T's Tips   :   Ian Tennent

Tip #4. Be Specific!

These days, more than ever, readers want visual stories. Stories that they can picture. Stories that creep and dance around the bonfire-lit stage of their mind's eye.

Writing with the wet tinder of vague imprecision does little to ignite this bonfire, stacked expectantly, in our reader's imagination. We need to charge our sentences with static, then douse them with napalm. Infuse them with a latent combustibility that needs only the tiniest spark of recognition to catch fire and flame high in the mind's eye.

So, how do we do this? By being specific.

For example: "He climbed into a white car and drove off," is bland. It gives the reader information but nothing more. It's a weak image. Better to write:

"He slid his belly behind the wheel of a white Volkswagen Beetle, gunned the engine, and thundered down the lane."

This sentence gives us an image of a large man hunched behind the wheel of a small car. He's either angry or in a rush, as evidenced by the word "thundered", and he's probably in a small town, or suburb, as evidenced by the word lane.

However, be warned. Being specific is not merely about injecting steroids into your verbs or tossing adjectives and adverbs around like confetti. Rather aim for maximum visual impact with the fewest words necessary. Focus on what exactly it is you are trying to convey. Is your character bored or angry or in love? Is your setting gloomy or eerie, serene or terrifying? Being specific is about drilling into the main attribute of what it is you're trying to capture and bringing that particular element to life in the most visual way you can. Being specific is not about describing every element of your story in minute detail.

In the above example, there is little merit in writing: "He slid his bulbous, khaki clad belly behind the crusty steering wheel of a dirty, off-white, 1979 model, convertible Volkswagen beetle, exuding spores of rust like a mist of pollen falling from an Australian tree fern, gunned the 1.2L engine, until it coughed inky black smoke from its ragged exhaust pipe and thundered down the lane in an earth-shattering clatter of smoky noise coupled with noxious diesel fumes."

This assault of sound and colour and texture is too much. Our reader can't see the wood for the trees; can't taste the ham for the cheese.

To be fair, like everything, there are exceptions to the above: 'Tech-heads' in particular take as much pleasure in writing about the third generation Glock 17 9mm short recoil–operated locked breech semi-automatic pistol, with its spring-loaded claw extractor and stamped sheet metal ejector pinned to the trigger mechanism housing, as their readers do in reading about it.

Even so, as far as possible, my advice remains the same: be specific, be precise, be concise.

Non-specific words to watch out for include "very", "quite", "really", "fairly" etc. These words are the epitome of vague and a characteristic of weak writing.

e.g. "The flames were quite close now," isn't as powerful as, "The flames licked at the wooden fence."

"It was clear she was very upset," … is very boring… "She flung her merlot into his face," gets my attention.

my attention.