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Diana Gabaldon is the author of the award-winning, #1 NYT-bestselling OUTLANDER novels, described by Salon magazine as “the smartest historical sci-fi adventure-romance story ever written by a science Ph.D. with a background in scripting “Scrooge McDuck” comics.”

Diana gave permission to excerpt an example of her writing technique from her essay, THE SHAPE OF THINGS for use in this workshop. She also included this bit of personal advice:

You might mention the writing-out-of-sequence notion, as well; a lot of early writers don't realize that they don't have to do it via the outline/topic sentence/topic paragraph/rough draft/edit/polished draft model they were taught in fifth grade.

If you're on Chapter Three and you don't think you can go on because you don't know what happens in Chapter Four....ask yourself, "Do I know what happens in, say, Chapter Six?" If so, write that. It's just as easy (and often much easier) to write backwards as it is to write forward. And it will certainly get you past a roadblock. <g> (Mind, some writers Just Can't Countenance writing out of sequence, and that's fine. It's just a matter of how your own brain is wired up.)

--Diana

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Excerpt from THE SHAPE OF THINGS, Diana Gabaldon

If I come up to my office to work and it's what I call a "cold" day (meaning I knew how to write yesterday, but seem to have forgotten how overnight), I usually pick up an inspiration of some kind off my bookshelves. (I have thousands of inspirations to hand, ranging from books—mostly books—to toy cannon, silver quaichs full of stones and crystals, a 19th-century cobbler's hammer, a medieval chessman, a life-sized crystal skull, (well, it's plastic resin, but you'd never know, and if you're walking through your imagination, there's no difference at all), the shell of a giant clam (that's its genus, *Tridacna*, giant clam; the shell itself is only about six inches across, though they do get as big as three feet or so (these are the kind of clams reputed to clamp onto an unwary foot and drown the hapless beachcomber, though I don't know as how there are any reliably documented instances of this), a handful of horse chestnuts, picked on Guy Fawkes' Day in the UK, a bevy of little glass bottles filled with herbs and potions (I have a peppermint one that's meant to clear the sinuses, but by and large, you'd do better with a generous blast of wasabi), knives (I love knives, I have lots, ranging from a one-inch penknife that won't offend the TSA to a Highland dirk that a nice Canadian gentleman made for me), two Jewish "widow's mite" coins from the time of the Crucifixion, and several feather amulets. (Don't ask me why, but almost all authors keep feathers in their offices. It's probably Symbolic, though whether it's urging your spirit to fly through the medium of words—and you'd have to write a whole lot faster than I do even to work up a decent taxi-way, let alone achieve take-off—or is an unsubtle warning not to be a chicken, I can't tell you.))

Once I have my kernel in hand—well, in mind—I sit down and write a line or two describing it, as best I can. As an example, on one cold day, I picked up an old Sotheby's auction catalog of Scottish glass and crystal of the 18th century, and thumbing through it, found a photo of a cut-glass goblet, its surface incised with thistles.

“OK,” I said. “That’ll do.” And wrote something memorable like, “The light fell through the cut-glass goblet.” (I mean, it’s bound to, unless it’s the dead of night and all the lights are off, and in that case, why would you be looking at a glass goblet? Drinking from it, maybe, but I’m not tasting anything here.)

Well, when I’ve written my line or two, I sit and stare at it. I take words out. I put words back. I put new words in. I rearrange the clauses, if there are any. And all the while, the underside of my brain is kicking through the compost, looking for mushrooms and muttering questions in my ear: “What time of day is it?” (late afternoon, I can tell by the way the light falls), “What time of year is it?” (it’s winter, the light has that blue tinge to it...oh, and I must be in a room with a glass window or I couldn’t see that—so I know I’m not in a cabin on Fraser’s Ridge with an oiled deer-hide over the window), “If it’s winter, are you cold?” (Yes, my fingers are chilly and the end of my nose is cold, but my feet are warm, so there must be a fire...oh, there it is, over there, and there’s a dog lying by it, I wonder who that dog is, I’ve never seen him before...), and the line is meanwhile evolving to “The late-afternoon blue winter light (too many adjectives, do something about that...) fell through the cut-glass goblet incised with thistles (thistles are really irrelevant, who cares about the thistles...but they’re important for some reason, I wonder why?) and made a pool of light (no, it’s *amber* light, how odd) ...and made a pool of amber light...on the polished wood table-top.”

Well, there’s awkward for you, let’s tidy that up: “The cold blue light of the winter afternoon (nah, you don’t need “cold,” ‘cuz “winter” gives you that same association), “The blue light of the winter afternoon...” (no, I really like “cold blue light,” let’s ditch the winter instead, “The cold blue light of afternoon...” no, “The cold blue light of late afternoon...(because the alliteration of “light” and “late” appeals to me, and it *is* late, I can tell)...fell through the cut-glass (cut-glass? Maybe crystal? No, “cut-glass” alliterates with “goblet” and I don’t think you can have cut-glass that isn’t technically crystal, and even if you can, who cares) goblet and made (and made? Making? Yes, “making” is better, gives a sense of movement and light *does* move even though you wouldn’t think so to look at it, and besides, I want the comma before “making” instead of the “and” before “made,” because it will make the sentence look better visually)...goblet,

making a pool (no, that doesn't sound right, sounds like the goblet is taking a whizz on the table..."casting a pool"? Yeah, much better)...casting a pool of (it's still amber, I wonder why, is it just the color of the wood?) amber light on the wood (no, it really *is* polished wood, not just a plank)...on the polished wood of the table-top. (well, for heaven's sake, of course it's the top of the table, you don't think the goblet's clinging to the underside, do you? And you have plenty of internal alliteration going on in here already, you don't need more)...of the table."

"The cold blue light of late afternoon fell through the cut-glass goblet, casting a pool of amber light on the polished wood of the table."

OK, it's still a lot of adjectives, but each one of them is doing a necessary job, so they stay—and I got a nagging feeling of dissonance between the cold light and the amber light, which sounds warm...still, it's a reasonably graceful sentence, and it *is* what I'm looking at in my mind's eye, so alrighty, then! Now I know where I am; I'm in Jocasta Cameron's parlor, because she's the only person in this book who'd own a crystal goblet incised with thistles (I knew they were important, but that's *why* they're important—as indicating the cup is owned by a Scot—so we needn't mention them) and filled with whisky! (That's why the pool of light is amber; the glass is full of whisky.)

At this point, my eldest daughter came in and announced that it was time for soccer practice, so I hastily saved my work (so what if it's one sentence? It's MY WORK, and I hate losing it. I never, ever leave my computer without saving what I was working on—and usually saving to a thumb-drive too, just in case.)

So I'm driving down the road, listening to my daughter with one ear and thinking about my goblet and the fire and the dog, and envisioning Jocasta Cameron, whom I know a bit about. She's an older lady, Scottish, very elegant, aristocratic, long white fingers, and I'm seeing her hand—blue veins under the papery skin—reaching for that goblet full of whisky. And out of wherever this stuff comes from, I see a black man's hand, reaching in from the other side of the table, taking hold of the goblet and moving it just a little, so that Jocasta's fingers will curl naturally around it.

Whereupon I turned to my daughter in great excitement and said, “I’ve just realized Jocasta Cameron is blind!”

To which my daughter replied, “I don’t care. You missed the turn-off to the soccer field!”

Yeah, that’s how it mostly works, on the word-by-word level, which—horrifying as it is—is really the only way anything ever gets written. Once I have my kernel, and the words and ideas have begun to flow (well, sometimes they flow; sometimes it’s like shoveling rocks uphill), the scene grows slowly, sometimes on from the original kernel, sometimes in the opposite direction, frequently both. Sometimes the original kernel disappears completely (it did, in this instance); the kernel is seldom what the scene is *about*; it’s just my foothold on the page—a Tiki-torch to light my way.

The entire version of this essay is available on the web, and also as bonus material in Diana Gabaldon's 20th anniversary issue of OUTLANDER. Search for "The Shape of Things" Diana Gabaldon, or contact me if you wish to read the entire essay.