

Fiction: An Overview

We share stories whenever we gather. At the dinner table, we share stories of our day. At work, we share stories of how we or others try to accomplish tasks. At the gym, we share stories of success and frustration. At church, we share stories of challenges and faith. We share stories because stories, both in life and in literature, are the foundation of communication.

One of my favorite authors, Isabel Allende, has written a novel about a storyteller. In *Eva Luna*, Eva, which means "life," tells stories. Throughout the novel others ask her to tell stories to ease their pain, to bring them comfort, to guide them. Eva is illiterate until she reaches adulthood, and the schoolteacher Inis teaches her to read and write. In time, Eva writes her stories. The following passage describes the morning she begins to write:

I awakened early. It was a soft and slightly rainy Wednesday, not very different from others in my life, but I treasure that Wednesday as a special day, one that belonged only to me. Ever since the schoolteacher Inis had taught me the alphabet, I had written almost every night, but I felt that today was different, something that could change my life. I poured a cup of black coffee and sat down at the typewriter. I took a clean white piece of paper--like a sheet freshly ironed for making love--and rolled it into the carriage. Then I felt something odd, like a pleasant tickling in my bones, a breeze blowing through the network of veins beneath my skin. I believed that that page had been waiting for me for more than twenty years, that I had lived only for that instant, and I hoped that from that moment my only task would be to capture the stories floating in the thin air, to make them mine. I wrote my name, and immediately the words began to flow, one thing linked to another and another. Characters stepped from the shadows where they had been hidden for years into the light of that Wednesday, each with a face, a voice, passions, and obsessions. I could see an order to the stories stored in my genetic memory since before my birth, and the many others I had been writing for years in my notebooks. I began to remember events that had happened long ago; I recalled the tales my mother told me when we were living among the Professor's idiots, cancer patients, and mummies; a snakebitten Indian appeared, and a tyrant with hands devoured by leprosy; I rescued an old maid who had been scalped as if by a spinning machine, a dignitary in a bishop's plush chair, an Arab with a generous heart, and the many other men and women whose lives were in my hands to dispose of at will. Little by little, the past was transformed into the present, and the future was also mine; the dead came alive with an illusion of eternity; those who had been separated were reunited, and all that had been lost in oblivion regained precise dimensions. (251-252)

We begin to see within the mind of an author as she brings characters and situations to life. No wonder Allende gives her storytelling Eva the name of "life." Stories tell us about life.

In this lesson we begin our unit on fiction, on stories, and we'll discuss three principal elements of a story—plot, conflict, and character. The three stories that will guide our discussion are "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" told by Christ during his ministry,