

Weird Stories: Time Experiments

One of the most distinctive things about Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* is its approach to the passage of time. In the beginning of the novel, time advances at a crawl, with each day taking up dozens of pages. By the end, time is flying by, with years passing in an instant. The result is a sensation of being sucked into some kind of inescapable vortex—the momentum of the book is downhill, and what feels at the outset like an obsessively controlled narrative eventually proves to be a headlong tumble. What Hans Castorp, the protagonist, is tumbling into is the First World War—the surreptitious driving force of the entire book.

The passage of time is not often something we consciously consider when framing a story—yet it is instrumental in how events in a story are received. Even in a conventional story, time is not necessarily linear, nor does it flow smoothly; it flows into little eddies, where it swirls around, lingering in certain moments; or it dashes past presumably unimportant events, eating up months or years in a sentence.

Here's an exercise that will force us to consider time head-on. Choose a time “template” from the list below and write a few pages based upon it.

- 1) A story about a particular event which presents related events in the distant past, and related events in the distant future, but not the primary event itself.
- 2) A story in which time runs backwards.
- 3) A story in which time is fluid—that is, it can reverse direction, slow down or speed up, at will.
- 4) A story that takes place in a single moment. (See George Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, an entire novel—and a very long one—that takes place in a single moment.)
- 5) A story that spans two hundred years.
- 6) A story that presents a world in which time travel is routine, requires no special technology, and is used for even the most mundane tasks, like buying movie tickets or calling out for pizza.
- 7) A story whose narrator is incapable of perceiving the passage of time.
- 8) A story in which cause and effect are reversed.
- 9) A story in which important scenes are dispensed with in a single sentence, and unimportant ones are drawn out.

ALTERNATELY:

Draw a “time map” or a story or novel you think is interestingly structured.