SOME SHORT THOUGHTS ON SOME SHORT THOUGHTS

Alan Bissett

WHAT IS A SHORT STORY?

The simple answer is that it's a piece of prose fiction that's not as long as a novella (the broad limits of which we'd probably place between 20,000 and 40,000 words) or a novel. But that's where the definitions end, for within that scope we can include all manner of beasts: from John Updike's dense, concentrated domestic dramas, to Franz Kafka's nightmarish surrealism or the echoing, spare, spaces of an Ernest Hemingway. Form, content, structure and voice are all up for grabs, meaning the diversity found across the range of short-stories is arguably greater than that across novels, regulated as the novel is by genre, market and marketing. Short-stories (perhaps because of rather than despite their lowly reputation amongst publishers) are where a writer can be free. Truly free. Of course, this is ironic, considering space constraints. and yet boundaries are broken and re-broken every day in that smallest corner of literature's party, that place where no-one is looking. Think of *Letters from Steven, a Dog, to Captains of Industry* by Dave Eggers, a series of, yes, letters from, yes, a dog to, yes, captains of industry. Think of *Acid* by James Kelman, that most shocking of his stories, all of six sentences long. Within the form can be contained the traditional - the fable, the ghost story, the fairy-tale - or the radical - Angela Carter's feminist revisionism in *The Bloody Chamber*, for example, or Clive Barker's groundbreaking sex-and-horror slide-show *The Books of Blood.*

TRAINING ACADEMY? NO, BUT A FEW RULES ALONG THE WAY

The short-story may be how a novelist learns his or her craft, and the place to where they retreat to stretch and grow and play and practice, but we should avoid thinking of the form as a mere training academy, or plucky little sister of the novel. The tradition of prose writers who've specialised almost solely in the short-story remains impressive: Anton Chekhov, Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, Edgar Allan Poe, and, more recently, Lorrie Moore, George Saunders and Ali Smith, whose short fiction confirms their reputation in tandem with or even in the absence of novels. Some of the most promising writers in the U.K. and U.S. have broken through (or are on the verge of doing

so) over short-stories which demonstrate a range and flexibility that the tidy, unitary vision of the novel disallows: Z.Z. Packer, Toby Litt, Anne Donovan, Colette Paul, Hannah McGill. And yet despite the many flavours on offer even within a single anthology, there are certain things which govern the short-story, certain ingredients or gelling agents which prevent the whole thing from dissolving into a gooey mass of tastes in the mouth. A canny writer will notice them, assimilate them, and use them as the basis for their experimentation, like the chords which underpin a jazz solo, rather than a constraining set of rules.

CONFLICT

Firstly, and most obviously, all drama thrives on conflict. This is the among the most basic advice ever given to writers (along with those hardy perennials, 'Write what you know,' and, 'Show don't tell'). Conflict, as a concept, is more elusive, less limiting, than its Fists of Fury connotations suggest. Conflict, in a story, almost never means violence. Conflict almost never means a raised hand or even voice. Just as in life, the most tense, unbearable scenes are when something unspoken is taking place between people, some issue or trauma, something awful which peeks and winks and hints from beneath the surface of everyday stuff. This is what a writer like Carver understands better than anyone. The conflict in his stories is so barely apparent, so inaudible, that we skip merrily through another frigid living-room scene often wondering if we've missed something. And yet it's so there. On the surface, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* is a story about two couples enjoying an afternoon whisky, discussing what love means to each of them, but growing gradually drunker. And that's all. Underneath the dialogue and smiling and hand-patting and reassurance, however, lies another story, one about the destructive, scouring, merciless nature of love, one in which each of these characters is at war with the others and themselves. Carver suggests this other story subtly, in a glance between husband and wife, in a character picking up and putting down a bottle, in the fading quality of light in the room, but nonetheless he is only putting on paper that same sense and perceptiveness that we use in real life to gauge the mood, thoughts and motivations of the people around us, using only bare, surface clues of their tone of voice, body language, clothing, dialogue, atmosphere. For Carver, it is possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language to endow these things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power. So the 'conflict' may be something as dramatic as a woman fighting

against domestic imprisonment and growing insanity (as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper') or something as low-key as a model yearning to eat a dessert in Helen Dunmore's 'Ice Cream'. But in each case we have a character engaged in struggle, in opposition to other characters, in a position of weakness or moral quandary.

AN ENDING IN SIGHT

All creative choices – of point-of-view, tense, voice, style, structure – enhance the quality of the reading experience, but it is the central drama within the protagonist which drives the narrative, gives it energy, fire, *raison d'etre*. The ending of the story, as such, requires some kind of resolution to the drama. This again is often misinterpreted, as 'resolution' in the literary story is rarely so ham-fisted or obvious as characters shaking hands and agreeing to disagree, or a piano being dropped onto the head of the villain. Aristotle had a word for what is required of the dramatist at the story's end, hamaratias, in which the fate of a character is linked to their decisions, and so fitting. At a basic level, a protagonist such as Macbeth, who when given a moral choice makes all the wrong moves, finds himself damned at the close of day, just as Hamlet, who chooses to face rather than embrace corruption, is vindicated in death. Characters, even in the limited space of the short story, are taken on a journey, however small, and end in an emotional state different to the one from which they began. The main character of Chekhov's *The Lady With the Dog* transforms over a few thousand words from a pragmatic, even-handed civil-servant into a ruined, beleagured, lovelorn fool. The change, the resolution, need not be so pronounced as this. Helen Dunmore's protagonist simply sticks a spoon into a mound of ice-cream, and eats, oblivious to the horror of her peers. But however your story ends, what should be suggested is some 'turn', some irreversible alteration in the character's fortunes, linked to the manner in which they have faced the central drama. And the more subtle and implied, this change, the better. Let your character light a fag, close a door, get into a car, buy a cat. All of these things can stand for the overall and final change in the drama, in the character.

THE FINISHING TOUCH

Which only leaves the last sentence. Just as the job of the fiction writer is to suggest the story beneath the story, the simmering and complex tensions existing below ordinary events, so too should she suggest the ending *after* the ending. That final line must resonate

way beyond the story's close, pointing towards some unseen future. Consider these, the last lines to some of my favourite short-stories, and the world beyond the story's border to which they act as signpost:

'I see its eyes!' – Michel Faber, *A Hole with Two Ends*

'And then they were upon her.' – Shirley Jackson, *The Lottery*

'I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.'
– Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

'Hear that sound? That's laughter, yes. That's me, laughing, yes, that's me.' – Doris Lessing, *How I Finally Lost My Heart*

Alan Bissett is an award-winning short story writer. His first novel, *Boyracers*, was published in 2002 by Polygon. He has just finished his second novel.