

THE NOT-SO-BIG NOVEL
How Thinking Like an Architect Can Help a Writer

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Within the pages of a novel—a stack of bound paper that you can carry in one hand—a writer has to build a world that may span a single block or an entire continent, as well as stretch back and forth across the centuries. A reader opens this small thing and dives into infinite new worlds, and in many novels, these worlds feel as comfortable as the chair in which the reader sits. Yet to create this interior world, a writer needs to design a structure that feels at once familiar and innovative, something that can contain character, plot, setting and more—in short, everything needed to become a novel.

An architect faces a similar challenge. Shelter is a human necessity—be it tent or palace, igloo or sandstone cave. Often, a home's design is a response to the environment; inside, you'll likely find a place to sleep, to cook, to gather together with family and friends. When an architect picks up his pen (or mouse), he's working to create a place that will provide both shelter and comfort. A thoughtfully designed house can become an expression of the residents' personality and creativity, be a place for sanctuary and socializing, and take on a life of its own.

Because of their central role in people's lives, houses often appear in novels as both symbols and characters in their own right. Home is important for characters within a novel, creating a setting for action and a place to define oneself—or defy. In Virginia Woolf's To The Lighthouse, the novel's brief middle section focuses primarily on the ailing family home. The nearly abandoned house seems to whisper in despair to the few who pass through its doors; it's hard to know what is more chilling, the deaths that befall the family and their friends or the quiet of the house's decay.

But the actual process behind designing a house is a craft that can inform writing in another way. Architects have long attempted to make a home both reflect and nurture its inhabitants; one of the people who has brought this kind of design to the public in recent years is Sarah Susanka, whose series of books, starting with The Not So Big House, brings together several long-held architectural ideas about how to create homes with comfortable spaces, no matter what their size. I want to look at how writers incorporate many of these same concepts constructing their own worlds on the page.

Building Blocks: Room-to-Room

When an architect sits down to design a house, he's immediately subject to constraints that don't burden a novelist; an architect must consider the land where the home will be built and the regulations governing building construction, as well as working with the future inhabitants to determine their needs and desires. Once these elements are in mind, an architect can begin to focus on the structure of the house.

Today, many architects are designing houses that are more than just the sum of their square footage. Instead of remaining dormant—like the rarely-used formal dining room--each room can be the hub of several daily activities, and each can reflect the owner's interests and personality. To make the most of the space, and to create a unified feeling throughout the home, an architect will look at the way rooms work together. A novelist might think of structuring a book in the same way, putting together the "rooms" of the novel (whether they be chapters, sections, even paragraphs) in a way that draws readers in the door, encourages them to move throughout the novel, and to ultimately find themselves at home there. Chapters each serve a particular function, and often have

many purposes: to introduce a particular character, to explore a conflict, to wrap up the plot. By putting rooms together in a thoughtful way, the structure created can have meaning as well as function.

Ceiling Height: As Above, So Below

Even though the pages of a novel seem to have only length and width, what's contained inside can zoom into a third dimension. Architects have started to look beyond the length and width of each room to create a sense of ease in the onlooker, often varying the ceiling height between rooms to delineate different uses for each area; eliciting feelings of safety and comfort in a low-ceilinged reading nook, or soaring spirits in a lofted living room. As Susanka writes, "[T]he height of these spaces is what makes places feel comfortable or uncomfortable. . . . By raising or lowering the ceiling, spaces are enlivened and places within the larger area are created that are individually defined yet clearly part of the whole" (64-65).

Novels can use this alternating pattern among chapters to inject intimacy into a broad landscape. John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath uses an alternating pattern of narrative styles throughout the novel. The novel's primary story is a fairly straightforward third-person narration of the Joad family's journey from their farm in Oklahoma to a transient life in California. Early chapters written in this style mix description and dialogue; the narrator touches on small moments in the life of several characters but doesn't dip too far into their thoughts. As young Tom Joad returns home from prison, the reader sees him coming in against the backdrop of the dusty Oklahoma landscape: "Joad plodded along, dragging his cloud of dust behind him. A little bit

ahead he saw the high-domed shell of a land turtle, crawling slowly along through the dust, its legs working stiffly and jerkily” (24).

Steinbeck alternates chapters focusing on this particular family with chapters that feature an omniscient narrator who paints wide cinematic scenes of the land and its plight. In an early chapter, the Joads notice their neighbor’s home and farm is empty. The following chapter begins with an overarching look at the way that cotton farmers are being evicted: “The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. They came in closed cars, and they felt the dry earth with their fingers The tenants, from their sun-beaten doorways, watched uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields” (42). This voice can talk about the history of the land, the years of drought; it can even philosophize about the nature of man (204).

This omniscient, “high-ceilinged” voice can also peer into the thoughts of individual, unnamed characters. In a chapter that begins, “The moving, questioning people were migrants now,” (385) the narrator moves quickly into the personal:

If that fella’ll work for thirty cents, I’ll work for twenty-five.

If he’ll take twenty-five, I’ll do it for twenty.

No, me, I’m hungry. I’ll work for fifteen. I’ll work for food. The kids. You ought to see them. Little boils, like, comin’ out, an’ they can’t run aroun’. Give ‘em some windfall fruit, an’ they bloated up. Me. I’ll work for a little piece of meat. (387)

These unnamed speakers serve as the collective voice of the migrants, whose individual stories are not told. Both these dialogues and the sweeping exploration of the western landscape present conflicts that later play out in the Joads’ own dialogue and

actions. By using this device, Steinbeck doesn't have to do any exposition within his "low-ceilinged" chapters, letting scenes with the Joads become straightforward advancements of plot. The reader isn't overwhelmed by too much history—a chapter that talks about the land as a whole, the qualities of men in general, are palatable, even beautiful, because the reader will soon understand how these big ideas will relate to the Joads' struggle, and in turn, how the Joads' struggle is only a single example in a larger tragedy. This structure makes these "small" lives seem bigger, and makes the large concepts—poverty, injustice—seem personal and real.

Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse fills with events of different lengths and "heights," a funhouse with tiny and huge rooms that boggle the senses. The first section, "The Window," spans more than one hundred pages, making it the longest section of the book (and its name even associates it with a house!). In this part, the events pass over the course of a day or two. And events, here, don't have the historical weight of The Grapes of Wrath. Small moments, all: a father discourages his son from going to the lighthouse, a woman paints, a dinner party is held. The only real event, it seems, is that two of the house's residents get engaged. The book's final section has a similar quiet, slow, appearance. Another day, ten years later: The same woman paints; a family takes a trip to the lighthouse. Yet in these seemingly mundane events, Woolf draws out exquisite detail of the meandering thoughts of the characters, creating layers of meaning, of height, within small moments.

In the middle section, "Time Passes," in contrast, ten years span the course of twenty pages. There's a world war, three deaths of characters the reader knows, and an ancient house falls from grace. The big events are condensed into single, bracket

sentences: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]” (133). If you looked only at the events within the chapters—their length and width—you might think this novel is truly a disorienting place of off-kilter rooms and wavy mirrors, from which you can’t wait to emerge.

But to many readers, the book feels balanced because of this alternation. For the middle section, “Time Passes,” the bracketed events in people’s lives, even though only a sentence or two describes them, sets them apart from the rest by their very form. In addition, giving these events less weight than the decay of the house fits into the primacy that setting has. The intimacy of the first section, the long, low-ceilinged feel of it, makes entering into this smaller, high-ceilinged room more striking. On second glance, To the Lighthouse is less a hallucinogenic funhouse, more a stately home like the one within its pages, each room the right size to serve its purpose.

Circulation: How to Get From Here to There

Architects look not only at the rooms themselves, but how people move from room to room in the design. In the book A Pattern Language, architect Christopher Alexander and his coauthors write:

The movement between rooms, the circulation space, may be generous or mean. In a building where the movement is mean, the passages are dark and narrow—rooms open off them as dead ends; you spend your time entering the building, or moving between rooms, like a crab scuttling in the dark.

Compare this with a building where the movement is generous. The passages are broad, sunlit, with seats in them, views into gardens, and they are more or less continuous with the rooms themselves, so that the smell of woodsmoke and cigars, the sound of glasses, whispers, laughter, all that which enlivens a room, also enlivens the places where you move. (628)

Sometimes, this blending among the “rooms” within novels and stories can be done through the short corridor of white space. In a 2001 interview with Ellen Kanner, writer Ethan Canin talked about his reason for using white space. "If you just go from Monday to Tuesday, it's not as effective as going from Japan in 1940 to Brooklyn in 1990," Canin told BookPage. “You can sort of trigger a reader to drop his emotional defenses.” Canin’s leaps pay off in his short story “The Year of Getting to Know Us,” a story that spans several decades and tackles many of the big ideas: love and death, marriage and fidelity. By separating three storylines with line breaks, the reader feels the passage of time among each section, and the story itself seems to travel across great distances across fewer than two dozen pages.

Another way of making the passage between different sections of a novel can be the retelling of stories, of lining up stories against each other that tell the same things, only in a slightly different way. In Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, several stories are told and retold that form the narrator’s experiences in Vietnam. One of the series of connected rooms within this book revolves around Norman Bowker, a member of the narrator’s platoon in Vietnam. About two-thirds of the way into the book, there’s a third-person story, “Speaking of Courage,” about Bowker. Bowker is now home from the war and driving aimlessly around a lake near his hometown. As he drives, he thinks

about telling a story to his father about the time in Vietnam where the platoon lost a man, Kiowa, in a sludge field while under fire. “He could not describe what happened next, not ever, but he would have tried anyway. . . . There were bubbles where Kiowa’s head should have been” (149). In the story, Bowker tries to rescue Kiowa, but begins to sink himself and loses hold of Kiowa’s boot.

The next story, “Notes,” begins by providing a short explanation of the previous one. “‘Speaking of Courage’ was written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker, who three years later hanged himself in the locker room of a YMCA in his hometown in central Iowa” (155). Suddenly, the reader sees Bowker’s story differently—it’s not really an account of Bowker, but a story that the narrator has invented about Bowker. At the conclusion of this chapter, the narrator says that he wants to absolve Norman from responsibility for Kiowa’s death: “That part of the story is my own” (161).

The story that follows this one, “In the Field,” describes the story of Kiowa’s death from a third-person narrator, focused on Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. As the soldiers search for Kiowa’s body, Cross contemplates what he will write to Kiowa’s family, describing the circumstances that led up to his death, and Cross’s own responsibility; he’s also watching one young soldier, standing alone, begin to cry.

Maybe it was something in the posture of the soldier, or the way he seemed to be reaching for some invisible object beneath the surface, but for several moments Jimmy Cross stood very still, afraid to move, knowing he had to, and then he murmured to himself, “My fault,” and he nodded and waded out across the field toward the boy. (169)

The story goes on to focus on the young soldier, who also implicates himself in Kiowa's death. And he repeats a line that is in the story of Norman Bowker. "There were bubbles where Kiowa's head should've been" (171). But this time, the young soldier seems to be Tim O'Brien.

These stories, told from different points of view, focusing on different characters telling parts of the same story, feel like rooms with fluid connections. A reader can pass back and forth between them, getting slightly different views and perspectives, and feeling them grow bigger because of the way one layers on the next.

The most generous circulation, according to A Pattern Language, is that in which there are no corridors at all, where people move between interconnected rooms with doorways between them (629). But even better than the interconnected rooms that exist without passages is, Alexander writes, a looping circulation. "With a loop it is always possible to come and go in two different directions. It is possible to walk around and around, and it ties the rooms together. . . . it connects rooms far more than a simple passage does" (630).

I'm not sure if there's a "better" when it comes to a novel (and an architect might agree that the best design depends on the particular house), but looping circulation can also make a novel feel both intimate and expansive. The overarching structure of David Mitchell's novel Cloud Atlas is a series of loops, each connecting with the next. The novel consists of six storylines, each taking place in a different time period, and in a different form: 19th century Pacific exploration (travel journal); pre-World War II account of a composer in Belgium (letters); 1970s California nuclear power plant intrigue (pulp thriller); modern England's publishing hi-jinks (confessional); a future world in which

clones exist (exit interview); and an even more distant future in which civilization has broken down (campfire tale). Each story becomes a shell for the next one—Mitchell tells half of each story before breaking off, even in mid-sentence, and jumping into another story. The first part of the opening story, “The Pacific Journey of Adam Ewing,” ends with such a fizzle that you almost think you have missed a page (39).

This pattern continues until the reader reaches the central tale, told around the campfire on a Pacific Island that may be one of the world’s last remaining human populations. Then the novel works from the bulls’-eye to the outside ring, continuing with the second half of each tale until the conclusion of Adam Ewing’s Pacific voyage at the novel’s end.

Stopping a tale halfway through its telling might seem an artificial way to build suspense. (I’m reminded of reading Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code, in which each chapter ends with a cliffhanger of sorts, which left me guiltily turning the page while also feeling cheap and manipulated.) But Mitchell’s structure works here because these halves of story are all intertwined. The 1930s composer has found a half-complete copy of Adam Ewing’s journal, which inspires a symphony; the futuristic clone watches a movie of the English publisher (who is considering publishing the nuclear thriller); the centuries-from-now primitive society worships this clone as a deity. The connections among the stories aren’t always apparent immediately—composer Robert Frobisher doesn’t find Adam Ewing’s journal until 20 pages into his letters, and it’s in an aside within his letter that he mentions the journal to his friend (64). Yet as the reader progresses through the novel, she begins anticipating these connections and creating ones of her own. The connections may start as dark and narrow corridors, but by the time the

reader is halfway through the book, she finds characters basing their entire belief system on all of the stories that came before, making the passages wide and looping, the structure open.

Mitchell may not have had this complex structure in mind before embarking on the novel. In a commentary in The Guardian, writer Julian Gough relates that Mitchell, a master of the novella, created this novel with the building blocks of six separate novellas. Without this unique connection between them, none of the stories would stand very successfully on their own as anything more than interesting pieces—what makes them transcend is how they connect with each other. And as Gough asserts, figuring out the connections can be the key:

People like art to make sense of chaos but without denying the chaos. That demand is a tremendous opportunity for the natural short story writer, who merely needs to come up with an organi[z]ing principle. It's just another technical challenge. Story itself is infinitely flexible, and doesn't much care how you tell it or what you call it. These stacks of stories, reinvented for the urban 21st century, could be called the multistory novel.

Why are these novels, in which stories interweave and retell each other, or step back and leave out important details so appealing? In A Pattern Language, Alexander describes how it aids architecture—for the same reason that it must thrill a reader—the observer can fill the movement with something of himself.

The building with generous circulation allows each person's instincts and intuitions full play. The building with ungenerous circulation inhibits them. It not only separates rooms from one another to such an extent that

it is an ordeal to move from room to room, but kills the joy of time spent between rooms and may discourage movement altogether. (628-629)

While Richard Russo's novel Empire Falls doesn't have such an avant-garde structure, the novel's many characters form "rooms" through which the omniscient narrator circulates. The novel is divided into four parts (buttressed by prologue and epilogue); in each chapter, the narrator slips into another character's perspective. But along with the chapter breaks delineating the rooms, the characters themselves provide passage into each chapter.

"At five minutes to six on Sunday morning a groggy Miles Roby came downstairs to prepare for the breakfast shift and found a man slumped over the counter, his forehead flat on the Formica, as if it had been superglued there" (298). Russo's chapter openings usually have movement (Miles Roby coming downstairs), locate themselves in time and place (the Sunday morning kitchen), and bring the character and the reader immediately in contact with another character.

Throughout Empire Falls, Russo opens the door to his chapters by having his characters actually walk through. "'Don't look now,' David said, looking up from his newspaper, 'but here comes the happy groom, just back from his honeymoon'" (357). Because this novel relies so much on the relationships between people in the town of Empire Falls, it makes sense that the people open each new room—because the chapter will be a place in which these relationships are complicated and explored, this brings the reader into the room as well. And reader and characters mark these entrances: "'Who's that just came in?'" Max Roby wanted to know when he felt the air change in the tavern"

(122). To move through space, to circulate freely, you also must know that you have arrived.

Enfilade: A Glimpse of the Future

Architects and designers of a classical bent use a concept called *enfilade*, a line of doors that provide an extended view through a space, to stretch a viewer's vision through a house, providing both connection and suspense. "A successful enfilade can unify a series of rooms having quite different characters, shapes, designs, and uses while at the same time giving a sense of expansion and mysterious connection beyond any one room" (Semmes 174).

Kate Atkinson, in her novel Case Histories, creates these kinds of sequential openings through the placement of chapters to provide the reader with an early glimpse of where the novel is heading and simultaneously create suspense. The novel begins with accounts of three murder cases, which all take place before the main narrative; each case is marked with the time during which it takes place. Olivia Land's disappearance, in 1970, comes first; second is Laura's murder, which takes place in 1994. Atkinson's third case is Michelle, Keith and the ax—which happens in 1979— In the third case, the narrator tells the story of Keith's murder. We already know that Michelle is severely depressed and feeling disconnected from her husband and her baby. When Keith wakes the baby by dumping the logs on the ground, "what actually happened was . . . she spat at him, which was something new as well, and then she ran outside and got the ax from where it was stuck in a log beside the sawhorse, and then she ran back inside with it" (43). Then there's a section break. In the next section, Keith is dead on the floor, and

“when you split someone’s head open it smelled like an abattoir and quite overpowered the scent of the wild lilacs you’d cut and brought into the house only this morning, which was already in another life” (44). The reader knows that Michelle brought the lilacs in that morning, so she’s the one (the “you”) who split Keith’s head open, isn’t she?

Then, the “present” narrative begins in 2004, with Jackson, a private investigator, on a stakeout. In this section, there’s also a hint as to what will be the other important time frame in the book. Jackson is thinking about where he was when Olivia Land disappears.

Jackson tried to remember thirty-four years ago. He would have been eleven years old. Had it been hot? He had no idea. He couldn’t remember eleven. The important thing about it was that it wasn’t twelve. All the years before he was twelve shone with an unblemished and immaculate light. After twelve it was dark. (64)

Near the end of the book, we find the fourth case history—that of Jackson’s sister, who was killed in 1971 on her way home from work. Atkinson has already characterized Jackson as someone who feels strongly about the killings he’s investigating because of his own daughter: “That was why he didn’t want to take on Theo Wyre. Theo terrified him, it made the death of his own child a possibility, it forced him to imagine it, to substitute Marlee for Laura Wyre” (116). Now, the reader understands that Jackson, too, is a victim in one of the cases like the people he is helping—she’s glimpsed the way the rooms of this story (the present investigation, the past murders) are intertwined.

Moving through the book is like moving through a series of doorways, each opening on something that one has seen before—but not closely. As the reader moves

through the final doorways, she gets a more accurate view of events that have already been described.

At the end of the book, Atkinson gives the reader what happens in the section break that she inserted when describing the third case history, of Keith's death. Michelle's sister, Shirley, arrives when Michelle runs out of the house, Michelle runs back inside with the ax and tosses it on the floor, and Keith is angry again. "[T]he next moment it was in Shirley's hands and she didn't do any girly tossing. She just lifted the whole weight of the ax up and brought the blade down on Keith's head" (285). Suddenly, the room we've just seen the corner of comes in to view—and it doesn't look as we expected.

From Public to Private: Intimacy by Design

In designing a house, an architect thinks not only of how people move through the rooms, but the order and orientation of the rooms that each person will see. Rooms can be put together in a variety of ways, but some arrangements promote more functionality and good feeling than others. One architectural rule of thumb, for example, advises that people in the dining room or kitchen of a house should not be able to see into the bathroom, or worse, glimpse the porcelain throne inside.

Architects often arrange rooms by how personal each space is to the occupant. "We organize our homes along an 'intimacy gradient' that places the most private, the most secure places at the end of the passages through the house, beyond gateways, through many boundaries" (Jacobson 169).

Within a novel, too, characters tread paths that lead from their public selves to their private ones. While novels might end in fireworks, the climax of meaning often comes when the characters reveal their most protected spaces, the people they are in the back rooms of their houses, after all the guests have gone.

Edith Wharton's novel The House of Mirth is all about how people behave when others are watching. It's the story of a young woman navigating turn-of-the-century American society, wrestling with her two desires: to advance her social standing by marrying well and to stay true to her principles.

In the hansom she leaned back with a sigh.

Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind the structure of an artifice? She had yielded to a passing impulse in going to Laurence Selden's rooms, and it was so seldom she could allow herself the luxury of an impulse! This one, at any rate, was going to cost her rather more than she could afford. (14)

Here, we see that entering into an intimate space too early has already caused problems for Lily Bart. But as far as structure goes, while the plot is taking us into supposed "intimate" physical spaces, we're not allowed to see Lily unguarded; here, Lily is alert and aware of her actions, even if she has yielded to an impulse. Her focus here is not on her feelings, but rather on the propriety of the situation and how it will reflect on her; soon after, she has found a new conquest on the train and flirts merrily with him, runs into other companions—in short, she moves in to moments full of people and conversation which leave little room for private space, private moments.

As Lily continues through the book, her crowd drops away. Each event serves to isolate her further from the crowd; chapters have fewer characters, and feature scenes with conversations with a single person, and also reveal more of Lily's feelings. She still protects her feelings—primarily from other characters, but from the reader as well. “She drew herself up to the full height of her slender majesty, towering like some dark angel of defiance above the troubled Gerty, who could only falter out: ‘Lily, Lily, how can you laugh about such things?’” (236).

But by the end of the book, we enter Lily Bart's bedroom and see her in despair, the most intimate moment for this woman who pushes away intimacy that can save her. “[T]he terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize her future; she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all empty and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe. But this was the verge of delirium; she had never hung so near the dizzy brink of the unreal” (341).

Sometimes, the withholding of intimacy is designed by playing with the time sequence. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel The Remains of the Day is organized as a travel journal, in which Mr. Stevens, the head butler of Darlington House, takes a journey through the English countryside during a week of vacation—his first in years. Each chapter is titled by place, day, and time of day: Salisbury, Day One, Evening; Salisbury, Day Two, Morning; Mortimer's Pond, Dorset, Day Two, Afternoon; Taunton, Somerset, Day Three, Morning; Moscombe, near Tavistock, Devon, Day Three, Evening; Little Compton, Cornwall, Day Four, Afternoon; Weymouth, Day Six, Evening. The last section takes place several days later than the regularly recorded sections of the earlier part of the book; at first glance, this could be travel journaling fatigue, starting with good

intentions but dwindling off as the trip progresses and the traveler spends more time enjoying the trip and less time scribbling away.

But as the reader begins the last entry, she notices something amiss. Mr. Stevens, while prone to reminiscing about his work at Darlington House in its golden age, decades ago, usually “writes” his account of his travels soon after each event occurs. On his second day, in Salisbury, he begins writing near dawn: “When I parted [the curtains] just a moment ago, the light outside was still very pale and something of a mist was affecting my view of the baker’s shop and chemist’s opposite” (47). But, we have been prepared for Mr. Stevens meeting with Miss Kenton in Little Compton—and the last chapter has no description of their actual meeting. Now, several days later, we are in a different town, and Stevens spends several paragraphs talking about his new locale before writing: “It is now fully two days since my meeting with Miss Kenton” (231). So, what follows—the long awaited meeting—is held for the end of the novel, not only its position in the text, but in the true chronology of events, which has run straightforwardly until now.

And this is the moment when we finally hear the ultra-reserved Stevens express his emotions. In his memories, he has been describing his interactions with Miss Kenton from a great distance. Years in the past After Miss Kenton’s aunt dies, and she tells Stephens that she is engaged, he stands at night outside her door:

And that was the moment, I am now sure, that has remained so persistently lodged in my memory – that moment as I paused in the dimness of the corridor, the tray in my hands, an ever-growing conviction mounting within me that just a few yards away, on the other side of that

door, Miss Kenton was at that moment crying. . . . I do not know how long I remained standing there; at the time it seemed a significant period, but in reality, I suspect, it was only a matter of a few seconds. For, of course, I was required to hurry upstairs to serve some of the most distinguished gentlemen of the land and I cannot imagine I would have delayed unduly. (227)

He seems to be unaware of what she could be possibly crying about. But when the two meet decades later, in a scene in the novel's last chapter, he finally reveals himself (both to himself, and the reader). As they talk of old times, Mr. Stevens asks Miss Kenton if she is happy. She says to Mr. Stevens that there are days when she considers what things would have been like had she remained at Darlington Hall and pursued a relationship with Mr. Stevens, but concludes that her place is with her husband (as Mr. Stevens, years earlier, concluded that his place was with the Lord Darlington).

I do not think I responded immediately, for it took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed—why should I not admit it?—at that moment, my heart was breaking. (239)

Stevens' heart is a room tucked far in the back of the house, in an out of the way place; but because we have traveled so far with him, Ishiguro, at last, eases open the door.

Refuge and Outlook: A Room with a View

Along with an increasing sense of intimacy as one moves through a house, architects often try to create spaces that let people observe the outside world from a safe, protected location. Whether tucked on a bench in an alcove, looking down at the garden, hidden in the upstairs balcony watching adults below at a party, or relaxing on the porch with a view of the street, “at its simplest, we are inside, looking out” (Jacobson 207). In the world of building, this may stem from an ancient need for shelter, protection and a view of challenges to come; in a novel, these places, at regular intervals, create a pause for readers and characters to contemplate what has happened and to see what may be ahead.

Sometimes the world on which characters are looking out on is very like our own. Ian McEwan’s Saturday follows a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon in London, during 2003 protests of the war in Iraq. Perowne’s day starts before dawn, as he wakes to see a burning plane descend on its way to Heathrow; the book moves through other rooms of action, including a car accident, a confrontation with a group of men (whose leader, the neurosurgeon realizes, may have early stage Huntington’s disease), and a furious racquetball game. Following all of this action, the middle of the book provides a welcome respite. The opening scene, in Chapter 3, shows Perowne resting in his car—a refuge allowing character and reader to catch their collective breaths. “While he waits, Perowne leans against the headrest and closes his eyes. . . . The importance of the game has faded to nothing, and in its place is a craving for sleep” (121).

But even these small moments are important to the plot. From his refuge, Perowne tries to call his wife, but can't reach her; he never has a chance to talk with her about his car accident and his encounter with the men—which sets up additional tension when the men he fought with earlier arrive at his house that night.

One might think that some books are built as complete refuge, offering no reason to look outward, no connection to the lively space of the home or outside world. Marilynne Robinson's novel Gilead takes the form of a series of letters and journal entries written by an aging preacher to his young son, and both the lilting language and the quiet imagery seem to create a sanctuary of peace and tranquility. The rooms here accumulate slowly, as does this novel's plot—which kicks in late and involves the return of John Ames' namesake, a young man who he heartily dislikes.

The book itself is a series of small moments interspersed with the narrator telling his young son about his own history. One early section begins: "I saw a bubble float past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst" (9). From his wife's blue dress to his son's playing with the cat, Ames sits and takes it all in: "One of the pleasures of these days is that I notice them all, minute by minute" (93).

These are tiny places not of refuge—perhaps the plot can never be a refuge, and it makes sense, as plot is something that would move a person through the rooms, rather than making them rest. John Ames (Jack) Boughton arrives right in the middle of one of Ames' reveries, and thrusts him out of his refuge.

One of the pleasures of these days is that I notice them all, minute by minute, and this was a fine one, until I found myself being hoisted to my

feet by that Jack Boughton. Then I caught a look on your mother's face and on yours, too, which I know could not have been because of the contrast we made. You didn't wait till this morning to realize that I am old. I don't know what it was I saw, and I'm not going to think about it anymore. It didn't set well with me. (93-94)

But while being pulled from refuge creates the tension that is the plot of this novel, the refuge itself is what creates the connection to the world—even though at first, the outlook on Gilead, Iowa, may not seem like a wide view. Many of Ames' observations start as passing, if beautiful, observation—perhaps a small sort of refuge, a keyhole view; yet each reverie ends with something that pulls Ames, and the reader, back into the place that he will soon leave. After watching bubbles float by, his wife and son and the cat in the yard, he writes: “You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. They were very lovely. . . . Ah, this life, this world” (9). It's this luminous, hopeful view that a reader takes away from this novel—not the conflict with Jack, or how one moves from beginning to end, except in that the passage of time magnifies these small moments.

You come in reeking of evening air, with your eyes bright and your cheeks and fingers pink and cold, too beautiful in the candlelight for my old eyes. The cold has silenced all the insects. . . . I do wish Boughton could have seen how his boy received his benediction Well, I can imagine him beyond the world, looking back at me with an amazement of realization—“This is why we have lived this life!” There are a thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient. (243)

In its structure of small moments, Gilead reminds me of the story of the old woman who lived in the shoe; not that Ames is beset with children, but it is how I imagine her house—unconventional, packed with tiny rooms that each has a window (through the laces, the tongue, the eyelets, perhaps even the upturned sole). The children are gone, and the old woman is sweeping out their rooms, one by one. Each, while perhaps jumbled-seeming and cheek-to-jowl with the next, is spotlessly clean inside, and offers the strange kind of harmony that can only come from a fairy tale.

Coming Home

Designing a new home, or significantly changing an existing home, is a process of discovery. . . . each time we start, it feels as if we are charting a new course, seeking a new place, one that neither we nor our clients have seen before. It is a somewhat paradoxical process, for when we “arrive” . . . the owners often feel that the new place is familiar, a place they already know. “Yes,” they say, “this is what we had in mind.” (Jacobson 7)

Within the home, people might not think about how the rooms are connected, that the house leads them onward to a view, or provides a place for them to rest. Soon, walls are covered with paintings, corkboards or magazine cut-outs; rooms fill with furniture, toys, books; the kitchen cabinets are stocked; and people gather in the kitchen, around the table, or retreat to a couch or a quiet spot in the garden. But the structure that creates the feeling of well-being lies hidden, making the place feel familiar, even without the things that fill it.

A novel does the same thing. While writing, a writer hopes to create something new. But as a reader, while we want to be dazzled by a world we've never seen before, we also want it to be a place that, at last, feels like it's already a part of us. At the end of a much-loved novel, whether it ends in tragedy or bliss, what's left is this: a sense that we have come home.

Afterword: Structure and My Novel

I set out wanting to write about structure because I've been having difficulty structuring my novel—I tend to have several different ideas about structure and want to try them out all at once. At the same time, my husband and I bought a house, and started planning a potential remodel (after we both went through three years of graduate architecture school). I've always liked the places that we lived, but felt that this had more to do with our “stuff” making these places feel like home, rather than the actual layout of the house. Now that we could influence the layout of the house, I felt just as paralyzed as I have when thinking about my novel.

In some ways, they are both remodels—while it might be easier to scrap the whole thing and start from scratch, working with existing material both limits and helps you focus your thoughts and use what you do have more creatively.

One of the aspects of home design that I think will help as I move through revisions is the movement between public and private space. In our own house, we're trying to overcome an odd structure that puts our bedroom door right next to the entry way. In my novel, I tend to have people ruminating too early, and why should a reader be interested in anyone's exposure before he/she really knows them? It seems (for the most part) more effective to start with something “public,” like action of a character, before we enter their private recesses, whether of space or in their minds. (And in our home, we're trying to add on a small second floor to remove the bedroom from the public space where people first enter our house).

My novel might feel like a slightly battered house in its hometown, the fictional town of Sebastian Bay; I think for my next project, it might be fun to come up with

something gleaming and intricate and modern and work on the design from the start, rather than trying to put a structure on top of the bricks and mortar of words. In reading about other novelists' experiences, it sounds like the process runs the gamut, from completely pre-planned book to the chance idea that turns into the perfect structure. And as the people of Sebastian Bay tend to cobble their lives together with whatever drifts their way, maybe it's not so unusual after all that my novel is taking shape in a similar, flotsam-inspired fashion.

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Hyejung loved to read to escape her daily stress. But that's before she woke up inside the bizarre world of her favorite novel! Instead of the main heroine who courts three eligible men, she is now Latte Ectrie — a minor villain that everyone hates?! One way or another, it's a chance to live out her most beloved storyline, with popcorn in hand to watch all the drama! Taking charge of the narrative takes on a whole new meaning!