

# THE PHYSICS OF FIRE

BY DONNA COFFEY LITTLE



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Exposition: Backstory

I started to wonder what fire even is. In college I'd taken the one required science class and spent the rest of the time studying literature and languages. Even though my father is a physicist, I'd never taken a single class in physics.

In fact, my father was the reason I'd never taken physics. Math did not come naturally to me. When I had to ask my father for help, it ended in disaster. We would sit at the dining room table, him trying to explain to me why it was obvious that if the train left the station at 10:00 going sixty miles an hour it would arrive at the next stop at 11:00. And I would want to know what was the name of the train, and what did the stations look like, and who was on the train and where were they going and why.

Exposition: Theme

My father, however, represented order to me, both in his unwavering Catholicism and in his mathematical certainty.

Transition sentences, sliding from exposition to scene.

Scene: Description of time, place and character

“What is the equation for fire?” I asked my father. We were sitting in my parents' kitchen. I'd traveled to DC for a conference but got sick, and my parents came and brought me home. He was wearing his trademark outfit, jeans, white Seinfeld sneakers, a white long-sleeved polyester button-down shirt with a pocket right over his heart, where he keeps his pens and his glasses.

He knew why I was asking, but he was still pleased to be asked, as if he had

been waiting all his life, all my life, for me to ask this question. He cleared his throat, the gravelly uh-hum that precedes his disquisitions.

“Heat is high energy particles, they’re jiggling really fast.” He picked up the bottle of Amoxicillin I’d picked up from the CVS that morning and started zooming it around like a little boy with a toy spaceship. “And cold is lower energy particles.” He picked up the Flonase bottle next to the meds.

The Flonase was lethargic. It just sat there in in his hand. But then he crashed the Amoxicillin into the Flonase and waved them both around wildly.

“When the hot particles encounter the cold particles, the cold particles start zinging around too. High energy molecules excite other molecules to become high energy.”

“So fire is contagious,” I said.

“Yes. When a hot particle hits a colder one, it becomes hot too.”

The Amoxicillin knocked into the Flonase again. “A burn front is created. And it doesn’t stop until all the fuel and all the oxygen is gone.”

“So my house was the fuel?” I asked him.

Scene: Dialogue

Scene: Gesture description  
(always intersperse dialogue  
with gesture.)

Scene

Scene Dialogue

“Yes. And when things get hot enough, they turn from a solid to a gas.”

“So the fire was my stuff turned into gas?”

“The carbon of your furniture, your walls and floors, it all turned into carbon dioxide.”

Dialogue:  
Image and Theme

“What’s the ash then?” I ask him. “Why is anything left at all?”



# MONSTERS AT THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

BY HEATHER SHAW



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Dialogue

Looking at the highlighted passages, you can see how the excerpt carries the reader through the conversation, offering dialogue throughout, but supporting that dialogue with reflection and some summary to keep up the pace and break up the text, both visually and aurally.

Reflection

Here I was able to condense several minutes of interview time into a short paragraph. Summarizing can give your reader necessary information without overwhelming them with dialogue or slowing down the pace of the scene.

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Dialogue

Reflection

“What are we talking about, exactly, when we talk about faith?” I asked.

“Well, there’s a certain amount of consensus about how to think about knowledge, belief, and truth,” Smithies said. “When it comes to faith there isn’t that kind of consensus.”

Faith might be a special kind of evidence, he said. Or a completely non-evidential basis for belief. Or, as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein thought, a commitment to act in fidelity to a set of beliefs that have some useful role to play in your life.

It was comforting, in a way, to realize that faith did not have a concrete definition, even in philosophical jargon. That it was fluid, practical—a word for the way in which we relate to the unknowable elements of a religious worldview. But I wasn’t hearing anything that sounded quite like an Orthodox view of faith.

“In the Eastern Orthodox church,” I said, “there’s this sense that faith is not something that you think at all. Faith is something that you do.”

I had heard this many times since my conversion to Orthodoxy, but I’d always seen it through my old evangelical lens: the Bible says “faith without works is dead,” meaning faith and works are separate things. Actions are confirmation of our faith, but faith itself is still a mental activity. Now, in my grasping for a new definition of faith, I wondered if there was something more to this sentiment.

Smithies stared just beyond me, tapping the notebook with his pen.

“If you can make that work, in a way this is very attractive, because you don’t have to engage in these debates,” he said. “Having faith that God exists is not a matter of believing that it’s true, but acting as if it’s true. So you can be committed to acting as if God exists without believing that God exists.”

Is that what I had said? It sounded so cold now, pointless even. Smithies rightly wondered why, given this definition of faith, anyone would choose to make the object of their faith specifically religious. Why not choose something simpler, like social activism or a general humanism? Why bother with all these transcendent values?

Dialogue

If you can’t spend a lot of time describing a person, small details like this one can help your reader envision the character. A couple of brushstrokes is all you need: your reader will fill in the rest.

Dialogue

I chose to end the scene without a quote, though it could easily have gone the other way. Even though the final words are Smithies’, I wanted their weight to reflect my own doubts. How would the focus of the scene change if I had placed these final questions into Smithies’ dialogue instead of in exposition?

# THE VALE

BY JONATHAN MOSEDALE



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Gives reference of  
time and place for reader

Throughout my teenage years, I returned often to explore the vale,

slowly extending the distance I travelled. I became familiar with the many paths; familiar too with the residents of the woods through which they led.

Vivid detail and description.  
Notice word choice: "monitor my progress"  
and "melancholy call".  
Setting a tone/mood that  
reverberates throughout the piece

Frozen stares from the woodland edge would monitor my progress as day lengthened into twilight, followed by the clatter of horn on wood as the deer vanished once more beneath the shadows of the trees. Or it would be the melancholy call of buzzards that led me up the valley when the sun was at its highest. Once in the morning hours, I overtook another youth late returning to its lair; a young badger with a bustling swagger.

Such residents were brief tenants in the life of the vale. The true inhabitants paid no more attention to my presence than I to the brightly coloured hoverflies that would alight momentarily upon me.

Circles back to this in the end.  
The oak is the object that evokes reverence  
and reflection

An old oak, a mere hundred or so years old, acted as a herald, marking the turning that ushered the visitor to the ancient yew groves, cloaked in shadow even on a sunny day, where ancient trees erupt from the bare and barren earth offering gnarled witness to the passing centuries.

Walking beneath their massive shadows in summer evenings, or running a hand along their glistening boughs after the autumn rain that transformed mere wood into richly veined marble, it was hard to dismiss the logic of

Reference to the spiritual/super natural/  
religious theme; good transition to next  
section

animism.

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For many today, nature and wilderness hold greater spiritual significance than God or Church. If once, concepts of the divine shaped our everyday experiences and the supernatural lurked beyond the confines of our gaze, today it is often nature that is sanctified and notions of the wild that prowls the edges of our imagination.

The Church of England, in which I am a minister, is often portrayed as a thoroughly domesticated religion in which faith has been tamed to serve the needs of society, reason and convenience. In this, it might be argued, the church mirrors the landscape and nature of England; neither offers much space for the untamed wild.

My own, early experiences of church and nature were often intertwined. At the age of nine, I spent my first Easter service staring out of the open doorway of the cliff-top church, craving the glimmer of the waves beyond. I was more captivated by the shadows cast by light streaming through crenulated windows than by what took place within the walls. If I first perceived the beauty of nature from within a church, it was in my visits to the yews where first I understood an instinct to worship.

Reflection/inner point of view

Tells you who he is; goes further into church and nature and transitions into next section.

The things that evoke details can be anything. Throughout, there is a lot of focus on what he sees and hears. When recreating imagery, focus on the 5 senses and see what memories come rushing back.



# RELIGION, EVOLUTION, AND GROWING UP AMONG THE SEA URCHINS

BY OLGA V. NAIDENKO

creative commons



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Bringing the reader directly into the scene; the reader does not yet know who the protagonists are; the reader learns the time and that one of the protagonists is a recent arrival to the country.

Strong, vivid personal memory of an encounter with a subject that straddles domains of science and religion.

Meeting the character through the eyes of a visitor to the house.

How the writer/story-teller experiences her first meeting with the subject of creationism and the conflict that engenders in her mind.

Finally the reader meets the narrator.

In my first year in the United States, in a log cabin in the rural community of Eaton, New York, Bonnie Duval laid out several books on her dining table.

“These books explain why evolution is wrong,” Bonnie told me.

Her smile stretched between full cheeks, softening a face framed by gentle blond curls. Having once earned her living as a seamstress, she usually wore an embroidered kitchen apron that she had sewn herself.

The table, large enough to fit Bonnie and her husband Jim, their adopted kids, and several guests, was empty, except for a flowery plastic tablecloth and the books Bonnie wanted to me peruse.

I leafed through the books, surprised to see that they were not about grace and salvation, like other books and stories this family had shared. Instead, they featured pictures of dinosaurs and fossil bones and rebuked Darwin, Darwinism, and the evolutionary theory that I had learned in high school and college. They also talked about the Creation of the Earth, presented the Biblical perspective on science, and argued that the Earth was quite young, much younger than the estimates of solar system age advanced by astronomers and physicists.

As an 18-year-old exchange student from the just-collapsed Soviet Union, studying biology at Colgate University, I still had a great deal to learn about the Duvals.

In my first year, I worked at the dining hall, meeting the service staff that lived in the nearby villages. Robert, an assistant cook in his late 20s who would have never been able to afford Colgate tuition, offered to introduce me to a hospitable couple from his church. I had never met anyone like Jim and Bonnie before – a Bible-reading, church-going, evangelical family that opened their doors and arms to church friends, neighbors and hapless foreign students alike.

Brief side scene giving information about the family.

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# THE VERY LAST ELEPHANT

BY MARK NOTTURNO

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Author is setting up time and place by referring to the likely year of the action and age, using the phrasing (it must have been; I could not have been older than) to indicate this comes from memory, not an exact recording.

Start of the scene: "we, the family" are on the way home from church, and the reader knows that church is somehow going to appear in the overall scene.

Author brings us directly to the scene describing it as a child would - through the eyes of a short character (child who is shorter than adults), with personal character details such as "counting the change carefully."

We see the personality of a new character, the father, with telling details such as "screaming and laughing at the same time"; and we see the child's vivid experience of family conflict coming in the context of a conflict within the practice of religious faith.

It must have been in 1957. My family lived in Teaneck, a small Manhattan bedroom on the Jersey side of the Hudson. We drove home from church that Sunday morning in my father's red Rambler Rebel, stopping as we usually stopped for Kaiser rolls at Gratzel's Bakery. I had not yet started school and could not have been older than four at the time. But my father allowed me to go inside the bakery with my sister, who was three years older, to pick out the rolls.

We waited together in a long line of tall adults fresh from church. When we eventually made it up to the counter, my sister asked for two dozen rolls, the ones with the black poppy seeds, and waited as Mr. Gratzel put them into two large brown paper bags—one for her and one for me. She then handed him money and counted the change he gave back carefully.

We left the bakery and climbed into the backseat of the car, me first. The engine was still hot but my father was just getting warm.

"I don't care if it's Father Henry or Sister Prudence Goodbody," he nearly screamed at my mother, laughing at the same time, as he often did. "Most nuns are frustrated virgins, and most priests seem to be happiest when they're with the boys. They are 'the clergy'. They live in a world of their own. And it's a very different world than the one we live in, believe me."

I sat behind my father sniffing at the rolls in the bag on my lap, feeling

their warmth on my hands and my thighs, and listening to their argument.

I wanted to ask my father what a virgin is. But it did not seem the right time.

Child - and the author - is asking a question about information delivered through father's speech in the previous paragraph; it is a most practical question from a child's perspective, "What does this word mean". Yet the tension created by the family and religious conflict within the scene precludes the possibility of getting a quick answer, or a quick resolution of the conflict we have witnessed in the previous paragraph.