She Breaks Your Heart

Chuck Palahniuk on Amy Hempel

Illustration by Rachel Salomon

WHEN YOU STUDY MINIMALISM IN THE NOVELIST Tom Spanbauer's workshop, the first story you read is Amy Hempel's *The Harvest*. After that, you're ruined. I'm not kidding. You go there, and almost every other book you ever read will suck. All those thick, third-person, plot-driven books torn from the pages of today's news -- after Amy Hempel, you'll save yourself a lot of time and money.

Or not. Every year on my tax return's itemized C schedule, I deduct more money for new copies of Hempel's three books, *Reasons To Live*, *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom* and *Tumble Home*. Every year, I want to share these books. What happens is they never come back. Good books never do. This is why my office shelves are crowded with nonfiction too gross for most people, mostly forensic autopsy textbooks, and a ton of novels I hate.

At a bar in New York last year, the literary bar KGB in the East Village, Hempel told me her first book is out of print. The only copy I know of is behind glass in the rare-book room at Powell's Books in Portland, a first-edition hardcover selling for $75 without a signature. I have a rule about meeting the flesh-and-blood version of people whose work I love -- that rule I'm saving for the end.

Unless Hempel's books are reprinted, I may end up spending more or making fewer friends. You cannot *not*push these books on people, saying, "Read this," saying, "Is it just me, or did it make you cry, too?" I once gave *Animal Kingdom*to a friend and said, "If you don't love this, we have nothing in common."

Every sentence isn't just crafted, it's *tortured* over. Every quote and joke, what Hempel tosses out comedian-style, is something funny or profound enough you'll remember it for years. The same way, I sense, Hempel has remembered it, held on to it, saved it for a place where it could really shine. Scary jewelry metaphor, but her stories are studded and set with these compelling bits. Chocolate chip cookies with no bland "cookie" matrix, just nothing but chips and chopped walnuts.

In that way, her experience becomes your experience. Teachers talk about how students need to have an emotional breakthrough, an "ah-hah!" discovery moment in order to retain information. Fran Lebowitz still writes about the moment she first looked at a clock and grasped the concept of telling time. Hempel's work is nothing but these flashes, and every flash makes you ache with recognition.

Right now, Spanbauer's teaching another batch of students by photocopying *The Harvest*from his old copy of *The Quarterly*, the magazine edited by Gordon Lish, the man who taught minimalism to Tom and Amy. And me.

At first, *The Harvest*looks like a laundry list of details. You have no idea why you're almost weeping by the end of seven pages. You're a little confused and disoriented. It's just a simple list of facts presented in the first person, but somehow it adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Most of the facts are funny as hell, but at the last moment, when you're disarmed by laughter, it breaks your heart.

She breaks your heart. First and foremost. That evil Amy Hempel. That's the first bit Spanbauer teaches you: A good story should make you laugh, and a moment later, break your heart. The last bit is: *You will never write this well*. You won't learn this part until you've ruined a lot of paper, wasting your free time with a pen in one hand for years and years. At any horrible moment, you might pick up a copy of Hempel and find your best work is just a cheap rip-off of her worst.

To demonstrate minimalism, students sit around Spanbauer's kitchen table for 10 weeks taking apart *The Harvest*. The first thing you study is what Tom calls "horses." The metaphor is -- if you drive a wagon from Utah to California, you use the same horses the whole way. Substitute the word "themes" or "choruses" and you get the idea. In minimalism, a story is a symphony, building and building, but never losing the original melody line. All characters and scenes, things that seem dissimilar, they all illustrate some aspect of the story's theme. In *The Harvest*, we see how every detail is some part of mortality and dissolution, from kidney donors to stiff fingers to the television series *Dynasty*.

The next aspect, Spanbauer calls "burnt tongue." A way of saying something, but saying it wrong, twisting it to slow down the reader. Forcing the reader to read close, maybe read twice, not just skim along a surface of abstract images, short-cut adverbs, and clichés.

In minimalism, clichés are called "received text."

In *The Harvest*, Hempel writes, "I moved through the days like a severed head that finishes a sentence." Right here, you have her "horses" of death and dissolution *and*her writing a sentence that slows you to a more deliberate, attentive speed.

Oh, and in minimalism, no abstracts. No silly adverbs like *sleepily*, *irritably*, *sadly*, please. And no measurements, no feet, yards, degrees or years-old. The phrase "an 18-year-old girl" -- what does *that*mean?

In *The Harvest*, Hempel writes, "The year I began to say *vahz*instead of *vase*, a man I barely knew nearly accidentally killed me."

Instead of some dry age or measurement, we get the image of someone just becoming sophisticated, plus there's burnt tongue, plus she uses her "horse" of mortality.

See how these things add up?

What else you learn about minimalism includes "recording angel." This means writing without passing any judgments. Nothing is fed to the reader as *fat* or *happy*. You can only describe actions and appearances in a way that makes a judgment occur in the reader's mind. Whatever it is, you unpack it into the details that will re-assemble themselves within the reader.

Amy Hempel does this. Instead of telling us the boyfriend in *The Harvest*is an asshole, we see him holding a sweater soaked with his girlfriend's blood and telling her, "You'll be okay, but this sweater is ruined."

Less becomes more. Instead of the usual flood of general details, you get a slow drip of single-sentence paragraphs, each one evoking its own emotional reaction. At best, she's a lawyer who presents her case, exhibit by exhibit. One piece of evidence at a time. At worst, she's a magician, tricking people. But reading, you always take the bullet without being told it's coming.

SO, WE'VE COVERED "HORSES" AND "BURNT tongue" and "recording angel." Now, writing "on the body." Hempel shows how a story doesn't have to be some constant stream of blah-blah-blah to bully the reader into paying attention. You don't have to hold readers by both ears and ram every moment down their throats. Instead, a story can be a succession of tasty, smelly, touchable details. What Spanbauer and Lish call "going on the body," to give the reader a sympathetic physical reaction, to involve the reader on a gut level.

The only problem with Hempel's palace of fragments is quoting it. Take any piece out of context, and it loses power. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida likens writing fiction to a software code that operates in the hardware of your mind. Stringing together separate macros that, combined, will create a reaction. No fiction does this as well as Hempel's, but each story is so tight, so boiled to bare facts, that all you can do is lie on the floor, face down, and praise it.

My rule about meeting people is -- if I love their work, I don't want to risk seeing them fart or pick their teeth. Last year in New York, I did a reading at the Barnes & Noble in Union Square where I praised Hempel, telling the crowd that if she wrote enough I'd just stay home and read in bed all day. The next night, she appeared at my reading in the Village. I drank half a beer and we talked without passing gas.

Still, I kind of hope I never see her, again. But I did buy that first edition for $75.

*Chuck Palahniuk is the author of*Fight Club *and*Choke*. He will read from his new book,*Lullaby*, at the Beverly Hills Library, 444 N. Rexford Dr., on Monday, September 23, at 7 p.m. For more information, call Book Soup at (310) 659-3110.*