

## The Art of the Short Story

Yes, an unoriginal title, but then perhaps this addresses one of the first concerns - is it possible, or even desirable, to be original? Does originality miss the point, and if so, what is the point?

Surely, all that matters is that a story is enjoyable.

But few stories are enjoyable in a universal sense; that is, few stories exist which affect every reader the same positive way. Reading is an intensely personal experience. I can only talk about the short stories I love.

When I think of my favourites, I struggle to find a common denominator, aside from all being written in English. Some are compressed history, others are slices of familial life, or a particular kind of day, or simply a stream of consciousness. Some are autobiographical, others are clearly imaginative. They are written by both genders, with and without resolutions, conclusions, or epiphanies.

But there is this sense, with all these stories, that what is important are the not dramatic events themselves, but the moments leading up to them, and the days, months and years later. Anticipation and memory. Imagination and nostalgia. These authors recognise, and salute, that most puzzling and maddening of human traits – the periodic inability to experience the present, in the present. All those movies and novels which show people weeping on cue or smiling warmly and wisely at appropriate moments collude in the conspiracy that our hearts' most genuine responses are always during the dramatic moments themselves.

Not so!

Think of that final poignant scene from *Brokeback Mountain*, with Ennis buttoning up Jack's shirt, and saying: *Jack, I swear...* That is all he needs to say, we understand perfectly his belated passionate commitment to his lover.

We are essentially slow creatures, and can take decades to fully respond to events, as in *A Story of Folding and Unfolding* by Ali Smith – a man remembering how he met his recently dead wife. We can also spend lengthy periods anticipating the future, as in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* by Hemingway – a sick man considering his imminent death. Freed from the burden of plot and resolution, short stories are the perfect vehicle for these less dramatic moments. They can pivot on a single glimpse of an unguarded character's reaction.

At the end of the day, what all writers tell us is simply what it is like to be them. To perceive the world through their eyes. And that is endlessly fascinating of course, because we're alone and hoping that we're at least a bit like other people. It's the moments of secret recognition that move me. When a writer accurately and dispassionately conveys some seemingly inexpressible emotion lurking in my heart, I want to phone them up and invite them for a five course dinner. I momentarily want to marry them.

But how do good stories work? Sometimes they lower your guard, then deliver that sharp punch you keep going back for. A delicious sadness. Consider, for example, *A Small, Good Thing* by Raymond Carver. The narrator explains, un-dramatically, that a boy has been hit by a car on the way to school and ends up in a coma. It happens to be the boy's birthday, and the mother has ordered a cake from the bakery. Most writers would focus on the boy, or the mother or father, but Carver decides to approach the event sideways. He tells us about the baker who has never met the boy. The baker is fed up because no one has collected the cake he's so carefully baked and iced. He feels used, tricked, betrayed. He begins phoning the boy's house, leaving threatening anonymous messages. The reader is forced to think about the baker's lonely and exhausting life, and forgets the boy. The parents eventually understand who is leaving rude messages, and in their hour of numb grief, march to the bakery to confront this monster. When the baker hears their story, he's quiet, then serves them warm rolls from the oven and some hot coffee. This is the small good thing he can do for them. And, like the baker, the reader has no defences against sudden sadness, because he's been thinking about something else. He forgot to brace himself against a child's sudden death.

Sadness in life is terrible, of course, but sadness in fiction is a good thing. Happiness is good too, obviously, but harder to achieve. Happiness is something we rarely know we possess, till years later. The trick is to twist some hope into sadness or nostalgia. And it has to be realistic hope; hope without sentimentality. Carver is king of unsentimental poignancy, and I deliberately set out to be like him. I mostly fail of course, but give him credit whenever restraint wins over gushing.

All writers are influenced by other writers.

Back and back it goes, until one can imagine Chaucer admitting that, ever since he read *The Bible*, he'd been wanting to write something about mortality, and maybe try a similar structure as John the Baptist. I wrote a story a long time ago that was influenced by *A Small, Good Thing*. My story, *A Dangerous Place*, was rejected dozens of times. Then it sat in a file on my computer for a decade. Finally, in a moment of impulse I sent it to the V.S.Pritchett Prize competition and it won. I loved it, so wasn't surprised it won - but I also understood competitions are quite random, and I was just lucky for a change.

Like most stories, it began with a germ of truth. A boy I knew in California, when we were both 16, died in a car accident. The fact his family were British made it sadder. I decided the boy would not die in my story. I would focus on the physical manifestations of emotion in his parents, and the fact of their being in a foreign country. I would also describe the driver who killed him. I made it up. I'd never known his parents or the other driver. My clear goal was to make the reader as sad as possible, and I began by describing the domestic details of a house suddenly hit by tragedy. I over-wrote, and deleted about half. Then I trimmed it more, and experimented with the ending before settling for the sound of crickets at dawn. When I imagined people reading it, I pictured them entering my house, and I had an overwhelming urge to make them feel at home. That was the mood I was in while writing it.

When I consider the short story form, I see it a logical compromise between the sincerity of a poem and the artifice of a novel. A novel cannot dwell simply on moments; it needs dramatic twists and turns to serve the plot. A poem is better suited for peripheral moments, but most lack sheer reader-time to achieve this end satisfactorily. But a good short story must be like a poem; every word must count. And it must be like a novel; the reader must lose themselves, albeit briefly, in entirely different lives.

Perhaps the genres are not so different. A good short story has most things a good novel or poem has. It emotionally engages you. You're sorry when it ends. You feel as if you know the author. You may never re-read it, but you'll never forget it. It may even become so familiar, you'll wonder some days if it happened to you. You'll tell other people to read it, in order to better understand marriage, or death, or mental illness. Sometimes you haven't even read it. A friend summarised a Carol Shields short story to me once, about a wife hiding in the garden rather than confronting her husband with her awareness of his affair. This picture stayed with me, and a few years later I wrote *Stepping Out*, the title story of my collection.

I don't feel guilty about using an idea from Carol Shields or a style from Raymond Carver anymore than I feel guilty for writing about a family holiday we had in 1967. No one ultimately owns stories, and styles can never really be stolen. They can only be assimilated into one's own style. If one avoided using everything one had experienced, everything one's family and friends had experienced, everything one had read or seen on television or a movie, then one would be left with maybe three things to write about. Maybe just two. And the longer you live, the more any effort to not draw from life becomes ludicrous.

I began writing novels because no one would publish my collection of short stories. My favourite novels are written like a series of short stories, each chapter self-sufficient, with its own logical rhythm. Carson MacCuller's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and Tim Pear's *In the Place of Fallen Leaves*, are two examples. Perhaps they too wrote novels because no one would publish their short story collections.

If poems are like flats, furnished minimally, novels are rambling houses, with endless sheds in the yard. And a short story is a compact cottage. Maybe two small attic bedrooms, and enough cupboard space to accommodate mystery. Just enough clutter to prickle my curiosity, but never so much that I feel confused. To my mind, the perfect size.