



Making It Strange: Defamiliarization

David Rodeback





The stranger before you

- ▶ CMTO of a West Valley City manufacturing firm, where I write C#.Net code, SQL queries, marketing copy, video scripts, etc.
- ▶ Two collections of short fiction in print; short stories in several anthologies
- ▶ Novel forthcoming in 2024
- ▶ In a former life taught writing, Russian language, and Russian literature at BYU, Cornell, and elsewhere



In this hour we will

- Define and explain **defamiliarization**
- Loop twice (in the shallow end, then the deep end):
 - **Practice seeing it** as readers
 - **Analyze** how it works
 - **Discuss how to do it** as writers
 - **Practice doing it**
- **See it change the world (1852-1865)**
- Q&A
- Two final notes, one weird and one profound



1. Definition



Definition:
defamiliarization
or ***estrangement***
or ***making strange***
(остранение)

Presenting something familiar in a strange or unfamiliar way, to cause the reader to see it differently.

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Definition:
defamiliarization
or ***estrangement***
or ***making strange***
(остранение)

In other words, helping the reader to slow down and see – perceive – something the reader has learned not to see, through habit, familiarity, instruction, ideology, indifference, etc.

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Mostly-serious content warnings

- ▶ My first example has a hooker in it.
- ▶ Two of my examples involve the opera.
- ▶ Some of my examples involve warfare.
- ▶ I will refer to Russia repeatedly, but not modern Russia.
- ▶ We'll look at something Tolstoy wrote about Christian communion, which was so offensive to some that it was shortly followed by his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church.

2. The hooker at the opera

(not the same as the hookers **in** the opera)





The opera scene in *Pretty Woman*

- Richard Gere's character, Edward, a business tycoon, flies Julia Roberts' character, Vivian, a hooker, to San Francisco to see one of the world's great opera companies performing Verdi's *La Traviata*.
- Vivian's first opera. Worries that they're late, but he knows they never start on time on opening night.
- She thinks her opera glasses are broken. He shows her how to hold them.
- She hears music, looks down from the box, sees the orchestra, and says, "There's a band."
- Edward says something lofty and vaguely ridiculous about how, if you don't immediately love the opera, you may eventually learn to appreciate it, but it will never enter your soul.
- We watch as she's moved by the most beautiful scene and music in the whole opera. (It's Verdi!)



Analysis

In defamiliarization, the author may address the reader **directly**, as in poetry or essays or other kinds of narrative.

In fiction the author often uses **a character** who is either having **a new experience** or having **an old experience with new eyes**. Either way, the goal is to help **the reader** see what has become too familiar to see.

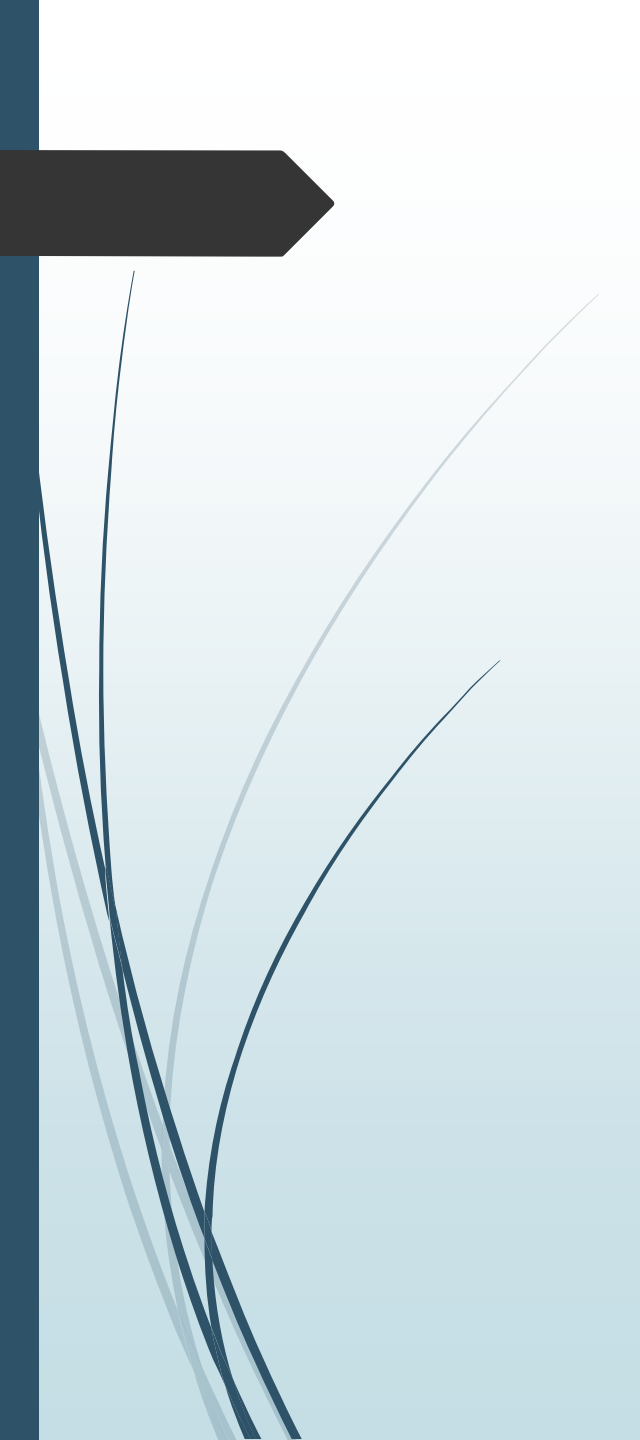
- How does this scene help us see Vivian differently?
- How do we see Richard differently?
- Do we see opera differently too?

(Foreshadowing: We're not done with the opera.)



3. In the weeds with the Formalists

(ever so briefly)

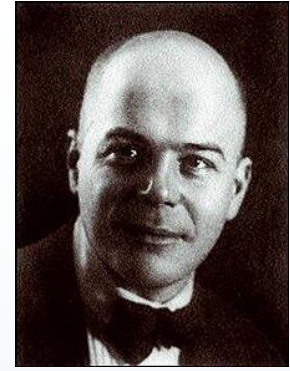


Definition: **defamiliarization** (review)
or **estrangement**
or **making strange** (остранение)

Presenting something familiar in a strange or unfamiliar way, to cause the reader to slow down and see it – or see it differently.

Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984)

“Art as Technique” [or Art as Device]



- ▶ “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to **increase the difficulty and length of perception** because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”
- ▶ “Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. . . . Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.”

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In other words . . .

Anais Nin in *The Novel of the Future* (1968):

"It is the function of art to renew our perception.
What we are familiar with we cease to see. The
writer shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by
magic, we see a new meaning in it."

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In other words . . .

J.R.R. Tolkien in “On Fairy-Stories” (1939/1947):

“We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be **freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity**. . . . They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring **ceased to look at them.**”



4. In which I practice on you, briefly



(In)famous log lines

- Transported to a surreal landscape, a young girl kills the first person she meets and then teams up with three strangers to kill again.
- An eccentric businessman invites five children to his manufacturing plant, where each of them suffers a horrific accident in a macabre game to find the next CEO.
- A young woman kidnapped by a man driven insane by his grotesque disfigurement grows to love her captor in a case study of Stockholm Syndrome.



(In)famous log lines

- Transported to a surreal landscape, a young girl kills the first person she meets and then teams up with three strangers to kill again.

(The Wizard of Oz)

- An eccentric businessman invites five children to his manufacturing plant, where each of them suffers a horrific accident in a macabre game to find the next CEO.

(Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory)

- A girl kidnapped by a man driven insane by his grotesque disfigurement grows to love her captor in a case study of Stockholm Syndrome.

(Beauty and the Beast)



National Punctuation Day

ladies and gentlemen treasured readers all it is my distinct pleasure to wish you a happy punctuation day yes its september 24 already where has the year gone when i worked as an intern in the office of us senator james mcclure of idaho one of my responsibilities was to draft responses to constituent mail when the topic or position didnt fit an existing collection of responses that could be sent automatically the first such letter was urging the senator to vote in favor of i forget the name but it was something like national cosmetics day or maybe it was a week i dont recall anyway my first draft was playful for my amusement and that of the office staff it pondered what the women of the world would look like without cosmetics i actually think most of them would look great but thats not the point this actually is not one of those stories where the joke goes in the mail by accident and causes a national embarrassment i wrote a serious draft after that which was approved so i signed it with the signature machine the senators signature and it went in the mail which is not my point in any case it wouldnt make very much sense for me to commemorate talk like a pirate day which just passed by not talking like a pirate since i dont talk like a pirate anyway but since i use punctuation all the time and im pretty good at it if i say so myself i thought it might be a reasonable tribute to national punctuation day if i posted an entire blog post without a single mark of punctuation no periods commas colons semicolons dashes which i overuse apostrophes parenthesis another thing i overuse ellipsis yet another and without any capital letters or paragraph breaks you get the idea punctuation is important to our lives in ways that i cant even illustrate without using it the amazing thing is that some of my dear friends for example on facebook write like this all the time i dont know how they do it and its often hard to read and i sometimes want to block them from my wall but theyre my friends so i dont in any case this tendency toward unpunctuated writing which is no worse than using many exclamation points or question marks in succession seems to be rooted in twin causes a public education system whose employees in many cases dont punctuate let alone write very well and the culture of twitter or text messaging generally where every character can be a labor in itself and some punctuation marks can be hard to access and even if you can type more than twitters limit of 140 characters its hard to imagine why you would want to so happy punctuation day lets never do this again and now im going to proofread this to make sure it sort of makes sense and that i didnt put in any punctuation by accident i think reading it will be painful and if you also think reading it is painful imagine how painful and unnatural it has been to write this post so go forth and punctuate properly never use quotation marks for emphasis here is a fun web site about [national punctuation day](#) i havent studied it exhaustively but i think they want you to bake something how long can this go on i want my punctuation back right now later note i just proofread this and removed two fugitive apostrophes yes it was painful to read even more than to write but if you send comments on this post please dont use any punctuation so i dont have to remove it myself its less work for me that way and youll help me celebrate this auspicious day

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National Punctuation Day comments

“oh my goodness you sound like a different person without punctuation”

“huge gasp gosh i couldn't breathe without a comma or a period”

“your prose was just like proofing my two sons freshman college papers continual run on sentences funny at parent teacher conf last night we discussed this very thing”



5. Omaha Beach and Eminiar VII



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Defamiliarizing War: *Saving Private Ryan*

20-minute Omaha Beach landing scene near the beginning

- ▶ Shot so you're almost on the beach
- ▶ Still not the real experience, but more like it than many past D-Day scenes in movies
- ▶ Defamiliarization by stripping away clichés and conventions and approaching nearer to reality



Defamiliarizing War: Captain Kirk at Eminiar VII

Star Trek, TOS: "A Taste of Armageddon"

Captain Kirk and the Enterprise arrive at Eminiar VII, which has been at war for generations with a neighboring planet – but they've sanitized it, in a way.

- Kirk sees the horror of their convention.
- The audience sees war stripped of glory and romanticism and reduced to its essence: the slaughter of humans.
- It gets personal: a ruler's daughter and the Enterprise crew



Viktor Shklovsky again

Material I stil v romane L. Tolstogo 'Voina I mir,' Moscow, 1928

"When it is necessary for Tolstoy to 'make strange' death or war, then he need only 'particularize' it, to make it not war in general or killing in general, but the killing of a real man."

Scene:

Rostov comes upon a French dragoon officer whose foot is caught in a stirrup -- pale and mud-stained face, fair and young, with a dimple in the chin and light-blue eyes -- "not an enemy's face at all suited to a battlefield, but a most ordinary, homelike face."



6. Swimming in the shallow end

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Scenario:

First High School Basketball Game

- First-person narrator: Jenny, a high school sophomore
- Kinda brainy, doesn't enjoy sports, never been to a game
- Boy she likes, Troy, is on the JV basketball team
- She goes to his game, takes dad with her to explain
- Doesn't know the game, the conventions, the symbolism, the culture
- We'll use her *new* experience to help the reader who is familiar with the experience to see it differently

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How do these look, sound, or feel to her?

- ▶ Jump shot (describe w/o *shot*, *basket*, or *backboard*)
- ▶ Tried to draw a charge, called for the block
- ▶ Hard pick
- ▶ Drawing a charge

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Hard pick

“Nice pick!” [Dad said]

What I saw was Troy standing in the way of the player who was guarding another of our players, who had the ball. Their guy ran into Troy pretty hard, while our guy got away and scored.

“Isn’t that a foul?” I asked. “On Troy? For getting in the way? Or the other guy for running into him?”

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Drawing a charge

Later he got run over again. He took a few seconds to get up, which worried me, but this time he smiled.

The referee gave a different signal and pointed dramatically to the other end of the court. Troy's teammates on the floor high-fived him, and the guys on the bench stood and cheered.

"Did you see that charge?" Dad asked. "Nicely done!"

"I saw it. I didn't like it. Why is it a good thing?"

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Some of the basics

- ▶ POV character having new experience, reader sees through her eyes
- ▶ She doesn't know the jargon or the meaning of actions
- ▶ She has a guide

Now we'll add three useful details:

- ▶ She reasons but misunderstands (in thought or speech)
- ▶ She responds in the wrong way (does the wrong thing)
- ▶ She notices how her response is different from others'

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She gets it wrong

“You guys like doing this?” I asked. “This is fun for you?”

“Some girls like it too. It’s a lot of fun. Much safer than football.”

“If you say so.” I’d never been to a football game, but I knew they wore helmets and lots of padding, and played on grass, not a hardwood floor.

<snip>

The horn sounded, and everybody in the stands and on the floor went crazy, except the other team. Some of them hung their heads.

And except me. I started to clap.

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My intentions as author

- ▶ Show boy and girl are from different worlds
- ▶ Show them working to understand each other
- ▶ If going to a game is a familiar experience for the reader, I want the reader to see it differently, through Jenny's eyes
- ▶ Trying to get the reader invested in the relationship
- ▶ Not trying to show the reader the truth about basketball.



Sample in the handout: “If Only I”

Boy poet likes a girl who plays flute (7th grade)

When the band teacher announced the first song, I thought its name sounded like some kind of pasta. I listened as carefully as I could to the flutes, and I tried really hard to like them, but I didn't. They were shrill, and a weird vibration made a lot of their notes sound bad. The louder they played, the worse it got. . . . Maybe some of the flutes were broken, or they were playing the wrong notes.

. . . It sort of sounded like they were fighting.



(continued)

After concert, boy poet talks to girl flute player (7th grade)

It was getting a little easier to talk. “I liked that band at the assembly too.”

“What band at what assembly?”

It was a strange question. It was only a few days ago, and it made her cry. She couldn’t have forgotten already.

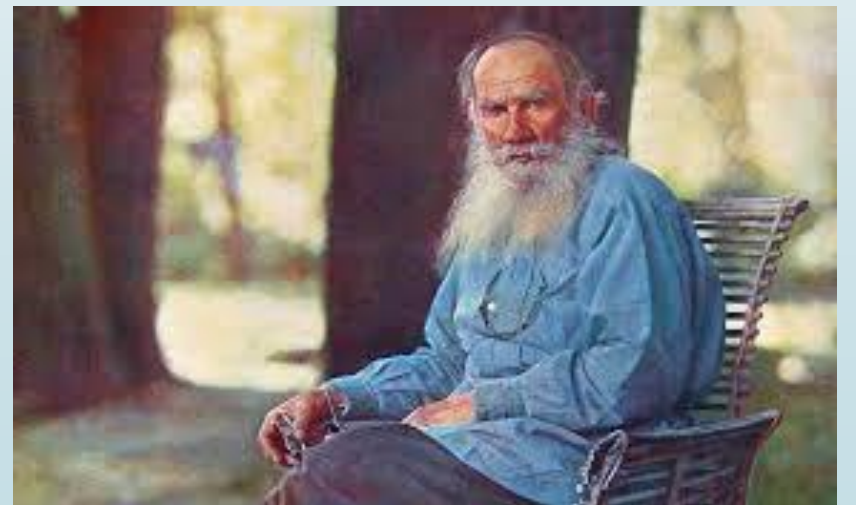
“Last week? The symphony?”

She laughed, and I didn’t know whether to be devastated that she was laughing at me or awestruck at the sound. It was like the brook that bubbled through the park in my neighborhood, where I liked to write sometimes.

“That’s not a band. It’s an orchestra.”

I felt stupid and small. . . . “What’s the difference?”

7. How a master did it





In the handout: Natasha at the opera

from Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace

The floor of the stage consisted of smooth boards, at the sides was some painted cardboard representing trees, and at the back was a cloth stretched over boards. In the center of the stage sat some girls in red bodices and white skirts. One very fat girl in a white silk dress sat apart on a low bench, to the back of which a piece of green cardboard was glued. They all sang something. When they had finished their song the girl in white went up to the prompter's box. A man with tight silk trousers over his stout legs, and holding a plume and a dagger, went up to her and began singing, waving his arms about.

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(cont.)

First the man in the tight trousers sang alone, then she sang, then they both paused while the orchestra played and the man fingered the hand of the girl in white, obviously awaiting the beat to start singing with her. . . .



(cont.)

After her life in the country, and in her present serious mood, all this seemed grotesque and amazing to Natasha. She could not follow the opera nor even listen to the music; she saw only the painted cardboard and the queerly dressed men and women who moved, spoke, and sang so strangely in that brilliant light. She knew what it was all meant to represent, but it was so pretentiously false and unnatural that she first felt ashamed for the actors and then amused at them.



(cont.)

She looked at the faces of the audience, seeking in them the same sense of ridicule and perplexity she herself experienced, but they all seemed attentive to what was happening on the stage, and expressed delight which to Natasha seemed feigned.

(Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*. Tr. Aylmer Maude. Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1966. Book 8, Chapter 9. P. 620.)

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My interpretation

Tolstoy's point is about the audience, not the opera. The urban nobility are detached from reality, attached to illusion, and they prefer it that way.

Natasha herself was this way, until her time in the country began to ground her in reality – that is, in truth.



In the handout: Communion at the Prison Church from Leo Tolstoy's Resurrection

POV: Maslova, a prisoner, has decided everything she was taught about God is "trickery and deception," and none of the people who seem to believe really do.

The priest, robed in a peculiar and very inconvenient garment made of cloth and gold, cut and arranged small pieces of bread on a saucer; these he put into a cup filled with wine, at the same time uttering various names and prayers. . . .



(cont.)

The essence of the service lay in the assumption that the small pieces of bread cut by the priest and dipped in the wine to the accompaniment of certain manipulations and prayers, became the body and blood of God. . . . The principal act came when the priest, having taken a napkin in both hands, slowly and rhythmically waved it over the saucer and the golden cup. This was supposed to be the moment when bread and wine were transformed into flesh and blood, and therefore this part of the service was performed with special solemnity.

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(cont.)

“To the holy, pure, and blessed Mother of God!” the priest cried loudly from behind the partition, and the choir solemnly chanted. . . . Then the transformation was considered accomplished, and the priest, having removed the napkin from the saucer, cut the middle piece of bread into four parts and placed it first in the wine and next in his own mouth. He was supposed to have swallowed a piece of the body of God and to have drunk a portion of his blood. Then the priest . . . stood before the people, inviting those who wished to come and partake the body and blood of God, which were in that cup.



(cont.)

... The priest stood in front of an image ... which was meant to represent the same God he had been eating [and half-sang, half-spoke]....

Of course, the priest did not really believe that bread and wine could become human flesh and blood ... or that he had indeed swallowed a piece of God – no one could believe this – but he believed that it was his duty to believe this belief.

(Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*. Tr. Vera Traill. New York: New American Library, 1984, pp. 134-38)



What's your interpretation?



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My interpretation

Tolstoy's point is that the church, both institutionally and in the persons of particular priests, has hidden true religion under a thick layer of ritual which cannot possibly mean what the people are expected to believe it means.

There's a layer of hypocrisy too, because the clergy don't believe it themselves. They merely pretend to believe it because it's their job.

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In passing: Other books known for defamiliarization

- ▶ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*
- ▶ Tolstoy, *Kholstomer* (narrator is a horse)
- ▶ Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*
- ▶ George Orwell, *Animal Farm*



8. In which you practice on us

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How to: things to know before you begin

1. What do you want your readers to see?

Something hidden behind routine, convention, cliché, tired symbolism.

2. Why don't they see it now?

Too familiar, taught/learned not to see it, vested interest, etc.

3. Will you show it to the reader directly or through a character's eyes and mind?

4. How do you want the reader to feel and act as a result?



You'll need **outsiders**

- ▶ Probably the **narrator**
- ▶ Likely also a **character** – who may be having the experience and becomes a proxy for the reader
- ▶ The goal is to take the reader outside to look in with new eyes.

You may want **a guide**

... who sees what is habitually seen (by insiders), as a foil for the outsiders.

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Your tools include . . .

- Unusual, unexpected, unceremonious, or unconventional language
- Stripping away symbolism, convention, even euphemism
- Unusual metaphors or comparisons
- Change in POV
- Time travel, space travel, fantasy, etc.
- Unconventional narrative structure (e.g. static in *Godot*)
- In poetry especially, unusual arrangement of words & lines
- Anything that slows down perception and gives the reader time to perceive



Now *You* Make It Strange

► **50-100 words**

► Pick one of these:

- Help a homeowner see a child's view of dandelions (or vice versa).
- Help someone who loves the dolphin show at Sea World see an animal rights activist's view (or vice versa).
- Give us a nineteenth century time traveler's view of social media.
- Describe an off-planet, non-humanoid alien's view of two humans kissing.

► WILLING TO **SHARE** WITH THE CLASS? **TEXT TO 801-369-2626**



9. Sometimes you change the world



A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.

Background

American slavery and Russian serfdom were similar institutions and were both abolished in the same half-decade.



Which bring us to 1852

- ▶ **Ivan Turgenev** (better known for *Fathers and Sons*)
humanized Russian serfs in *Sportsman's Sketches* (Записки охотника)
- ▶ Tsar Alexander II said they helped persuade him to free the serfs in 1861.



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 - ▶ Tsar Alexander II said they helped persuade him to free the serfs in 1861.
- ▶ **Harriet Beecher Stowe** **humanized American slaves** in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
 - ▶ Huge bestseller.
 - ▶ Langston Hughes: "The most cussed and discussed book of its time."



A few notes

- ▶ Lincoln (attributed) said to Stowe: “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.”
- ▶ Turgenev hadn’t read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* when he wrote *Sportsman’s Sketches*, but read it later, called it a masterpiece.
- ▶ Stowe and Turgenev met in Paris in 1856. Long talk about American slavery and Russian serfdom. He found her kind, sensible, and shy.



10. Q&A



11. Weird, nearly final note

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Typo: coincidence or not?

Russian Formalists talked about . . .

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Typo: coincidence or not?

Russian Formalists talked about

how art transforms ordinary language into poetry.

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Typo: coincidence or not?

Russian Formalists talked about

how art transforms ordinary language into poultry.

(Yeah, I meant *poetry*, but . . .

. . . I accidentally made it strange.)



12. Worthy final note

(before the shameless self-promotion)



(If you want to change the world)

“ Blessed are they
who see beautiful things in
humble places
where other people
see nothing. ”

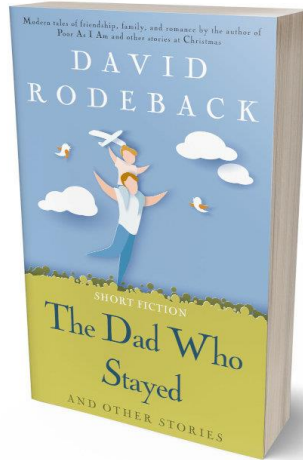
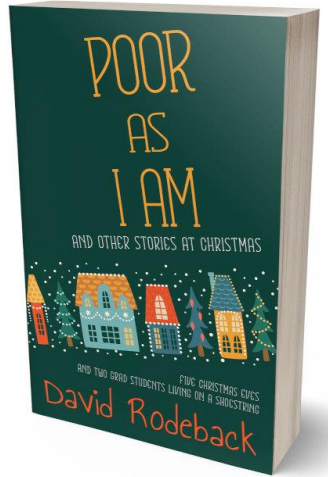
— *Camille Pissarro*





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