

*A  
Story Teller's  
Story*

*SHERWOOD ANDERSON*

*Introduction by Thomas Lynch*

The tale of an American writer's journey through his own imaginative world and through the world of facts, with many of his experiences and impressions among other writers—told in many notes—in four books—and an Epilogue



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TO ALFRED STIEGLITZ,  
*who has been more than father to so many puzzled,  
wistful children of the arts in this big, noisy, growing and  
groping America, this book is gratefully dedicated.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Living in fiction can be habit forming: that sort of affliction by which everyone and everything become fixtures in the theater of one's own invention. Once started, it is hard to stop—like Saturday matinees—the plush seats, lights dimming; the velvety curtains open to an audience bathed in big-screen, cinematic light, wide-eyed and agape. The humdrum, sunlit lives of townspeople and neighbors, occasional strangers and passersby out on the pavement become suddenly novel, shaded and exotic. The flat-lines of happenstance and routine are sharpened into narrative arcs of intrigue and adventure. The fictionist's addiction is to “fancy,” to borrow Sherwood Anderson's word—a craving for contingency and serendipity, a cast of characters to rescue the everyday from its ordinariness.

*A family of five boys and two girls—a mother who is to die, outworn and done for at thirty—*

*A father, whose blood and whose temperament I am to carry to the end of my days. How futile he was—in his physical life as a man in America in his time—what dreams he must have had!*

*There was a dream he had of something magnificent—a lone rider on a horse, dressed in shining armor and riding in a city before a vast multitude of people—the beating of drums . . . “The man—he comes! Hurra!” People who live their lives by facts can never understand such a fellow. “He comes! All hail!” What has he done? Well, never*

*mind—something grand, you may be sure of that. The dream that never can become a fact in life can become a fact in fancy.* (Book I, Note II, p. 25)

The voice of the soliloquist—alone, stage left, a single beam of light—amplifies the drama of *A Story Teller's Story*, as does the persistent theme of escape, from an America of fact and factories, marketing and manufacturing, to the borderless Ohio of imagination and creation. Part manifesto, part reverie, part romance, it is full of scene-sets, stage directions, vignettes, and “moments,” beginning with a mid-American, late-nineteenth-century boyhood and closing with a man in middle age, ten years into his writerly life, gaping and gobsmacked at Chartres Cathedral. An epilogue replays what seems a never-ending struggle in the writer's life between “the fanciful” and “the physical,” between the work one does for a living and the work one does to be alive, between the “futile” and “magnificent,” the transcendent and mundane, between the jobber and the artist, between his father's legacy as a ne'er-do-well and his triumph as a story-teller, between life's facts and fictions.

The facts of Sherwood Anderson are these: he was born in Camden, Ohio, on September 13, 1876. He had an “irregular” education. His mother died when he was nineteen. His father was a “rather loveable waster.” After several odd jobs and a brief tour of duty with the U.S. Army at the end of the Spanish-American War, Sherwood Anderson went to work in Chicago writing ad copy. He married Cornelia Lane in his late twenties, fathered three children, and settled briefly in Elyria, Ohio, where he owned and operated the Anderson Manufacturing Company, a paint distributor and roofing products firm. After five years as a small town

business mogul, on November 28, 1912, he walked out of his office and turned up four days later in Cleveland, dazed and disheveled. Soon after, he left his business, his wife, and children and moved to Chicago to begin a literary career. He spent the rest of his life writing novels and stories, poems and memoirs. He was married four times, divorced three times, made two trips to Europe, and traveled around America. He settled in Marion, Virginia, bought up a pair of local newspapers, and watched his literary star fade over time while men he had mentored, Hemingway and Faulkner, rose to greater and greater prominence. On a trip to South America, he fell ill with peritonitis, which resulted from a bit of a toothpick perforating his stomach. (He'd had a few martinis at the bon voyage party in New York the week before.) He died on March 8, 1941, in the Panama Canal Zone. He was brought back to Marion for burial. He was sixty-four.

He was thirty-six that Thursday, the 28th of November, 1912, when he escaped the paint factory. Variouslly described as a nervous breakdown, a midlife crisis, or according to Kim Townsend's 1987 biography, a "fugue state," the moment is an important watershed. And if the borders between fact and fiction in Anderson's own account of it are blurred, such shifting borders mark the whole of his canon. Today we might call much of his work "creative non-fiction": a skewing of the truth to show things as they are.

*It is the sort of thing that makes autobiography, even of the half-playful sort I am now attempting, so difficult to manage. One wants to treat oneself as a person of more dignity and worth than one has the courage to attempt. Among advertising men with whom I later associated we managed things better. We took turns doing what we called*

*“staging” each other. I was to speak highly of Smith who in turn did the same of me. The trick is not unknown to literary men, but it is difficult to manage in autobiography. The self of the fancy persists in laughing at the self of fact and does it sometimes at unfortunate moments. Also the fancy is a great liar. How often later, when I became a man of business, I did in fancy some shrewd or notable act that was never done in fact at all, but that seemed so real that it was difficult not to believe in it as a fact. I had been talking with a certain man and later thought of a number of brilliant things I might have said. Then I met a friend and told him of the conversation, putting the brilliant things in. The story several times repeated became a part of the history of my life and nothing would have later so amazed me as to have been compelled to face the facts of the conversation and the figure I had cut in it. (Book II, Note XI, pp. 257–58)*

Such honesty—to fess up to one’s penchant for fibs—is central to a story-teller’s story. As presented in this passage written in Reno in 1923, the “authentic” liar has been enriched and ennobled under the “authority” assumed by every writer. Anderson had left New York and taken the train west in February to establish residency there for the purpose of securing a quick divorce from his second wife, Tennessee Mitchell, from whom he’d separated the year before. He’d lately fallen in love with Elizabeth Prall. In March he began a process of “inner distillation,” trying to make a case for the artist as the most manful of American men, with his own odyssey as a model. The lifelong cycle of work, routine, escape (by flight of fancy to a new life and a new wife), relocation, remaking, and creation had by now established itself as Anderson’s method. Published in 1924

by B. W. Huebsch, five years after the publication of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson's star shining as brightly in the literary firmament as it ever would, *A Story Teller's Story* came wrapped in a dust jacket that proclaimed, "Our best story teller here tells his best story." It is the father's affliction, the fictionist's gift, by which this autobiography is proffered as "author-ized" biography.

This lifelong tension between what Anderson regarded as the dull life of commerce, small town industry, and gainful labor and the rich life of the story-teller's art and soul informs so much of the writer's life and fiction. He belonged to a generation of men defined by and, in Anderson's estimation, confined to their jobs. Farmer, businessman, soldier, grocer, senator, salesman, doctor, priest—all were indentured, encumbered, stunted by their occupational identity and the public's expectations of them: cogs in a heartless machinery rather than characters in heroic tales. And though his fiction is famous for giving voice to the private, silent lives of such characters, and though the rags-to-riches stories of Rockefeller and Garfield filled his youth and formed his notions of "success," he might never have imagined an Ohio or America where cops sang opera, wrestlers became governors, actors became presidents, and poets—Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams in his own generation—held down day jobs that did not subtract from their "real" work. Stevens, a successful insurance lawyer, saw a solid relationship between poetry and surety claims. Both, he argued, involved calculated risk. For Stevens the daily grind was good for the imagination. Dr. Williams, who early on decided on a dual career as physician and poet and saw medicine as "the thing which gained me entrance to these secret gardens of the self," would leave his office in

Rutherford, New Jersey, where he treated poor urban immigrants and children to weekend among writers and artists in New York. To be at once doctor and poet were, for Williams, elements of the one "practice."

Not so for the artist stuck in the paint factory for whom occupation and preoccupation were zero-sum games. Stuck in middle America, in middle age, in a marriage grown dull with duty and detail, pestered by kids and cash-flow troubles and the memory of his own father's vexations, he saw his options as "either/or." By Anderson's romantic lights, a father's failings as husband and provider are redeemed by his charms as a "teller of tales." That one might do both well only occurred to him later in life.

In the years that immediately followed *A Story Teller's Story*, Sherwood Anderson bought farmland beside Ripshin Creek in Troutdale, Virginia. He built a fieldstone house he called Ripshin and bought up two newspapers in a neighboring county and served for a few years as their editor before turning them over to his son, Robert. (I am indebted to Don Francis of Marion, Virginia, for his writings about Anderson's life and times in Smyth County.) This escape to southwest Virginia in 1925, he explained in a column in the newspaper, was because he "had grown tired of city life and wanted the quiet intimacy of life in a smaller place." He felt pressured to produce more fiction, and in a letter he wrote, "I am taking this step (to buy two newspapers) for two reasons: first, to free myself from the immediate necessity of living by my pen, and then to get back into closer association with all kinds of people in their everyday lives." Life among writers and artists and the inspirations of French cathedrals notwithstanding, he was evidently more inspired by Kiwanians and Rotarians, housewives and local heroes.

He even created a fictional reporter, Buck Fever, who held forth on matters large and small.

He married well and happily in 1933 to Eleanor Copenhaver (his fourth, her first), a prominent native of Marion, Virginia, and a labor activist with the YWCA. She was nineteen years younger, brainier and more passionate, and had a life of her own devoted to causes other than him. In the Townsend biography there is a photo of Eleanor and Sherwood taken in Boulder, Colorado, in August of 1937. They are a handsome couple, smiling broadly. Speaking that week to the writers' conference at the University of Colorado, he opened his remarks with this admission:

*I presume that all writers, and particularly the story teller type of writer, is inevitably also something of an actor. I know I am. I think I have always tried to set for myself certain parts I am to play in life. I have tried to conceal this fact as much as possible, but almost all of my intimate friends are on to me. Some of the roles I have set for myself in life I have played miserably, and others I think I have played pretty well. I am so much the actor that often I ask myself the question—"Is there really any such person as Sherwood Anderson?"*

The house lights dim, the curtain parts, the shadow of the soliloquist entrances stage left as the light beam widens around the voice. The Saturday matinee of imagination begins.

When he died some few years later in Colon, Panama, back in Ohio the *Elyria Chronicle Telegram* got it wrong when their obituarist wrote "Sherwood Anderson, Former Elyria Manufacturer, Dies." He was really a writer. That was

the part he played best of all—as he called it in careful Ohioan, “pretty well.” Of course, the real Sherwood Anderson lives on as writers do, inhabiting the characters and dramas of his own creation, including the several created here, in *A Story Teller’s Story*. And we can be grateful, permanently so, we readers and writers and workaday sorts, for our reintroduction to this wonderful text.