the heroine, Offred. However, the epilogue, presented in the form of notes from an academic symposium in the future, suggests that Offred escaped and the world she inhabited is history. The last line of the epilogue, "Are there any questions?" has such power, some of the book's fans have had it tattooed on their bodies.

The Epiphanic Ending

Epiphanies are wildly popular and understandably so, as an epiphany can provide the author with a way to crystallize his or her themes and finish on a ringing emotional high note. The author hopes that as the world comes into hyperfocus for a character in the throes of an epiphany it will also for the reader. However, an epiphany in and of itself doesn't constitute an ending. If an epiphany is unearned, illogical, or ends the story too soon, the writer has failed. Most often, the action that follows this moment of acute awareness is the true end of a story. When you find yourself aching to strike your character down with an epiphany, a blazing comet of clarity that changes everything, make sure it can be followed by an action that warrants being your ending. Despite the fact that James Joyce's characters, particularly those Dubliners, experience epiphanies as though they were seasonal allergies, in reality epiphanies are rare, and often fleeting. As they should be. Joyce's short masterpiece "The Dead" begins, appropriately enough, at a celebration of the religious holiday the Feast of the Epiphany. During the party, a tenor sings for the guests, as the protagonist, Gabriel, observes a woman—who, after a moment, he realizes is his wife, Gretta—transfixed by the song. Later, in their hotel, a wistful Gretta confesses that the song stirred memories of an old love who despite suffering from consumption had stood vigil outside her window in a storm the night before she left Galway for Dublin and subsequently died. The story closes with Gabriel realizing that he has never and will never love his wife as this man did. Joyce writes: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling

faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

The No-End-in-Sight Ending

IT IS NOT difficult to get lost inside your story and to become unsure of the direction in which your denouement lies, or, recognizing this, to fail to stop and reorient yourself, but rather charge on ahead, believing that if you keep plunging forward through the thickets of confusion, you will, by magic, happy accident, or providence, reach the nirvana of a perfect ending. The reality is that at some juncture—half blind, fingers cramped into gnarled fists, family and friends banging on your door—you will be forced to acknowledge that you are overwriting.

But before you allow yourself to be sucked down into the quicksand of despair, pause; it is easy—in theory, at least—to save yourself. All that are required are a machete, a wheelbarrow, a handkerchief, and nerve.

Consider that there may simply be too much going on for any mortal to bring the story to a close in a sane and satisfactory fashion. The only way to see the end is to clear all the narrative brush, mercilessly hack away at the overgrowth of nonessential scenes, dialogue, and action. Sever competing story lines, cart them away in your wheelbarrow. Turn a cold eye on your cast. Is it too large? Are all of the characters contributing? Every character comes with drama; if some are receiving more attention than their parts warrant, bid them a fond adieu. If you can't bear the thought of cutting them loose altogether, transfer them

into the reserves file. Take your handkerchief, mop your brow, and now look at your story. The path to your ending should be much clearer.

The Open Ending

THE FLIP SIDE of the story that goes on without end is, of course, the story that just stops, like a conversation in which the speaker is cut off midsentence. You find this often in the work of writers who are attempting to mimic literary masters such as Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, and especially Anton Chekhov, who is credited with popularizing what is known as the "open" or "zero" ending.

The open ending doesn't focus on building the story to a resolution of conflict (or at least not the one we expected) or an epiphany. Rarely do we see how a character has changed, but rather, more realistically, how the character has failed to change; or if there's been change, it's dubious. Because of this, open-ended stories possess a true-to-life, naturalistic quality. By subverting our expectations, the author forces us to project our own meaning onto the end. So the epiphany isn't in the character; instead, that moment of illumination occurs within the reader, which can be much more powerful than the experience we'd have witnessing a character's epiphany on the page.

Many of John Cheever's stories and the majority of Raymond Carver's end with a character arrested in thought or on the verge of a realization, as Nick is at the end of Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The gin is drunk up, the kitchen has grown dark, and the two couples,

having grown increasingly inarticulate and frustrated by their attempts to define the elusive nature of love, sit in silence. Carver expresses the universal desire for love by having Nick reflect on the "the human noise we sat there making"—the beating of their hearts.

The key to creating a successful open ending is to leave the reader with a powerful impression of what the future might hold for a character, a sense of how his or her view of the world has been altered in a significant way. Despite the fact that the story is drawing to a close, you want the reader to feel the story has, in the end, gotten bigger, not smaller.

Or, as a character says in Grace Paley's short story "A Conversation with My Father," by way of explaining to her father why she doesn't write traditional stories: "Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life."

Open. Not empty. Understand that should you end your story too soon, or too abruptly, your readers will most likely not interpret your silence and sudden exit for depth or mystery or artful obscurity. They will think you walked away to have a cigarette.

And oh that knowing your last line guaranteed you a stellar ending. If you are lucky, you might find—as Charles D'Ambrosio did when he decided to begin his moving story "Drummond & Son" with the challenge to write a story that ends with a father saying, "I love you" to his troubled son—that the last line can be the seed that grows the story. However, the risk in having a predetermined final line is that the story can feel overdetermined, the connections forced and artificial. Knowing where you're going is swell, just make sure that you leave your-

self open to discovery in the writing. When there's no discovery in the writer, there's no discovery in the reader.

The Big Bang Ending

FOR AN AUTHOR to feel trapped in a story, claustrophobic, bored, frustrated, perhaps even angry, is not unheard of. Desperate to bring this sorry situation to a dramatic conclusive end, he or she unleashes an earthquake, a flood, a fire, a plague of frogs; strangles grandma in front of her dachshunds; sinks a ship filled with refugee children; throws the smirking pedophile into a cage of tigers, hoping that this extreme or tragic ending will do the emotional work the author could not. When in fact, such bald and cheap attempts to provoke readers, to make them angry, or to bring them to tears will inspire only disappointment and ultimately leave them feeling empty.

Gratuitous endings are unforgivable. However, extreme endings that are earned, that are consistent with the story line and what we know of the characters, can make for a brutally successful ending.

Flannery O'Connor, patron saint of peafowl and the Southern grotesque form, is famous for unsettling, tragicomic endings punctuated by bursts of violence. We look forward to these dependably grim and deliciously ironic endings, the attendant losses of life and salvation, because O'Connor creates characters who, deeply flawed in the eyes of God, and thus in her eyes as well, get what they deserve. It is a testament to O'Connor's gift for dark comedy and storytelling that we allow ourselves to be

implicated in the final judgment she passes on her characters. We are amused by the twist on fate O'Connor delivers at the end of "Good Country People," when the haughty young woman's attempted seduction of a simple country Bible salesman ends with him stealing her artificial leg, and horrified at the close of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," which famously ends with the self-serving, irritating grandmother being executed. As though we didn't already feel guilty for wishing somebody would shut grandma up, O'Connor's choice to end the story with dialogue—"'She would of been a good woman,' The Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life'"—removes the buffer between reader and author, putting us on the scene so we can almost smell the sulfur. Which is why this ending lodges itself in the reader's memory like a bullet.

The Happy Ending

EVERYBODY LIKES A happy ending, readers *and* writers. So ingrained is this belief in the author's mind that if he reunites the lovers, graces the infertile couple with not one, but two children, saves the earth from being pulled into the sun, he will win the reader's heart. But you must, as with all endings, earn your happiness. If the reader doesn't have good reason to imagine the story *won't* end happily, then the happy ending is worthless. We suspect that Charles Dickens's stouthearted orphan David Copperfield will indeed become the hero of his own life but that his journey will be fraught. And it is. David endures all manner of loss and tribulation, but the greatest tragedy is his having

married Dora, of whom he is very fond, but does not love, while pining for Agnes. In order for David to marry Agnes, Dickens must off Dora. So while David gets his happy ending, it comes at a cost.

The Sad Ending

AND IT IS just as important, if not more so, for an author to earn a sad ending, because the truth is readers are more likely to overlook a slightly flimsy happy ending (after all, they've got the sun on their shoulders) than a poorly developed sad one (after all, it's midnight in their soul and they're standing in a downpour). As with the happy ending, if readers don't have reason to believe that there's the smallest chance the story will end, if not happily, then not miserably—the sad ending will not be nearly as satisfying.

Don't think for a moment that by simply offing the beloved heroine or by drowning a sack of kittens, you will break your reader's heart. You have to earn your tears. No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. I believe it must have pained Edith Wharton awfully to have the splendid Lily Bart die at the end of *The House of Mirth,* just at the moment of redemption: "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear."

And despite the classification of an ending being either "happy" or "sad," the finales that linger in the reader's mind are those that are tinged with a little of both.

The Moralistic Ending

THERE IS NEVER any doubt how a fable or fairy tale is going to end—with a moral. Only the most unsophisticated fiction, that geared toward preaching/educating/controlling the behavior of children (and dim-witted children, at that), ends with the reader being taught a lesson. I don't know about you, but I don't care to be lectured to, not by an elephant or a goblin or a wise man in a robe clutching a staff. It's tedious. If you want to end on a moral note, make sure you do so obliquely. I shouldn't be aware that I've drunk the Kool-Aid until I'm in line to join the merchant marines.

The Symmetrical Ending

I KNOW NO one likes to admit it, but at some point every author feels the temptation to pen a terribly clever ending. Here I should say that I applaud cleverness and experimentation, but never for the pure sake of being clever or experimental. Should you want to experiment with an ingenious ending, one effective means is to create a symmetry between your beginning and your ending, as Hemingway does in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which opens and closes with Robert Jordan awaiting the firing squad on the pine-needled floor of a forest, or as Marcel Proust does in *In Search of Lost Time*, which begins and ends with a reference to time.

If you grew up, as I did, in the 1970s, you might have had your mind blown, as I did, when you discovered that S. E. Hinton's

classic American coming-of-age novel *The Outsiders* (written when she was just sixteen) begins and ends with the same line: "When I stepped out into the bright sunlight, from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman, and a ride home." The novel opens with Ponyboy Curtis, a member of the hardscrabble Greasers gang, being jumped by members of a rival gang—the middle-class Socs—as he leaves a movie theater. It closes with Ponyboy, who has barely survived the turf war that took the lives of his brother and friends, beginning a writing assignment for his English class, suggesting that the story we just read was Ponyboy's account of the events. Of course, there are other, more sophisticated modern pieces with beginnings and endings that mirror each other. For example, Lydia Davis's microportrait of a marriage "In a House Besieged," employs the title as both the first and last lines, the cadence of the lines creating an inescapable continuum mimicking the couple's relationship.

The *Surprise!* Ending

SURPRISE ENDINGS ARE seductive because they appear to offer the promise of an easy end to our problems. The oldest surprise ending in the book, the deus ex machina, comes from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, in which he cautions poets never to resort to creating a "god from the machine" to resolve their conflicts. Horace was reacting to Euripides's fondness for concluding a play by introducing a new character, most often a god, who, suspended from a crane by a leather harness, would be lowered on to the stage

to save the day for no reason that made sense. (Witness Medea, guilty of murder and infanticide, being whisked off to Athens before Jason can exact his revenge.)

For those of you taking notes, this means no happy coincidence, no emergence of a character or man in a leather harness who will save the day. No *And then I woke up!* There is a tale, now legendary in the circles of teachers of creative writing, about a story that ends with the revelation that the story was being narrated by a squirrel with a bag on its head, which is the explanation for the story's problem with point of view.

However, if you're set on writing a surprise ending, a real shocker, it must be original—in a good way, not a narrated-by-vermin way—which is hard in this day and age, when we seem almost unshockable.

Perhaps the most famous surprise ending in modern literature is from Ambrose Bierce's 1890 classic short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," which opens with Peyton Farquhar standing on a bridge with a noose around his neck, about to be hanged for being a Confederate sympathizer. What follows appears to be the tale of his desperate escape—he makes his way home to his wife. But, in fact, the last third of the story is imagined in the span of time between his falling from the bridge and the noose snapping his neck: "As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow on the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence!"

A lot of amateur writers seem to favor the surprise ending of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," perhaps because it's a story that's often taught to high school students, an age at which

too many writers leave off reading. However, it is a respectable trope, albeit one that can leave audiences howling in furious bewilderment. Witness the last episode of *The Sopranos* (a tragedy worthy of Shakespeare), which could be interpreted as showing that six seasons worth of story were all a flashback of the main character, who is about to be capped.

The Make-the-Reader-Wait-for-It Ending

IF YOU HAVE done your job well, readers' anticipation of your ending has been building. Their natural reaction is one of excitement, the heart rate increases and so does the speed at which they read. All they want to do is gallop toward the finish line, thoughtlessly skimming over sentences you've labored over. Stop them. Pull on the reins! Never do you want to let your readers out of your control, least of all at the end. You want them fully attuned to every word, every nuance. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is by engaging the reader on as many sensory levels as possible, so as to ground them entirely in the moment.

The ending of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is exquisite torture. Chopin doles out the sensory details as she puts the reader in the body of Edna, a wife and mother filled with the knowledge that she will never be able to live her life truly as she pleases, standing on the beach:

> The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive,

never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.

We experience the sensation of cold as Edna wades naked into the water, the exhaustion of her body as she swims away from shore, and ultimately her final thoughts as she drowns:

> Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.

Chopin's vivid details and lyrical prose draw us so deeply into the character of Edna, we can almost taste the salt on our lips.

Every word, every sentence in a story or novel should count. However, never is it more crucial, never does the language bear more weight than in the final line. The last line should be the perfect crystallization of the story. If you write a sublime last line that resonates with readers, they will hold it fast, repeat it like poetry, until it takes on the weight of prayer.

Sometimes these lines are like a pop on the jaw, as with Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises,* which closes with his alter ego, Jake, responding to Brett's notion they could have be happy together: "'Yes,' I said. 'Isn't it pretty to think so?'"—a gimlet-eyed distillation of Jake's, and the author's, resignation. Sure, we all have hopes

and dreams, but they are just that. Or the line can land like a punch in the gut. In *1984,* George Orwell holds out the hope that Winston will escape the totalitarian regime and overthrow the government until the last line: "He loved Big Brother." The message Orwell delivers is loud and unmistakable: those who succumb are done.

Then there are those who go long, as Salman Rushdie does, expertly controlling the reader through the footfall-like rhythms of his words as they build to a run at the close of *Midnight's Children*:

> Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace.

In Conclusion

It all comes down to this: endings are a bitch. The best ending is one that leaves readers with a profound sense of awe and wonder, not only at the world the author has created but also at the considerable skill with which the writer has pulled it off. The

truth is, the best endings don't feel like endings at all. The best ending is one in which the world gets larger, not smaller. It's not an ending at all. It's the beginning of understanding the world and ourselves in a new way.

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