

TONY ARDIZZONE

HEMINGWAY'S CAROMS: DESCRIPTIVE SHOWING AND TELLING

Tony Ardizzone is the author of six books of fiction, most recently the novel *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*, and the collections *Taking It Home: Stories from the Neighborhood* and *Larabi's Ox: Stories of Morocco*. He is the editor of the anthology *The Habit of Art: Best Stories from the Indiana University Fiction Workshop*. His work has received the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, the Milkweed National Fiction Prize, the Friends of Literature's Chicago Foundation for Literature Award for Fiction, the Pushcart Prize, two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, and other honors. He teaches in the creative-writing program at Indiana University.

I encourage the writers with whom I work to read widely, and to understand that each work they encounter offers them an opportunity to learn something new about craft. This involves their ability to read as a writer, with an eye on technique, on the specific ways a particular effect in a given work is achieved. In the same way that apprentice painters learn and refine their craft by first identifying and then imitating the techniques of their masters, so writers can develop their craft by looking more closely at works they admire, identifying aspects of the works' techniques, and then imitating those aspects. Here is an exercise based on these principles.

In a letter to a fellow writer, Ernest Hemingway wrote the fol-

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lowing about his method of description: "I always try to do the thing by three cushion shots rather than by words or direct statements." To put this into context, "three cushion shots" is a term used in a game called three cushion billiards, which is played on a table with no pockets and with two white cue balls and a single red ball, called a carambola. The object of three cushion billiards is for each player to strike both the opponent's cue ball and the carambola, but before doing so bounce off three or more cushions (or make three caroms, a word derived from "carambola") before both balls have been hit. Doing so scores a point and allows the player to continue.

What Hemingway was suggesting to his friend was that the best description more often than not is indirect. Rather than aim directly at a specific aspect or attribute of character (e.g. honesty, intelligence, attractiveness), the skillful writer often relies on series of caroms, or indirect statements, to suggest or show the character traits the writer intends to reveal. Direct statements about character are overt and *tell* the reader about the character. Descriptive caroms are specific and suggestive and *show* the reader intended character traits, and by doing so involve the reader more closely in the experience of the character and the fiction. This is the concept behind the creative-writing teacher's suggestion to "Show, don't tell."

EXERCISE

Look at examples of description in the fiction you read and identify the direct statements and the caroms that the writer uses as well as the character traits that these indirect descriptions suggest. Then choose one of the examples as a model and write a description of one or more characters (a woman, a man, a boy, a girl), relying on caroms of your own.