

**Excerpts from *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction:  
Tips from Editors, Teachers, and Writers in the Field***

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**From the Introduction, by Tara L. Masih:**

In U.S. culture, the Roaring Twenties saw an explosion of artistic creativity in all genres and socioeconomic classes. What the Harper Brothers had started in the nineteenth century—“increasing sales potential of books to mass-culture” (Douglas 14)—was continued and built upon in the new century after the close of World War I. The Book-of-the-Month Club was founded in 1926, tabloid journalism took off, and newspapers and magazines and journals abounded, making publishing New York City’s second largest industry, after textiles. Ethnic journals catered to the Jewish community, and to the African American population that was emigrating from the South and starting its own “renaissance.” In her book *Mongrel Manhattan* (1995) Ann Douglas notes, “Fifty new black newspapers and periodicals appeared between 1916 and 1921, bringing the number of publications to 500” (324).

In the literary field, some of our best-known writers were making their mark: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, Sara Teasdale, Katherine Anne Porter, Hart Crane, Dorothy Parker, H. H. Munro (Saki), Ezra Pound, and a little-known expatriate—Ernest Hemingway. These writers, like their recent predecessors recovering from the Civil War, were now recovering from another war, were being exposed to the new psychological awareness that Freud was making available to the public (*The Interpretation of Dreams* was translated into English in 1913), and were finding a passion for truth (Kate Chopin’s “scandalous” work had a revival in the twenties). A friend of Dorothy Parker was quoted as saying that the writer “labored for weeks, sometimes months, over a three-page sketch because . . . ‘every word had to be true’” (Douglas 35).

**From Shouhua Qi’s “Old Wine in New Bottles?”**

Although the name has a ring of novelty to it, flash fiction in China can be traced as far back as the creation myths of Nuwa (350 BC?), Fuxi, and Pangu. The story of Pangu, a legendary godlike giant, which first appeared in written form during the Three Warring States period (220–263 AD), has a word count of 350 in Chinese. It is “flash fiction” all right. If squeezed hard, it may even fit the “microfiction” label. Yet there was nothing “micro” about the way Pangu created the world, separating *yin* and *yang* with a swing of his great axe, standing between Heaven and Earth to uphold the sky, with such inspiration, courage, and force that we are still experiencing the ramifications today. It took Pangu no less than 18,000 years to complete his feat, but the story can be told in the pintsize space of a few hundred words.

And it would take more than two full millennia for flash fiction to evolve to where it is today—as a hot, *white-hot*, important literary genre. Along the way many great writers have tried their hands at this storytelling form: Pu Songling (1640–1715), Wu Jingzi (1701–54), Cao Xueqing (1715–63), among others. Many of the 400 or so stories in Pu’s *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* are only a couple of hundred words long. . . .

### **From Michael Martone's "Titled: The Title"**

I write long, long titles for my short, short stories. I suppose this is, for me, existential, a function of the genre, a genre that defines itself, first, with this intensified brevity—the *short* short. But what kind of brevity? What is the quality of “brief”? The shortness of the short, the short shortness has, most often, to do with word count and, also (though less often) with the word count’s relationship with page length and, by extension, the number of pages. I have noticed that the genre’s most definite defining instruction found in the guidelines for contest and anthology solicitations spells out the length of “short.” It seems length is, perhaps, our only agreed upon convention. Adrift, in the miasmatic nebulousness of this form, it is comforting to count beans, to have beans to count on. The prompt to write this something we call the short short story is addressed in terms of numbers of words—250, 500, 1,000—or numbers of pages—one page or complete on two facing pages. Often, the only defining characteristic of the short short story is this kind of length, or lack thereof. At the very least, length as a defining characteristic goes a long way, a kind of essential DNA, as close as we get to formula or rules.

I believe this piece here was to measure out at 2,000 words (or so I remember). Yes, two thousand words. But let me burn some of those words on this aside. Just how quaint, how antique to use that particular scale of numbers—250, 500, 1,000—numbered by such metrics for this genre of short fiction, already strange because the genre is already mostly characterized by word count, page count, but so curious also that the word count, page count is still based on the ancient typewritten page of 250 words. This makes me think that the form, perhaps, is a creature, most of all, not of the handwritten page but of the typewritten page or of the computer written page—the computer hobbled to act like the antiquated nineteenth-century machine. I am at this moment using double-spaced Courier on my iMac to mimic the typewriter and the 250-word page. All of this to say that this is a lot of words to say this: if an essential part of the form is the formal limitation of words, and if every word counts in the form, then do the number of words in the title count in the count?

### **From Kim Chinquee's "Flash Fiction, Prose Poetry, and Men Jumping Out of Windows"**

Is [plot] essential in flash fiction? I can only stress the importance of plot in any literary genre. And though flash fiction is its own little devil, getting away with bending many rules, this genre is not excused from plot. In many cases, the sequence of events in a particular flash may be difficult to distinguish; likely, in flash fiction, plot is often presented in nontraditional ways, arising through other elements necessary to make a successful literary story—character, language, point of view, setting, structure, voice, each element can be accountable for plot. Plot in flash is inclusive and exclusive. For example, rhythmic language in a piece can suggest playfulness, and juxtaposed with some eccentric detail, the combination of these elements here can make a good flash fiction. Deadpan tones of horrifying accounts can justify a plot line. A third-person flash ending in first person can twist a piece and thus render it successful. Providing descriptive elements and omitting the events can also work. When used effectively, omission of details can gear a plot. Plot is vital in flash fiction, propelling it to its brevity.