

Exformation in Your Fiction by Crawford Kilian

Most of what I know about writing fiction is in my book [Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy](#) (which applies to most genres, not just SF & F). But in the last few years I've been thinking about another aspect of fiction: the effect of exformation.

It's an usual word, coined some years ago by a Danish science writer named Tor Norretranders. He defined [exformation](#) as the information you don't bother to put in a message because you know your reader/listener already knows it.

I heard of it first in a nonfiction [book](#) by the excellent SF writer Gregory Benford. He had been involved with an effort to figure out how to warn future generations not to explore our nuclear waste dumps.

After all, we've been writing for just a few thousand years, and nuclear waste can take hundreds of thousands of years to decay. If a Neanderthal had wanted to warn us about some threat 100,000 years ago, would we even know it was a message? That, Benford explained, is why exformation is important. The Neanderthal would take for granted that we'd know what Neanderthals knew, and that might not be true at all.

As I explored the idea of exformation, I began to realize that it's absolutely critical to the way we communicate right now, as well as with our distant descendants.

Kilian family story: One day in the 1920s, my grandfather and Will Crawford (a family friend I would later be named after) walked through the woods in New Jersey to see Will's sister. When they got there, my grandfather said: "My god, we must have seen a million rabbits on our way over here!"

Will, standing silent behind him, held up a hand with fingers extended: *Five*.

For almost a century now, when someone in the family exaggerates, someone else will hold up a hand with five fingers extended. Everyone will understand instantly, and even the exaggerator will laugh.

This is exformation. Everyone in my family knows the story of the million rabbits, and the upraised hand retells the story with total brevity. No doubt you have similar running gags in your own family, with your lover, or with your friends. A word, a phrase, and everyone is instantly back in some point in shared experience – with an emotional jolt.

Did you and a classmate ever commiserate about your teacher's verbal quirks, and then make eye contact after the teacher said it yet again? And then you both nearly killed yourselves laughing, much to the bafflement of your teacher and everyone else.

Another term for this is "allusion" – a reference to something that the reader or listener is expected to get. If I talk about Jo the streetsweeper, it doesn't mean anything unless you've read Dickens's *Bleak House* – and if you have, you know Jo as one of the great tragic figures of English literature. If I complain that "I can't get no satisfaction," you probably know enough to recognize the allusion to Mick Jagger's song, and you understand my complaint differently because you're thinking of me and Mick at the same time.

The critical jolt of exformation

When you make that connection between what you've just learned, and what you learned long ago, you feel a sudden jolt of emotion: hilarity, anger, grief...or just comprehension. In education, that's how we learn best: "*Aha! I get it!*" In fiction, that jolt is absolutely critical to success.

And it's critical on several levels.

First, *shared exformation creates trust*. I well recall bumping into a couple of Vancouverites in Hong Kong; instantly we were chatting like old friends, because we knew we shared so much exformation. And in Stockholm recently, I could stop anyone on the street for directions and get an answer in fluent English – so I knew the instructions were reliable, and I liked Swedes that much more.

That's also why we go to high school reunions. (Some of us, of course, avoid reunions precisely because we share far too much exformation with our classmates.) So we tend to trust those who seem to share our backgrounds. That is of course important for any storyteller who wants an attentive audience.

Secondly, whether we feel trust or not, *we have a social relationship with those who share our exformation*. After all, we share a language, and especially some dialect of that language. I have online pen pals who are learning English; their biggest problem is understanding the exformation behind terms like "use your noodle" and "watered-down." Until they do, they'll always feel like outsiders when they talk with native English speakers.

We also share the experiences of our generation: If you were born after about 1958, you don't personally remember the assassination of John Kennedy, so you are excluded from those who do. And I lack exformation about the last four decades of great rock. When I told my students that I'd lost interest in pop music after *The White Album*, they looked at me with mixed pity and contempt – but at least we shared exformation about *The White Album*.

We even have gender exformation, which is why few guys are fans of Harlequin romances, or chick lit in general. They have nothing in their own backgrounds to compare them with. Similarly, most women dismiss male-oriented "action" fiction as a "guy thing." And it's also why so few male authors can write convincingly about women. (I still recall a young woman 50 years ago who'd just read her first D. H. Lawrence: "That bastard! How does he know so much about me?")

Shared exformation is why we tend to prefer one genre over another. If you like vampire novels, you've read a lot of them; you know the conventions of the genre, so the author doesn't have to explain them from scratch. The fun comes in a particular vampire novel's variations on those conventions – which mean nothing to a reader new to the genre.

Too much exformation spoils the tale

Genre exformation is both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because the author can count on a readership that settles right in to enjoy the story. It's a curse because readers get too comfortable with a particular set of conventions. Like toddlers who want the same bedtime story every night, they don't want to learn new conventions.

Mercifully, we don't like exformation rubbed in our faces. You hated it in school when the teacher kept going over stuff you already knew; the message you got was that the teacher must think you were really dumb. And in fiction, too much exformation can backfire.

Example: Imagine a science fiction story written in 1962 and set in 2012. Hero gets out his "iPhone" and "texts" his girlfriend: "Thanks to modern technology, we can share our love by typing messages to each other on our phones. I love you."

A reader in 1962 would need that first sentence, or the passage wouldn't make sense. Even then, the reader would wonder how on earth you could type on a phone. And the reader wouldn't believe or trust you.

That kind of clunky exposition is all too common in SF and fantasy, where people treat each other like morons about subjects everyone should have in their exformation: "Well, darling, as we learned back in university on Vega IV, interstellar travel depends on pseudomagnetic wormholes permitting travel at megawarp speed."

Even Tolkien, bless him, had thousands of years of exformation to convey, back to when Sauron was a pup. That may be why *The Lord of the Rings* is so long. But he slipped it in bit by bit over an eventful timeline of just a few weeks from the escape from The Shire to the destruction of the Ring. The hobbits' ignorance of this backstory gave him an excuse, but you can't always have an ignoramus who needs such explanations.

In fact, sometimes you can create a much stronger impact on readers by treating them as if they already have the exformation, even when you know they don't. John Le Carré was an ex-spy who created a whole bogus vocabulary of Cold War terms. (After all, he couldn't reveal how British spies really did their job.)

So we never learned what a "lamplighter" was, except by implication. Le Carré was letting us eavesdrop on the grownups; we didn't understand everything, but it sure sounded important. And real. We believed that real spies must talk and behave as Le Carré described them, because they didn't stop to explain to us what they were up to.

That lent his novels a powerful authenticity. Le Carré wasn't the only one to use this technique: I understand that some gangsters model themselves after the Corleone family in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*.)

I learned about this kind of exformation years ago when I sent the manuscript of *Gryphon* to my editor at Del Rey Books. It was an attempt at a space opera, and I had worked out a very elaborate backstory to explain the world my characters lived in.

My editor phoned to say he was disappointed by all the exposition in the first chapter. I blustered about all the stuff readers would need to know, blah blah, and when I was through he said: "Well, I'm going to cut most of it out."

When the page proofs arrived, I read the first chapter and could not tell what he'd cut. I had underestimated my readers, but my editor hadn't. He knew they would understand quite easily what had happened to create the conditions of the story, and would take some of my baffling observations and terms as promises to be explained in due course.

All the furniture on the front porch

Fantasy and SF aren't the only genres where writers underestimate their readers' brains and patience. I've read a lot of manuscripts by aspiring novelists who, in effect, put all their furniture out on the front porch. They haven't learned that a novel is a big, roomy place, and we readers don't need the whole backstory in the first chapter.

In fact, dropping your readers into the middle of a story without much explanation is actually a pretty good gimmick. Readers will pay attention to details precisely because they're like visitors in a foreign country, noticing what's familiar and what isn't.

You should be aware of this response, and exploit it: This is when you can sound your themes and plant the images and events that will pay off in the climax and denouement of your story. The great Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye argued that every story begins with a prophecy and ends with its fulfillment—though not always the fulfillment we expected.

What you tell us in the opening pages of your story will rush back into your readers' minds. This jolt is what some critics call the "shock of recognition": the jolt of awareness when reality suddenly "collapses" into a new state. Frye called this "anagnorisis," a Greek work that literally means "upward learning." In the Bible, it's "revelation," when we finally see the light after a lifetime spent seeing through a glass, darkly.

I argue that this is why we care about stories in the first place: They tell us about something familiar (shock), about particular unfamiliar events (shock), and then about an outcome that the story predicted would happen (shock).

Every shock makes our brain look for comparisons between what we've just learned and what we already know. Like a Stone Age hunter following a deer's fresh hoofprints, we know what we're after. We lose the trail, which forces us to think. We try a new

tactic. When we finally see our prey, we enjoy a flood of endorphins as a reward from our rejoicing brains. Slowly, we notch an arrow and pull back the bowstring. If all goes well, and we've learned our lessons, we'll feast tonight.

This is not just an extended metaphor. Elizabeth Marshall, in her fine prehistoric novel *Reindeer Moon*, tells us that in the female narrator's tribe, the men's stories all end with "mountains of meat." We tell stories about what we most desire and what we most dread.

Surprise me!

No one, of course, likes spoiled meat. The endorphin reward depends on not knowing how the arrow will strike, so we don't want to know the ending too soon. In the same way, we don't want to be able to predict who killed Sir William, who will win the throne, and whether the lovers will live happily ever after. Sure, we want the killer jailed, the true king crowned, and the lovers married – but we want to be surprised by the way it happens.

"In my beginning is my end," T. S. Eliot wrote. But the end must be camouflaged in the opening pages, lost in a mass of distractions. Otherwise, no one will stick around to see how things turn out. So the key elements of your climax should appear early in your story as just a few more scraps of realistic detail. As readers, we'll absorb them, accept them, and ask: "And then?" Only at the end will we feel the surprise, the shock of recognition, the anagnorisis we've been hoping for.

And if we've been prepared for that surprise, we're happy. You haven't pulled the solution out of your hat or called Apollo down from Olympus to sort things out. You've outsmarted us fair and square, and we're grateful.

To conclude, one practical note: If you're approaching the end of your story and you simply don't know how it's going to end, go back to your opening pages. Walk around in them, looking at the furniture, the weather, what people are talking about.

Somewhere in those pages you'll find what you're looking for – a scrap of information that your readers have absorbed and think they've forgotten. That will be the factor that makes your climax both powerful and seemingly inevitable, the prophecy of the outcome.

And if you know your ending but can't find the prophecy, now is the time to insert it in the opening!

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