The Writer's Craft

Shirley Jackson— Of Subtlety and Scapegoats

by Robert S. Boone

Shirley Jackson (late 1950s)

HORROR STORIES. What do these two words say to you? Perhaps you can picture yourself (a few years ago) at camp, crouched by the fire as a grinning counselor relates a gory tale of a headless ghost and a shriveled hag with a rusty chain dragging from her boney ankle. Or maybe you remember a night in your big brother's room hearing a story about a giant pig who eats only boy scouts and younger brothers and sisters.

Do you carry around lurid images such as these—images triggered by the words "Horror Stories"? The chances are that you do. And if you ponder the moment these images entered your imagination, you will likely discover that you—not the storyteller—created them. Your camp counselor, your big brother, and anyone else who has terrified you with words, like all master terrifiers, know that suggesting is far more frightening than outright stating.

This principle is followed closely by Shirley Jackson in "The Lottery." It's a popular story with young writers looking for new ways to hold their audiences.

What is Shirley Jackson's secret? She achieves her effects by avoiding predictably horrifying techniques. She does not speak in a melodramatic voice. She does not select a spooky setting. She does not invent ghastly characters. She does not even furnish gruesome details. Yet we sense that something a ful is about to occur.

A Civilized Voice

Listen to the way "The Lottery" opens:

> The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with a fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blooming profusely and the grass was richly green.

In this same soothing voice, Shirley Jackson's na rator goes on to describe the citizens of a sma American village assembling on the square to partic pate in an annual event. The narrator is like a sma town journalist totally immersed in small-town a fairs—the 4-H club, the 4th of July parade, bake-off. and apple bobbing contests. Or we can imagine a aging baby-sitter who has spent her life reassurin small children. This is definitely not the narrativ voice of a war correspondent or a sportscaster. It i the voice of someone totally tolerant—tolerant eve of the ghastly events that will take place on thi square.

A Civilized World

"The Lottery" takes place in the square of a part o a small Midwestern village. It does not take place ir the catacombs of a haunted castle or in the labora tory of a demented scientist. This is not like *Jaws*

scene. Sometimes he holds us at a distance, while at other times he literally brings us inside a scene.

Don't other writers take care to place the reader in the right spot? Of course, but Wolfe—especially in this book—does the job particularly well.

Early in the book, for example, he describes a parachutist's rapid descent. To give us panoramic perspective and also to have us share in a group experience, he places us in the crowd on the ground:

> They watched him as he started dropping. Everyone waited for the parachute to open. They waited a few more seconds, and then they waited some more. The little shape was getting bigger and picking up tremendous speed. Then there came an unspeakable instant at which anyone on the field who knew anything about parachute jumps knew what was going to happen.

The chute, as you probably figured out, never opens. Along with the others in the crowd, we watch a man plunge to his death. Wolfe could have moved us around, from the crowd to the plane, to the victim and back to the crowd. Instead, by locking us in one place, he creates a more lasting impression.

Frequently, Wolfe wants us to experience something up close, such as being on an aircraft carrier at the moment a plane takes off. He moves us onto the carrier where he casts us in the role of a "newcomer," so that we don't miss what a veteran might take for granted. Finally, he arms us with the abstract knowledge of what the "training films" reveal about such experiences:

> In the training film the flight deck was a grand piece of gray geometry, perilous to be sure, but an amazing abstract shape as one looks down upon it on the screen. And yet once these newcomer's two feet were on it . . . Geometry . . . my God, man, this is a . . . skillet. It heaved, it moved up and down underneath his feet, it pitched up, it pitched down, it rolled to port (this great beast rolled!) and it rolled to starboard . . .

From this vantage point, we not only feel the heaving of the carrier, we hear "detonations," "roars," and "shrieks." We even taste the heat of the flames. And we watch men in "Mickey Mouse helmets hooking fighter planes onto the catapault shuttles so that they can explode their afterburners and be slung off the deck in a red-mad fury with a *kaboom*."

Often Wolfe places us in the same room with the subject of his description, in this case cameramen in hot pursuit:

> Some of them were up on a ladder that was propped against the wall under one of the huge lights. Some of them had cameras with the most protuberant lenses, and they had a way of squatting and crawling at the same time. . . . Without another word, all these grim crawling little beggar figures began advancing upon them [the astronauts], elbowing, and hipping one another out of the way. . . .

Clearly, Wolfe not only wants us to see these cameramen at work, he wants us to see them as *he* sees them: "a swarm of root weevils." A journalist himself, Wolfe finds this behavior humorously repulsive. Standing next to him in the room, we can appreciate what he means.

In the previous description, Wolfe moves us close to see human beings acting like animals. At other moments in *The Right Stuff*, he moves us close to animals acting like humans. In order to test the equipment, scientists used apes, some of which actually learned to pilot the rockets. In the following scene we are inside the cockpit next to an ape trained to "man" the spaceship:

> In one test the ape had to be able to judge time intervals. The signal light would go on, and he had to wait twenty seconds before pulling the lever or he would receive the ever-cocked electrical shock.

One ape, Number 83, did not always respond to the shock, but when he chose to, he "could operate a Mercury console like no ape that ever lived. He was so good →

Photo: © 1982 Nancy Crampton; Courtesy Farrar, Straus and Giroux

they used him as the test subject for a laboratory experiment that simulated a fourteen-day orbital mission."

From time to time, Wolfe pulls us even closer to the subject, frequently to get a good view of something seemingly ordinary. Consider this description of a navy bridge coat:

> It was double-breasted made of navy-blue melton cloth and came down almost to the ankles. It must have weighed ten pounds. It had a double row of gold buttons down the front and loops for shoulder boards, big beautiful belly cut collar and lapels, deep turnbacks on sleeves, a tailored waist, and a center vent in back that ran from the waistline to the bottom of the coat. Never would Pete, or for that matter many other American males in the midtwentieth century, have an article of clothing quite so impressive and aristocratic as that bridge coat.

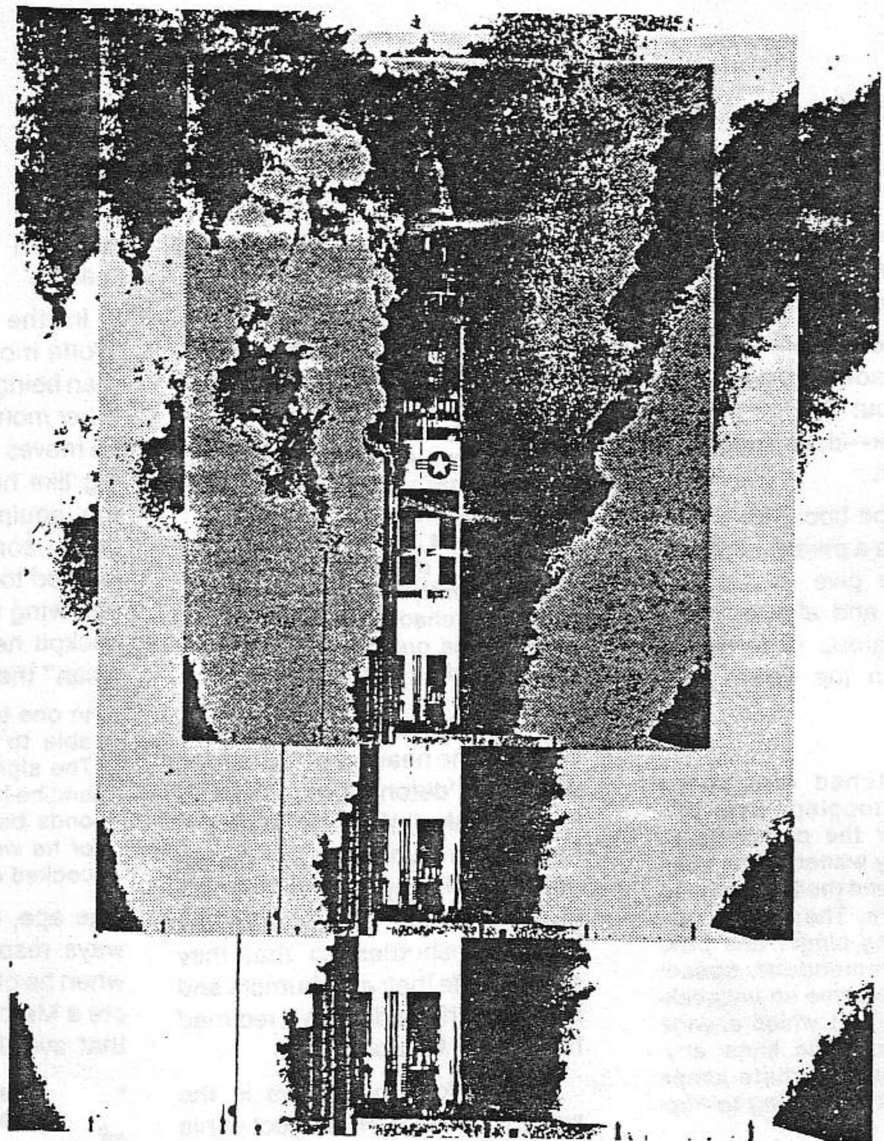
Who else but Wolfe could make a *coat* exciting?

Wolfe brings us right inside some experiences. What does it feel like, for example, to be ejected from a plane?

> Ejection meant being exploded out of the cockpit by a nitroglycerine charge, like a human cannonball. The ejection itself was so hazardous—men lost knees, arms, and their lives on the rim of the cockpit or had the skin torn off their faces when they hit the "wall" of air outside—that many pilots chose to wrestle their aircraft to the ground rather than try it . . . and died that way instead.

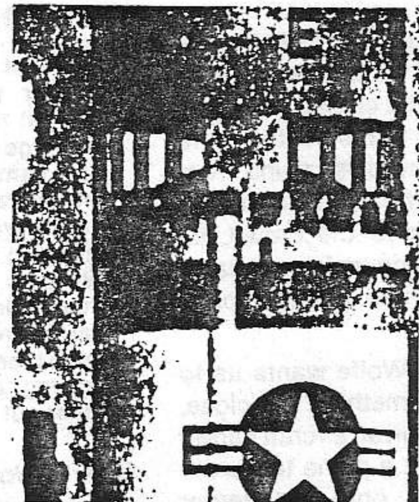
What is it like to be next to a burning airplane?

> When the airplane fuel exploded, it created a heat so intense that everything but the hardest metals not only burned—everything of rubber, plastic, celluloid, wood, leather, cloth, flesh, gristle, calcium, iron, blood, and protoplasm—it not only burned, it gave up the ghost in the form of every gas known to chemistry.



As Wolfe makes luminously clear, neither ejecting from a high-flying jet nor witnessing a plane on fire is a pleasant experience. But to write the history of the American space program, he must include such scenes. And by placing us so unbearably close, he makes sure that we get the complete message, even though we want to look away.

Many of your high school writing assignments require descriptions. You may need to recapture a scene or an event. The next time this happens, ask yourself this question: "Have I placed my audience in the right spot?" **!**



Photos: Courtesy NASA