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Behind the short story

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What are the pleasures of writing and reading short fiction?

Tony Birch: Once I have been attracted to an idea for a story, which may come from a brief comment somebody makes, to something I see on the street or tram on my way to work, I enjoy building the story in my head; that is the architecture of the story. I will tend to do that for several weeks without writing a word down. Then when it comes time to sit down and write I am generally confident of an outcome. I will write a first draft in one sitting, and by the end of the day I will know if it has legs or if it's a dog. If I have thought enough about the story beforehand, it usually works. It is a real pleasure at the end of that day to know that I have a draft that has a good chance of working.

There are particular short stories that I regard as my all time favourite pieces of writing. Canadian writer Alistair Macleod's 'The Boat' is a loved piece.

Jen Webb: I write short stories because I have just one thing to say, and because the manner of saying matters perhaps more than what is being said. I write them too because, in a busy life, I can make a short story, a whole beginning-middle-and-end work, and spend time on it, polish it, and get it to the point where I can let it go without it taking over my whole life; and I can work on a number of short stories at once, and move between them when one stops feeling right.

I read short stories because I can be completely caught up in a fragment of life, and that tiny fragment becomes so important and so real. The pleasure is in the rush of impact in such a short space: being utterly propelled from line to line and knowing that because it's short I can entirely give myself over to it. Immersing myself in something small but dense. It's like looking at a painting, or hearing an aria: something that is here, then gone, but lingers with you. It's that old saw that I think comes from Edgar Allan Poe: a short story must have a single and unique effect and that every word and every sentence should matter. It is that focus on language and poise that matters to me.

How would you define or describe the genre of the short story?

TB: I like to think that we sometimes walk into a short story at a point where something has come beforehand, but we're not sure what it is, and we may leave before the end, or there is no end. Having said that, as someone who believes there are no rules to either reading or writing, only guidelines, some short stories are not constructed in this way at all, and can be equally as good, and more of a challenge.

JW: When I was teaching the short story, I used to describe it to my students as a narrative; rarely over 10,000 words or below 750, more commonly 1,500-5,000; to be read at a single sitting, but with enough time and weight to move the reader; focused to produce a singular effect; closer to poetry than to the novel; all aspects closely integrated and reinforcing one another: language, tone, mood, point of view, rhythm etc. For myself, I would add that a short story doesn't have to be story as such—that is, something with a plot, something with a beginning, middle and end. More satisfying for me are works that avoid conventional story, and instead are really prose-based explorations—moods, sketches, ideas, portraits, suggestions ...

How would you describe the style of your stories?

TB: I am a realist as such, stylistically. But realism is a misunderstood term and genre within Literary Studies today, and I would question it. Some of the uber cool posties sneer at it, but they're usually guided by superficial academic reading that suits a contemporary academic political discourse, or rather a lack of politics. Why is 'social realism' used so commonly about Australian and British working-class writing, and not North American writing? And why, when Australian writers of a middle-class background reflect their own lives and their upbringing are they referred to more commonly as 'beautiful writers' rather than realists? The most recent story I have published, 'Gifted' (*Overland* 184, 2006), is very realist in style. But one of the characters in the story steals all the junk mail in his street, creates a gigantic papier-mâché bath and builds perfect models of Morris Minor cars (all painted baby blue) before returning them to the NO JUNK MAIL letter boxes. That's not exactly a realist narrative.

'Realism' or 'social realism' (if it has to be called such) was traditionally an ideological genre. I'm not a self-conscious ideological writer. Joe Stalin has been dead a long time. And when I want to make a political point I get out there on the street and make it immediately rather than wait for my stories to trickle down to the proletariat and whip them into a revolutionary frenzy.

JW: I think my stories are mostly naturalistic with some magic-realist elements. I don't think I need to put everything in place story-wise (plot-wise) or that I need to adhere to a particular style or genre. Rather, I like to find a lyrical sort of voice, and use that to talk it through, whatever the 'it' might be. As for genre: I suspect the pieces in *Ways of Getting By* approach the genre of speculative fiction, but I didn't really write them with that in mind. I'm interested in people and in possibilities—the sense that anything can happen. Like many writers, I imagine a somebody, and then imagine how they might react to a something, and then I write about that. Sometimes that forces the story into a genre mould (life writing; speculative fiction; tragicomedy). More than style or genre, I like to think about language—about the pace of sentences, the juxtaposition of words against each other, about sound and image.

Do you think you are writing within a tradition and if so, can you talk about what that tradition is and which writers are placed within it?

TB: I am not experimental; my stories are plot and character driven; and I believe in the idea of creating a story that will grab and hold a reader. There are no writers who are obviously influential in a stylistic way, but I will always re-read pieces that I love just to remind myself what it is that good writers can do, and that I still have a long way to go to write at my best, which is a necessary challenge for me.

JW: I suspect that locating work within a tradition is more the sort of thing that literary scholars do than writers think about when making their work. If there is a tradition where I might at least have visiting rights, I guess it would be in the 'women's writing' school: I certainly have read a lot of women writers (growing up on people like Nadine Gordimer, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, etc) but I also read masses of other (male) writers, lots of poetry as well as novels, and heard lots of oral stories. I grew up in South Africa at a period when there was no TV in the country, so stories came from movies and theatre, the vast majority from radio and from being read to, and from listening to stories and yarns

told by adults in my environment. As a kid I also absolutely gobbled up stories about animals, which, at least for kids, are invariably hugely tear-jerking; and I think my taste for a bleaker approach to story might have been set by that, and heightened by my preference for mostly American writers (mostly male)—Ernest Hemingway’s minimalist sorrows, Raymond Carver’s curt hopelessness, Donald Barthelme’s loony visions, the more florid rushes of the Latin American magic realists and the Rushdie-esque ‘chutnified’ english. (I came to Australia as an adult, so my tastebuds weren’t set by Australian idiom and styles, though since I’ve been here I’ve read heaps of Australians, and admire many very much. But whatever I might think of US policies, I absolutely love US writing!)

You’ve written a collection of interlinked stories, not a collection of disparate pieces. What is the impulse, and procedure, behind this?

TB: The stories did not begin that way. There were six linked stories, where the central character, 'Michael', provides us with an insight into the landscapes of his childhood through quite specific and self-contained narratives (they’re a version of an urban parable, a narrative of place within an urban setting, with particular reference to postwar modernism, the unravelling of order within urban landscapes that are inherently contested and potentially destructive). That’s what I wanted those stories to achieve. It’s important to note that four of them were published individually, as self-contained stories. So at the point of writing them I did structure them as both stand-alone pieces, and stories that led (back and forward) into each other. When I put the collection together, I re-wrote two other published stories, 'The Red House' and 'Ashes', into the sequence, and wrote two new stories, 'A Disposable Good' and 'Redemption'. I also wrote each of the existing stories again from scratch, so that I would maintain an evenness of pace and tone.

JW: I didn’t actually set out to write a collection of interlinked stories, but when I looked back on a few years of production, it seemed to me that that is what I had done. Perhaps it happened because of a certain economy of effort ('Right, I can do that—I’ll just keep doing it!') or because I was trying to work something out. The impulse behind seeking to have them published as an interlinked collection was to focus on that ‘thing’ I was trying to explore, and to set each of those stories in a context. The procedure was long, arduous and very complicated. I began by arranging the stories that fitted together into a series, and then I dumped those that seemed to be going over the same ground, or that I thought weren’t working well enough, and then wrote a few more to fill in the gaps. I also did some pretty aggressive rewriting on at least some of the stories, to ensure that they did flow one to the other, and to bring out more the ongoing threads across the whole collection.

Using a therapist as the central figure was a deliberate intention when I reworked for a collection—she had been there in two or three of the stories in their original form, and I thought she was the right person to narrate these people’s lives and struggles. Her own struggles are there too.

What is the setting, the time and place of your stories?

TB: The stories work to map a particular landscape and time—inner Melbourne from the mid sixties until the end of the century. But I know from the generous comments I have

received from readers that the themes in the stories are also universal, particularly in relationship to boys and their fathers, and the emotional damage caused by displacement (that may be felt specifically, and in a tactile way, and may be more psychologically experienced—unconsciously, an abstraction). Within a global culture, the emotional resonances are common to many of us.

JW: I see this collection as located in a dystopic quasi-future, here in Australia or in quasi-Australia.

Much of it was written either while I was living in Central Queensland, or later remembering (reprocessing) my time there and the things I saw, heard and experienced, so CQ is in many ways the springboard for place. It seems to me a place that occupies a different time from the rest of Australia—not really past or future tense, but alongside the rest of the country. It is such a devastating place, environmentally, and that has informed the image or the feel of some of the stories. People I knew had died—especially, suicided; deaths in the local mine disaster; my own depression at the time; dead animals all over the outback; environmental decay; climate change and what it threatens; the disturbed and disturbing weather patterns in tropical Queensland; the bush fires in the ACT in 2003; the collapse of the rural economy in Queensland and elsewhere; the One Nation discourse; escalating global tensions ...

I am discouraged very often by how difficult it is for people to care about what is going on around them. So this sort of almost sci-fi, almost futuristic landscape seemed the right sort of setting for general grinding down of people and things. The age, then, is not our age, but a parallel-present: a here and now that could easily be sharing our values, patterns of interaction, systems of government, ordinary lifestyle, but experiencing the after-effects of a major catastrophe that has made the country, if not uninhabitable, at least terribly uncomfortable.

While in both collections there's a sense of struggle, there's also a sense of hope. Can you talk about this?

TB: I think this theme is there clearly within the book: the way out for me, and I don't mean the way out of my 'background', I don't have a background, was books. Books, and I mean fiction and poetry, taught me that the world is a more complex place than black and white, good and bad. The culture that I grew up in was both very protective and very destructive; beautiful and tragic. These descriptions appear to be contradictions; actions appear to be hypocritical. But they are not. They reflect the complexities of life, and where I came from there was either no attempt, or no potential, to hide that. I am glad I grew up that way. Books, and the formation of experiences of the human condition contained in them, helped me to make sense, at times, of a nonsensical world. And I have that still. I realise now that there are times when you have a disagreement with another person that it is important to be reasonable, to negotiate a position, to hear the other person out. But sometimes they are simply being an arsehole, and the only thing to say to them is 'fuck off.' Growing up the way I did taught me that, not the politeness of a university education.

JW: Whether I intended to write ways of getting by—of implementing actions against despair—I don't know. I think I'm a bit of a Pollyanna who was, for some years, going

through depression and some major life changes and trying to figure it all out. Writing is a form of therapy, sometimes, and I wrote some of these stories to try to find reasons for going on, reasons for making things work, and therefore ways of making things work. The downbeat idea of simply 'getting by' rather than triumphing is very much part of my own philosophy, and also comes out of many conversations I've had with my brother, a psychologist, about learning ways to cope with one's own vicissitudes. Also, I didn't think I could leave the characters trapped in nothingness, and in no hope.

'Angel Dust' was a thought piece. I was fed up with the really bad journalism in the local press, and all the 'Oh my god!' headlines, and the presence of the loony right in the media. I was also very immersed in gender politics and its language, and all its multiple possibilities, contradictions and imperatives, and the impossibility of sexual/gender relations ever being measurable according to one standard. I used to walk around the streets very late at night (insomnia!) and from time to time I'd see ridiculously young people out then, and thought about predators and parents etc. I don't really know why it was an angel who raped my young character, except perhaps because angel-sex must be more problematic, legally, than human-sex. Also, when I wrote it, angeldust was the drug-of-the-month for social reformers; and I was very interested in the idea of light and dark. One traditional notion of angels is that they are light—and yet we know from that same tradition that angels can be very bad indeed. So it was thinking about how people—especially young people, especially young women—are pinned by social 'truths', mores, laws and parental control, and how often they just want to piss it all off. And how when they do, things often go wrong for them. 'Jobhunting' has an improbability—maybe even an impossibility—at its heart. The thing that happens to people trying to find work at a period of high unemployment, the melding into each other, is imaginary, but it is also an image of how things are. 'A Feeling for Machines' comes out of an attack I saw on a trolley boy, the effects of the 2003 fires, and a general feeling of depression I was experiencing. Like the other stories it's not really 'about' anything, except possibilities—good and bad.

Tony Birch, *Shadowboxing* (Scribe, 2006)

Jen Webb, *Ways of Getting By* (Ginninderra Press, 2006)