

The Tsar of Love and Techno: Stories¹

Anthony Marra

Kurt Vonnegut's Eighth "Basic Rule of Creative Writing" states,

Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To hell with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

In *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, Anthony Marra's second book and first collection of short stories, the author violates Vonnegut's rule by introducing characters in fragmentary asides and withholding the characters' history until later stories. Characters may appear out of chronological sequence in fleeting memories or in passing narration within a larger event.

A fan of Marra since his first novel² (I survived the violence although several characters did not), I wrote this essay to explore how the author employs a non-linear timeline to transition characters from reference to reality.

Non-linear Timeline

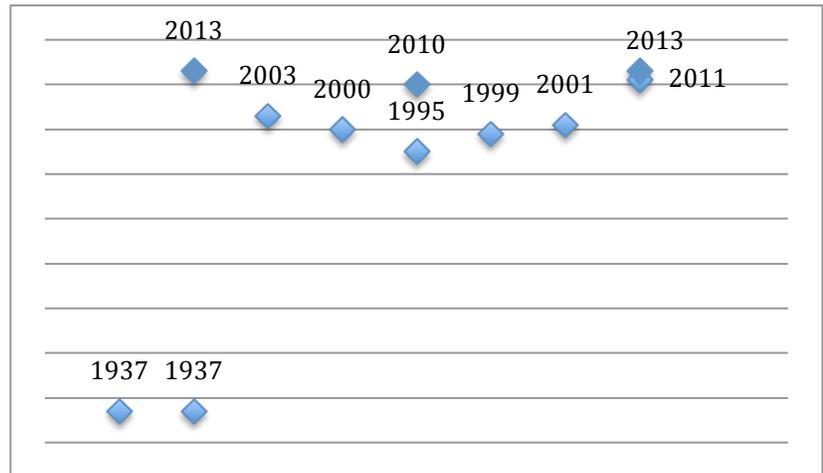
The collection's first eight stories begin and end at...well...the beginning and the end of the collection's timeframe: 1937 and 2013³ as shown in the following chart.

¹ Hogarth (Penguin Random House LLC), New York, 2015

² Authors interested in the craft of future-story should study Marra's first novel: *A*

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The second story, “Granddaughters,” set in 1937 and 2013, miniaturizes the collection’s progression and serves as the transition from the past to the near present. The middle stories move from the mid-1990s and 2010.



Marra uses stories first in sequence but set in a later time to comment on events that have not yet been revealed.

When the present precedes the past, not-yet-experienced incidents are presented as fact and common knowledge.

The following pages trace three characters’ delayed reveal across five of the collection’s stories.

COLLECTION OVERVIEW AND SELECTED CHARACTERS

Stories, Time & Characters	Time	Irina (ballerina)	Lydia	Vera
The Leopard	1937	Mention		
Granddaughters (Part 1)	1937	Reveal		
Granddaughters (Part 2)	2013		Name	Name
The Tsar of Love and Techno (Part 1)	2010		Mention	Mention
Wolf of White Forest	1999		Reveal	Reveal
A Temporary Exhibition	2013	Name		

³ The final story, “The End,” is an undated fantasy and is not considered.

The Leopard – Story 1

“The Leopard,” takes place in 1937 near the end of the Soviet Great Purge. Roman Markin, an apparatchik artist, erases newly designated traitors from paintings and photographs. Certain his bosses care only what is removed, not what is added; Roman inserts postage-stamp-sized portraits of his purged brother Vaska in every adulterated scene.

Assigned to airbrush an unnamed ballerina from a photograph, Roman hesitates, realizing that when the photo was taken she, “still has a tutu, tights, a full house, roses in water and champagne on ice in her dressing room. Still has a career. A home. A diploma. A birth certificate.” (Loc⁴ 199)

Roman adds his brother Vaska to her audience, but does not obliterate the ballerina. “The dancer’s left hand still dangles in the air...a single hand waving for help, waving good-bye, applauding no one...” (Loc 268) Her floating hand assumes center stage as evidence when Roman is falsely convicted of treason.

Granddaughters – Story 2

Set in the collection’s present (2013,) “Granddaughters” assigns the unnamed ballerina a second role as Galina’s grandmother. After recalling the grandmother’s decade (1937-1947) in a forced labor camp, the story moves to Galina’s past, her desire to dance in her grandmother’s toe shoes, her rise as the wife of the fourteenth richest man in Russia, and disgraced return to her hometown.

⁴ This essay is based on a Kindle publication. Lacking page numbers, “loc” will be used to identify the location of quotes.

“Granddaughters” introduces a member of Galina’s friends, an anonymous girl who “... left for America to marry a piano tuner she’d met online.” (Loc 879) Later, the girl is named with elaborating detail. “Lydia...had been one of us until she moved to Los Angeles to marry the piano tuner she had met online.” (Loc 998) Lydia is portrayed with begrudging respect for escaping her gray, cold hometown for the land of sun and citrus.

The narrator Lydia with her mother Vera’s youthful scandal: “Who has forgotten Vera Andreyevna, who unintentionally denounced her own mother, and was heralded in newspapers from Minsk to Vladivostok?” (Loc 787) Further on, “Surely you remember Vera, who as a child denounced her own mother to the NKVD?” (Loc 1000) Vera’s life is summarized without describing why or how she denounced her mother.

At this point, readers have built shadow puppets of the two women by role and action and are primed to layer flesh and motivation on their creations.

The Tsar of Love and Techno – Story 5

In “The Tsar of Love and Techno” (2010), Vera and Lydia are briefly discussed between friends:

“You heard about Lydia?’ I finally asked...

‘Yes,’ [Galina] said... ‘I’ve tried to make a film of her murder...’

‘It’s a tragedy,’ I said. ‘For Lydia, for Vera...’”. (Loc 1924-1947)

The hint of Lydia’s murder lingers until the next story.

Wolf of White Forest - Story 6

Set in 1999, Vera returns in “Wolf of White Forest,” recalling how she betrayed her mother—reporting the woman for stealing “a pouch of powdered eggs, a palmful of flour, and a cube of butter” (loc 2993) with which to make a birthday treat for Vera.

Jilted for a new mail order bride, Lydia returns home. As Vera betrayed her mother, Lydia betrays Vera by gossiping that her mother allows drug dealers to package cocaine in her kitchen.

Vera’s betrayal resulted in her mother’s death. But Vera’s story ends with Lydia kneeling on a frozen field, “...the breath carried from her body on the back of a bullet.” (Loc 3210)

A Temporary Exhibition – Story 8

The collection concludes in 2013 when a recurring character hosts “A Temporary Exhibition” of Roman’s censored artwork. Wall cards next to “before” and “after” reprints of the ballerina’s mutilated photograph name her, Galina’s grandmother, as “Irina Portnova ... prima ballerina of the Kirov Ballet.” (Loc 4054) The woman whose dismembered hand launched the collection is named more than seventy years after her photo was taken.

Summary

Linked story collections are not new: Sherwood Anderson established the genre in 1919 with *Winesburg, Ohio*. In *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, Marra reenergizes the form

through a disjointed timeline and characters introduced without full disclosure—
characters who step forward only when the stage/story is fully their own.

Marra's non-linear timeline allows glimpses of characters to coalesce in readers' minds with an impression of having existed and the vague feeling that they will be important in the future. When foretastes evolve into scene, characters are received as intimates with readers primed to learn more.