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## Endings: What Can You Teach?

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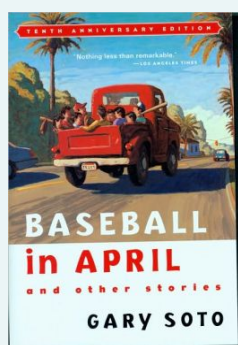
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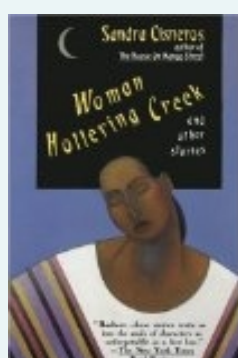
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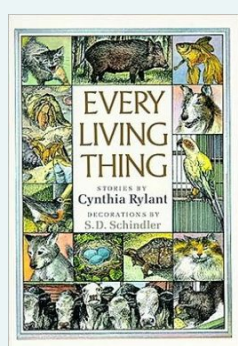
### Touchstone Texts:



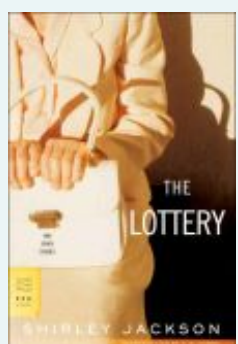
"The Marble Champ" by Gary Soto is a short story in the collection titled *Baseball in April and Other Stories*.



"Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros is a short story in the collection titled *Woman Hollering Creek*.



"Slower than the Rest" by Cynthia Rylant is a short story in the collection titled *Every Living Thing*.



"Charles" by Shirley Jackson is a short story in the collection titled *The Lottery and Other Stories*.

**Julie Patterson is writer-in-residence** for the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers and also an associate faculty member of the English department at the IU School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI.



Julie has taught in classrooms and after-school programs in Boston, Chicago and Indianapolis, and is currently on the artist roster for Arts for Learning Indiana (formerly Young Audiences of Indiana) and the Indiana Repertory Theatre. She has presented at the annual Indiana State Reading Association conference and Pike Township's Literocity.

### Endings: What can you teach?

by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence

As promised, this post continues our conversation on [beginning, middle and end](#) in story writing.

I should be candid. I'm struggling with what to say in this post, because the logical me wants to simply go back to those three stories that we looked at earlier and analyze the endings--just as we did the [beginnings](#). That would give us a few strategies that we could teach in the classroom. We might notice, for example, that a lot of stories--including "[Eleven](#)" and "[The Marble Champ](#)"--have what is often referred to as a "circle structure." The end echoes a theme(s), image(s) and/or phrase(s)/line(s) from the beginning. The author takes us "full circle," so to speak, reminding readers how the story began, though we return this time with more knowledge, now understanding why the specific theme/image/phrase is so important.

We might notice that other stories, including "[Slower than the Rest](#)," have what we might describe as a more linear structure, taking readers from point A (Leo and the turtle are alike; both are *slow*) to point B (Leo is changed; he feels *fast*).

But the artist in me wants to say that writers grapple with many complicated questions when deciding on an ending. We do more than just decide what shape we want the story arc to take. The work is bigger than that.

To me, endings are all about the take-away. What do you want readers to know, feel, do, think or wonder about after they finish reading your story? You can't write an ending until you decide *that*.

When I think about endings, I think first of my experience as a *reader*. I recall the stories whose endings have lingered with me and why. Cisneros' "Eleven" sticks out in my mind, because that last image is beautiful and haunting:

*...I want today to be far away already, far away  
 like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so  
 tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.*

I can't go to a fair or a birthday party and see balloons without thinking about "Eleven." Thanks to Cisneros, balloons are now a tangible reminder to me that everything in life is fleeting--the good moments and the bad--and the sight of balloons makes me a little sad and wistful. You may not have the same reaction to "Eleven," and I can't fully explain why my reaction is so strong, but I know that I now often yearn to end stories with some sort of common image that has profound meaning. I can turn this into a lesson in the classroom, teaching that writers sometimes end powerful stories with an image of an everyday object that symbolizes what the main character felt or learned as a result of his/her experience.

Another ending that comes to mind is Shirley Jackson's short story "[Charles](#)." I can't go into detail without ruining the story for those who have yet to read it, but what strikes me about it is that it essentially ends at the climax. We are left to imagine the resolution for ourselves, because it doesn't matter what Laurie's mom does when she gets home from her parent-teacher conference. The "lesson" of the story is in the a-ha moment in her conversation at school. It's worth noting that the lesson is not overtly stated either--perhaps different moms will take away different impressions from the story. I can turn this into a teaching point for the classroom as well, showing students that it is important to know *when* to end a story. Sometimes we need to stop shy of spelling everything out for readers.

So now you have two different strategies for figuring out *what* to teach about endings: (1) you can look at the endings of stories you are reading and try to describe what the writer has done and why, and (2) you can reflect on the most memorable endings you have read and try to articulate why each particular ending stuck with you. Both of these lines of thinking should uncover lesson ideas.

But honestly, I think it is very hard to write a good ending (confession: it's one of my biggest struggles in narrative writing), so this conversation can--and should--continue. In fact, I'm including a few links to other writers' thoughts about endings. While I doubt you'll really build your units of study around Chekhov in the elementary or middle school classroom, I want you to see that you can create multiple lessons on endings by studying the works of one prolific author. Maybe one of you will try doing this with texts by Cynthia Rylant or Kevin Henkes or another classroom favorite. If you do, please invite me to your classroom, or at least email me a note and some photos!

#### Additional Resources:

[Writers' Digest 5 Tips for Endings](#)  
[Susie Lovell's "In Search of the Perfect Ending"](#)  
[11 Ending Strategies from Chekhov](#)