

In Defense of Raisin Bran
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I wrote a story that takes place in a grocery store. In the opening, the narrator picks up a box of Raisin Bran, noting that she'd prefer a kid's cereal but can't justify buying one, being a grown woman and all. The Raisin Bran isn't mentioned again until the end, when it catches the narrator's eye and becomes the catalyst for a life-altering decision. I submitted this story to a journal, which promptly rejected it. The editor made a few comments, but the one that stuck with me was that, while he didn't love the story's ending, he "liked it well enough." He didn't elaborate, but I think it had something to do with the Raisin Bran.

When I first started writing fiction, descriptions were the bane of my existence. I was forever envious of those writers who could paint such vivid word-pictures of sunsets and small town shops, it was as though I stood smack in the stories' worlds. But I could never get myself to write like that. I was more interested in the interior goings-on of my characters—their thoughts and prejudices and damaged relationships—than their exterior landscapes. Sunset, shmunset—I wanted to write about the couple watching it, to give you a moment so sharp with tension, you'd cut your tongue if you came too close.

I couldn't reconcile these two seemingly disparate styles: lavish descriptions or emotional impact. In my mind, it was one or the other. My MFA advisors, attempting to rid me of this notion, told me to slow down, describe the room, what it smelled like, whether or not it was clean. I tried, I really did, but I always found myself moving back inside my characters. The primary lesson beginning writers are taught—especially beginning short story writers—is economy: economy of language and economy of space. Short stories need to be so tight that taking out a single sentence causes them to collapse. So why, I wondered, should I waste precious paragraphs talking about the sofa in a character's apartment? In other words, why tell the reader something she doesn't need to know?

That question shifted my thoughts about description. Once I started thinking in terms of "what the reader needs to know," I began approaching details like this: if my character is in a grocery store, maybe there are other shoppers, and maybe there aren't. But I'm only going to talk about them if they bear a greater significance to the story. This led me to another realization—I *shouldn't* name every person and item in the store. Because when I use details sparingly, they're much more likely to stick in the reader's mind. If out of all the cereals clogging the aisle, I only talk about the Raisin Bran, the reader is going to remember the Raisin Bran, no matter how long it takes the story to circle back to it.

Minutiae are not to be discounted nor underestimated, but they also shouldn't be tossed in willy-nilly. Every detail in a story—from the character's shirt to the car he drives to the mug he drinks his coffee in—holds a power that has the potential to change everything. I am a

person prone to epiphanies, in writing as well as life, and I believe that things like boxes of Raisin Bran can catch our eyes and spark “a-ha!” moments. It’s my job, as a writer, to make you believe this, too, if not in the larger “real” world, then at least in the world of the story. So perhaps that editor didn’t like my ending because I didn’t do my job, or maybe he doesn’t know what the poet William Matthews said: “The depth is in the surface.” It’s not about the Raisin Bran, but what the Raisin Bran represents.

Or maybe it is just about the Raisin Bran. It’s been said that “the devil is in the details,” but so is God and man and everything else we know and question about ourselves and our existence. People read stories to discover truths they can’t put into words, and the only way for a writer to discuss those truths without getting preachy is to use concrete details as vehicles to convey them—whether that’s a box of cereal or a tattered armchair or a look between two people watching a sunset. Our lives are jigsaw puzzles of small objects and simple actions, and we hardly notice most of them. The writer’s task, first and foremost, is to notice. To notice, and then to report what’s worth retelling, what holds significance beyond the world of the page.