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Reading, Writing and Teaching the Short Story

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1. Preparing for the short story

Reference

Of the couple of dozen names of writers you might be expected to encounter during the exploration of the short story, special attention should be given to the following: Anton Chekhov (1860–1904, Russia); James Joyce (1882–1941, Ireland); Guy de Maupassant (1850–93, France); Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923, New Zealand); Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986, Argentina); Ernest Hemingway (1889–1961, USA); Jean Rhys (1894–1979, West Indies); J. D. Salinger (b. 1919, USA); Alice Munro (b. 1931, Canada); Donald Barthelme (1931–89); Raymond Carver (1938–88); Angela Carter (1940–92, Britain); T. Coreghassen Boyle (b. 1948, USA); Haruki Murakami (b. 1949, Japan); Mia Couto (b. 1955, Mozambique).

We can narrow this down to an arbitrary dozen or so stories to start with:

1. 'Lady with a Lapdog' (Chekhov)
2. 'The Dead' (Joyce)
3. 'Bliss' (Mansfield)
4. 'Hills Like White Elephants' (Hemingway)
5. 'Funes the Memorious' (Borges)
6. 'Mannequin' (Rhys)
7. 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish' (Salinger)
8. The 'Juliet' stories (Munro)
9. 'The Flight of Pigeons From the Palace' (Barthelme)
10. 'The Company of Wolves' (Carter)
11. 'Neighbours' (Carver)
12. 'The Elephant Vanishes' (Murakami)

How to read the short story – an overview

Most critics agree that the history of the short story can be made sense of by seeing its trajectory from the nineteenth century (Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov . . .) to the contemporary (Barthelme, Boyle . . .) as a move from naturalism (or, perhaps it's better to call it social

realism) to formal experimentation and forms of surrealism. Though the most challenging figures defy this easy categorisation, the familiar names from the past – for example Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield – seem to have a great deal in common with, say, Raymond Carver and his 'dirty realist' colleagues such as Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Andre Dubus – who seem to practise a pared down form of naturalism.

Nevertheless, everyone can agree that Borges (with a trail of magical realists in South and Central America behind him), challenged Aristotle's beginning, middle and end 'well-made' story concept, set in a world conforming to traditional logic. That is to say, a world view which assumes that if you accurately depict what's on the surface, you might usefully suggest or reveal what's under that surface.

Some people would claim the experience of the Second World War as ushering in a change of sensibility (see the rise of the Theatre of the Absurd in France). Others, like C. L. R. James, the West Indian Marxist historian and critic, would date the concept at the First World War, with the millions killed in the trenches having a coarsening effect on those who survived at home – 'barbarism' he called it. The theory is that at some point in the twentieth century something (Freud? World Wars? Concentration camps? Repressive regimes?) caused us to break faith with Aristotelian verities of the golden mean and an assumption of rationality and the claims of naturalism. The result? Psychological instability (Pirandello – his stories, his plays) and Symbolism in Italy – particularly in the fables of Italo Calvino (1923–85); magical realism in central and South America, the 'pop sociology' of Barthelme and the 'epic realism' of T. C. Boyle, and others.

2. Revision

We assume that by now you have written something. So, to start with, have you:

- properly identified the setting for your story
- established a character: who is s/he and what is s/he doing here
- actually told a story?

Now: if you were to change the setting, what else would need to change?

- Is the character or the setting more important to the telling of this story?
- Are there people, not shown, affected by the actions of characters in the story?
- How will you communicate this?

This brings us to the question of how the story relates to the world of the story. The world of the story is usually larger than the story which is set in that world. The trick of the story that has resonance is to suggest that larger world without having to flesh it out.

So, to start with Revision, means that the emphasis is going to be on the *writing* of the short story, and to do that successfully (consistently, as opposed to a lucky one-off), you need to read and you need to revise.

Revision is important as it concentrates the mind on the practice rather than the theory of story writing. The notion of revising is useful to the writer as it implies that whatever is written can usually be improved upon; and it helps that mental transition from being a consumer of texts (the casual, even the critical reader) to being a practitioner. Being a practitioner not only helps you to focus on the art (craft) of making, but it informs your reading of published work, and invites you to ask new questions of it.

Plucking a story almost at random from those above, let's consider for a moment Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants'. Nothing is spelt out in this excellent 'minimalist' story. It is cryptic, elliptical and, indeed, 'Hemingwayesque' to a degree. Briefly, a young man and woman are at a small railway station in Spain (they are not Spanish) waiting for a train. We pick up from their conversation at the bar/café that she is distressed and he is, in a sense, reassuring her. She is distressed because he wants her to do something that she doesn't particularly want to do (we think it's to have an abortion); she is asking (obliquely – or openly, according to your interpretation) for reassurance but he is emotionally incapable of providing it; and in the end she becomes hysterical and asks him to shut up.

Now, he is not only emotionally immature (or cruel) he is off-hand and impolite (to the waitress) and we begin to wonder why someone who comes across as unattractive to the reader still manages to hold on to the affections of the young woman. We want to have a view of them beyond and outside this sketch. Has the man's behaviour always been like this? If so, we must form a view of the young woman's judgement, and perhaps modify our impression that she is purely a victim. (Reread Chekhov's 'Lady with a Lapdog' with this in mind. Why does Anna, in that story, so seemingly privileged and not under threat choose unsuitable men as her husband and lover?) We might begin to ask ourselves why the lady in the Hemingway story willingly goes along with what seems like emotional abuse. But does she willingly go along with it? We don't know for sure, because there is no 'back' story; there is no hint that the man has been different at different times in the past or in different circumstances. Is it merely the pressure of the situation that makes him odd? We can go on speculating but, after a while, this is what we are doing: we are no longer reading the text. It is at this point that we might ask of this (excellent) piece of writing, if some slivers of 'back' story might not have clarified (rather than explained) it, might not have made it an even better story. This is an example, then, of how we might approach revision without prejudice to the excellence of the draft in front of us.

3. The opening paragraph

It doesn't do any harm to ask where stories come from and whether they need to grow out of your personal experience because we all, presumably, know things about ourselves that others don't, and we find some of these things interesting, or hilarious or painful enough to want to share them with others. (We do this all the time, in conversation, and are puzzled if our listeners don't react with interest or concern.) So one thing that drives the story might be the conviction that your experience is unique. Or it may be the opposite impulse, that what has happened to you is something shared by others. Either way, a narrative will, hopefully, bring the experience to the engaged attention of others. (Of course, if the writing is successful, you are likely to discover new things about yourself that you didn't quite 'know' – or want to acknowledge – at the start).

As you write you'll be pleased (or alarmed) to discover that there are no rules about where to start. Anything – a memory, a smell, a sound and, of course, an incident – might trigger a story. (A writer once said to me, 'I write because I want to answer back. They tell lies about me, about us; and I want to put the record straight'. Nothing much wrong with that, and the energy in wanting to put the record straight could usually be relied on to keep a narrative buoyant. But a writer of fiction – as opposed to one

of journalism, say, or documentary – must be careful to 'answer back' in ways that are not predictable.)

So to the mechanics of starting. Some writers – and the American Bernard Malamud comes to mind – present us with a mass of clues in the opening paragraph, each of which suggests a separate storyline. The effect of this being that we, the readers, are forewarned of the possible developments of the story almost before we get going, and this primes us as we read along. We won't, of course, make the same connections as the writer does, but the consciousness of hints being realised or not as we read, adds to the richness of experience for the reader (and to the text).

Talking of the opening paragraph, how about being playful and start your story where someone else's story ends? Not in the conventional way of adding to the previous writer's narrative but by working backwards. Take a short story collection down from your shelf, turn to the end of a story and read the final paragraph. Then reconstruct the story (a story) from that final paragraph. The aim isn't to second-guess the author, but to show how a narrative can be teased out by working back from a given ending. How will you know if you have succeeded? Having constructed your story by working backwards from another's ending, then – and only then – read the original story. Is it richer than your own reconstruction? If it is, revise. Or start again with another story. And again.

Finally, in talking about starting your story, I am attracted to something that the American dramatist, David Mamet once said in connection with putting a script together. 'Get in late, get out early'. The first part, 'Get in late', seems very useful advice for the short story. Assume that things have happened before your story opens. Then you have the option, during the writing of the story, to refer back to some of those things.

Before we illustrate let me stress that of course we can start, like many traditional novels start, with the birth of the hero and continue with a strict chronology of events (I'm thinking of, say, *Robinson Crusoe* here: 'I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York . . .'); but often we need a novel's length to do justice to that approach. So, granted that we don't have 70,000- plus words at our disposal in a short story, it is good to start farther on in the story and leave room for the 'back story' that can be dipped into at will.

Consider this opening:

> Mary lived in Manchester. She was a student. . .

This might be acceptable, because then we could be made interested in Mary, in her being a student; and in Manchester. But wouldn't it give us a greater sense of lift-off if we assumed more of the story before we started? For example:

> Mary was late for College again today. It took two buses from Openshaw . . .

Here, we add another storyline (the lateness) but more importantly we give the opening greater force, greater sense of buoyancy, by making Mary habitually late for College. (Is the – presumably – difficult journey from Openshaw a reason or excuse for lateness: how organised is Mary in other areas of her life?)

How does Mary deal with being late? Do we need to know what she is studying? Is she living away from home? Is she an influence on or more influenced by her friends? (How much of her world are we minded to bring in?)

Doesn't the specificity of Openshaw suggest the writer's greater intimacy (knowing something more about it) with the tale about to be told?

So, here are more 'getting in late' lines, at random, that might open up space (rather than shutting it down) for the story:

> On her first day/last day at university . . .
> She didn't want to go back to Huddersfield.
> She was looking forward to going back to Huddersfield.
> Her sister visited that weekend. (A sister, another story line; a lot of 'back story' to be dipped into . . .)
> She dreaded what would happen this weekend.
> She was packing to go home.
> The first time it happened she didn't know what to do.
> Michael saw her first.

In the first sentence she can contrast her first day at university with the time before university. Better still, if it were the last day she'd have not just her time before university to draw on and the prospect of what happens after university to speculate about, but she would have the university experience to explore (to look back on with relief or regret) to work into the narrative. Similarly, there is Huddersfield and there is time away from Huddersfield. You can compare/contrast, etc.

Look at the last example, 'Michael saw her first'. What are the possibilities for the narrative? Already there are three possible storylines. Michael's, the woman's, and the person who didn't see her first. If this was a question of a woman and two men, we might be talking of a tale of rivalry. Even if – though this is less likely – there are only two people involved, Michael and the woman, and that Michael saw her before she saw him, there are two storylines; and the decision to point out who sees whom first almost suggests parallel narratives (or levels of perception).

Another question here is 'Who is to tell the story?' It is sometimes useful to write the narrative from one person's point of view and, in revision, give the story (or bits of the story) to someone else, and in further revision, see which angle of telling is the more effective. You might push this technique to the limit and attempt multiple narration!

Exercise

Look at an opening paragraph of a typical Bernard Malamud story (where many story lines are introduced), and try that approach for yourself: that is, hinting at many storylines that might be woven into the story – or at least be seen, in retrospect, to frame or establish the larger world of the story.

By the time you have worked through these various challenges you will have a substantial amount of the story written down – enough to read over, reassess and revise.

4. Revision: 2 – paying attention to detail

Sometimes your prose isn't convincing because the scenes you try to invoke come over as being generalised, not specific. It is best to assume at this stage that a person is not like another person. See your character as an individual. Only when you've successfully done

that do the similarities with others reveal themselves. So, in revision, write some descriptions – as if you're doing a documentary – of some of the following. These needn't lead to stories, they are your equivalent to the pianist's five finger exercises.

Waking up (time, where, with/without whom?)
Using the bathroom (Sharing? Are things in the right place? What's your gaze like first thing in the morning?)
Breakfast (How is it organised?)
Starting the day (getting ready for school, college, office, shop, factory, etc.)
Lunch with a friend. (Describe the friend. Then imagine the friend describing you.)

Now, can you imagine someone who doesn't have access to most of the above? Is there a narrative to be teased out there? We're moving from observation to the use of the imagination.

5. Shape: structure and form

Structure

If structure is something to do with the chronology of events, then the idea of a journey or of a quest would seem a natural shape for a story. The story of a life is one we can all attempt. But this might consume too many words (a novel). So, how about: going to the supermarket/ hairdresser's/ train station and coming back (either immediately or after a gap in time). Think of one unusual thing that happens on the journey. How did you (the character) deal/fail to deal with it?

Many stories are about a quest, sometimes external, sometimes internal. That gives a shape or direction to the narrative: Will the character accomplish the quest? Who will frustrate or facilitate the exercise? And why?

When you re-read published stories are you impressed by those where the quest is *more* or *less* overt?

Building the story around an incident

An incident, for example, such as an encounter with a pickpocket or a burglar (in the house)? A potential rapist? But it needn't be grim: how about: an encounter with a future husband/wife/partner?

If art is a marriage of content and form, the art is the more sophisticated when content and form would seem to fit in a way that excites interest in its aliveness – the opposite of being mechanically correct. Some traditional forms, following the Aristotelian principle of *beginning, middle* and *end* work well (hunt out new examples). Some modern writers shuffle this order – end, beginning, middle; middle, end, beginning – or dispense with some elements of it. (Think of Borges, Calvino, Barthelme, Boyle, etc. Or even, nearer home, J. G. Ballard in *The Atrocity Exhibition*.) They delight in creating new and unfamiliar structures. These shapes/structures range from the muted, for example the diary form (Jean Rhys, 'Fishy Waters'), the exchange of letters (Alecia McKenzie, 'Full Stop') to the more overtly daring: the Review, the Report, the Lecture, the rewrite of a

non-existent classic characteristic of Borges ('Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote'), Barthelme ('The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace'), and others.

Fiction versus essay

It's often a good idea to try to enlarge the space where fiction happens. We've hinted that 'getting into the scene late' might be one way of doing it. Another way would be to introduce the second character (we should have been practising this by now) bringing with her or him a new storyline (or set of storylines) to wrench the narrative away from the 'essay' structure, and make it easier to give your narrative 'social depth'. The dynamic between characters usually (though not inevitably) helps to enlarge the space for your fiction. For not only does each character have her own story, back story, life experience to date, and fantasies of the future, but some aspects of this are likely to conflict with the other character(s). The fictional world thus becomes more socially complex. If the world created isn't large enough to live in, that in itself is a theme of the story – whether stated or not.

Study the plays of Samuel Beckett to see how a space seemingly large enough to live in can be conjured from the most cramped – physical and emotional – circumstances.

6. Revision 3

There have to be some rules by which you revise, by which you decide that some stories are better than others, and it's useful to share those rules with others with a professional interest in fiction. Would you agree, broadly, with the consensus, that, say, Chekhov might not be a great stylist and there are loose ends in some of his stories, and sometimes there might be less narrative tension than a contemporary writer might employ *but* that his tone is humane, his approach is non-judgemental (which is, in a way, a form of respect for his characters); that in his tendency to understatement he doesn't bully the reader; that his characterisation is acute – and that these last are some of the qualities that make him special and attractive to the reader?

Assessment is often contentious. I would suggest three very simple rules as a guide to this. The 'rules' were formulated by the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) established in London after the Second World War to encourage appreciation of the arts in Britain. The guidelines for assessing literature were:

- linguistic vitality
- formal innovation
- emotional truth.

Do these need explaining?

'Linguistic vitality' means freshness of language and the absence of cliché. You will not be willingly read if your language seems borrowed or second-hand, if the imagery is stale ('Football is a game of two halves') or if it is weighed down by unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. Remember, in imaginative writing, effectiveness is not communicated only by the grammar of what is said. To say 'She goes quickly' to the door, or 'She goes slowly' to the door does, of course, communicate something of the sense of anticipation or reluctance with which the person in question goes to the door. But it might be useful to ask yourself whether 'quickly or 'slowly' communicates enough of the 'colour' or 'buried drama' contained in those particular actions.

Similarly, to write 'This is a sad moment' or 'This is a happy moment' very soon has diminishing results. How does this particular person demonstrate or communicate sadness or happiness at this moment? That's what you want to show. It is your ability to convey that, not the idea of it, that helps to create convincing fiction.

With 'formal innovation' (innovation of form), we mean that it is important to have a knowledge of (or a feel for) the *genre* in which you're working. Your reader is likely to have certain expectations (from prior reading, from films, from television) of how other writers have treated it. And you can't afford to be less sophisticated than your reader.

'Emotional truth' is difficult to describe. But if you are urging writers to avoid cliché in language, in form – and also in thought – it is important not to cheat where the feelings or emotions are concerned. Do not confuse sensibility with sentimentality. One way of distinguishing between empathy (something to strive for if the situation warrants) and sentimentality (to be avoided at all costs) is to subject the relationship of author and character to the 'empathy with' or 'sympathy for' test. Avoid 'sympathy for' (it's 'undemocratic', it makes the emotional relationship between writer and character unequal). Encourage 'empathy with'.

In attempting to avoid sentimentality do not go too far the other way and brutalise feeling. Remember that the object of the exercise of writing is not to show off, not to demonstrate how clever or knowing you are, but to present something effectively and convincingly true to your reader. Don't make your characters do things merely because those things are unusual or bizarre. Think of your characters as having their human rights, so that anything they do must be in response to their situation, and stem from their personality.

7. Character

We have more or less said something about character. There are lots of books on this by David Lodge and others. It might be useful, too, to read how people from the theatre – for instance, Stanislavsky, the first director of Chekhov's plays – write about this. You might have a look at Julian Barnes' essay, 'Justin: a small major character', collected in *Something to Declare* (Barnes 2002). Remember the same care must be taken over the minor character as over the major one. A waiter in a restaurant who comes to your fictional table might have only a few lines, but get the vocabulary, the idiom, the tone of address right so that we know not just where he's from but from his tone what sort of time he's having in the kitchen.

Always give the impression that the character is living a life which the story just happens to shed light on (to break into), and that that life will continue to be lived (unless the person dies in the story) after the story's end. So it's useful for the writer to know – though not necessarily for the reader to be told – what the character was doing five minutes before that character was introduced into the story.

But what is character?

A woman in an early John Updike novel has a stroke. Her speech patterns change. What else has changed: is she the same 'character' as before? If you were to change the character's name a couple of times during the course of the story for no dramatic reason, just to show that what unites the figure is more than a name, would the confusion caused be tolerated as more than a gimmick? What about fraught relations between the character and the author?

There is a character in a Pirandello story who is in revolt against the author. In 'A Character in Distress' we have the author (Pirandello) one night reading a manuscript of someone else's rather dull novel. The only lively character in the book is a Doctor Fileno. Next morning, which is Pirandello's time of day to meet *his* characters (that is, to write, to think about writing, to engage with writing), at the place and time where his characters jostle for his attention, Doctor Fileno turns up, and battles his way to the fore of Pirandello's characters, protesting to the new author first of all about his name, which he does not like. Furthermore, in the original novel Fileno has himself authored a work entitled *The Philosophy of Distance*. Fileno is proud of that but insists the way he is used in the plot of the novel demeans an author (himself) so elevated. He complains that instead of Fileno, another character, a solicitor, should have been made to take on a foolish woman as her second husband, and so on.

Is this a joke too far? Or is this a useful way in which an author might (in revision) think about character before releasing the work to the public. (It might be instructive that this story is called, 'A Character in *Distress*', not 'A Character in Revolt'.)

8. Dialogue

The old image of the iceberg is a good one when considering dialogue. Let the visible dialogue communicate a sense that two-thirds of the action is hidden underneath. To spell it out, to over-write is to lose credibility, is to risk self-parody.

It is useful to remember, also, that the application of dialogue must not give the appearance of conveying information, it must be to characterise. Of course it must convey information, but it must not give the appearance of doing so. (For examples of excellent dialogue, look again at those early dramas of Harold Pinter, those collected in *A Slight Ache and Other Plays*.) The Methuen series of monologues, dialogues and scenes from popular dramas are worth looking at here. They would be useful, also, for your study of character.

9. Literary conceits and extended metaphors

Writing involves discipline and hard work, but that doesn't preclude having fun. There is a sort of intellectual conceit, hinted at already – often a play with form – which, when it works, gives both author and reader tremendous fun. And you don't have to push it through to 70,000 words! To the experiments with form already mentioned, have a look at Donald Barthelme's one sentence story, 'Sentence'. Or read again 'The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace', the story where the print has to jostle for position with graphics for space on the page. Or look at J. G. Ballard's story, 'Index', which is nearly all index. (If it were all index it would not be particularly interesting as a story, but as a clever puzzle.) That it is not all index (see the first page) makes it an effective, experimental story.

10. Advanced exercises

Read a classic

Read a 'classic' story and see if there is a minor character in it who deserves her or his story to be more fully told (for example, Lily the caretaker's daughter in James Joyce's 'The Dead' from *Dubliners*). Seek out other examples and write the 'unwritten' stories.

Why limit it to the short story? How about doing something similar for Lucy in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*?

Non-human consciousness

Try composing a narrative where the mode of consciousness might not be human. For example, how do you capture the aliveness of a tree in leaf in its own terms; the *riverness* of river, the *stoneness* of stone?

This is perhaps the most difficult of all exercises. We might want to seek the assistance of the poets as we wrestle with this one.

Research

Of course everyone who writes does 'research'. If you are writing a story set in the 1960s, and the main character (or any character) is partial to popular music, you would inevitably check to see what was on the hit parade at the time the story was set. But most research is more than 'checking'. It is to familiarise yourself with subject and setting (often remote from your own) so that you can then present both without making either exotic.

You might look to the contemporary historian, the best of whom, in their narratives, manage to convince us that the lives and thought processes of people who lived in the past are very much like our own.

Short shorts

The production of the mini-short story is now suddenly made popular by Dave Eggers. But, as a feature of the genre, it has always been with us (not counting the fables of Aesop, etc.) from Kafka through Saki, Kelman to Frederic Raphael (*Sleeps Six and Other Stories*), etc. An issue of the *Translantic Review* was devoted to short shorts.

The test of the successful short short is no different from that of any other story: is it more than a sketch or a fragment? The special effect that the best short shorts have is the quality of parable.

An exercise for male writers

Try writing a mini-biography of a woman – or a series of women. Now revise. Delete those bits of the writing that are about yourself. Revise again. Delete those other (less obvious) bits of the writing that are about yourself. Start again.

11. Revision 4

Revision for an 'advanced' exercise is no different from revision at an earlier stage of the writing process; that's the important thing: the story, the scene, the character must convey the same degree of credibility as if you were writing about someone you know sitting down to breakfast and being casual about the brand names of the things on offer.

So, with an exercise that is particularly challenging, don't forget that your story is like a picture in a frame, and that there is something happening (or at least, existing) outside

that frame: it helps to animate, or to read better what's inside the frame. So, in revision, ask yourself the usual range of questions. If your character is in a room, mentally sketch the rest of the house, furnish it (though don't necessarily tell us that you've done that) so you know where the bathroom is, and if there is a fixed-line telephone; if there are other people in close proximity: this visual map, among other things, will help to particularise that person's way of inhabiting her space.

Then there is the revision that comes about when you shift position from writer to reader, when you become your own critic: is the sensibility of the tree the same as that of the river? And is that what the author intended?

Or again, having seen that film, read that book - since having produced the last draft of your own - or having had a strange parting with a friend, do you now feel that the texture of your piece no longer feels quite right. Revision ideally continues until the work is abandoned (ideally, because it has been published) and you're now working on the next piece.

12. Pace and tone

One of the organisations that gives prizes for stories, and hence must assess them, distributes a list to its judges of categories to be ticked off in pursuit of the winner. The categories include: Characterisation, Dialogue, Narrative, Voice, etc. But also Pace and Tone.

Pace

Lack of pace is perhaps easier to detect and put right than tone. For when the interest begins to flag, when you find yourself, as a reader, struggling to continue – even though the story is well-written, is free of cliché, is well-characterized and there is precision in the writing – chances are that the problem is lack of pace. If it seems flat or static or bogged down, you're likely to tick the box: 'loss of pace'. Better still, think of having a conversation with your friends, recounting a story of something that happened to you. You are not managing to hold the attention of your audience: your story is losing pace. You try embarrassingly to recapture their attention – you cut things out, you bring the end forward . . . Employ this method when you write.

Tone

With the problem of tone, what it means is that the author is getting in the way of her character. The child narrating has been given the experience – the sensibility and vocabulary of the adult author. That violates the tone. Remember that the author is at the service of her characters, not the other way around.

On another level, think again of the work of Katherine Mansfield. The great short story, 'Prelude', has a nervy, restless, anxious, impressionistic feel that makes the reader unsurprised to learn, in retrospect, that the story was written in a mood of anxiety and grief following Mansfield's brother's death on the Western Front in 1915. The impression we get from reading the stories, though, is one of vitality, youthfulness, the joy of discovery. Even in 'Bliss', where we learn at the end that the husband is having an affair, this febrile quality is maintained. And remember for much of this time Mansfield knew she was dying of TB. The shadow is present behind the glow, but

doesn't overwhelm it. Mansfield has complete control of tone. She doesn't confuse seriousness with solemnity.

Questions

1. Talking about pace, does Chekhov's 'A Dreary Story' avoid being boring?
2. Talking of tone does Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party' avoid sentimentality?

13. Sharing the 'back' story

The collection

We move on now from the individual story to the collection – the book of stories. Naturally, for a first book, it makes sense to put together a selection of 'best pieces'. But publishers will tell you – rightly – that it is difficult to market a book of stories. Unless they are genre stories. Our favourite detectives – from Sherlock Holmes through Pierrot to Inspector Rankin – hold their respective collections together.

Alternatively, we can build up a world from the individual story, by setting other stories in the same place, and be loyal to the 'facts' established at the beginning. The most spectacular instance of this is that of R. K. Narayan's imaginary 'Malgudi', now a 'village' on the map of India. Others have used the combination of the same setting and characters popping in and out of that setting, to create a larger world of the story. Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* is an example of this.

The device of creating the storyworld goes back to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The simplicity and effectiveness of getting each pilgrim to tell a story on their way to Canterbury is exemplary. Behind Chaucer, of course, was the inexhaustible Bocaccio of *The Decameron*.

My own experiment here, presenting a literary canvas larger than your conventional story can manage, but without the tight formal disciplines of the novel, is represented in *Meet Me in Mozambique* (2005), where one character, Pewter Stapleton, appears (or is referred to) in all fifteen of the stories, and where the same scene is sometimes animated by different characters in different stories. The trick is to try to be loyal from one story to the next to the details established (as in Narayan's 'Malgudi', the characters might display new facets of their personality in the new story, but they shouldn't change character). The process is perhaps taken a bit further in *At Home with Miss Vanesa*, the 2006 companion volume to *Meet Me in Mozambique*. Of course we've had hints of this from many writers. F. Scott Fitzgerald's Pat Hobby, Hemingway's 'surrogate', Nick Adams, etc.

Cross-story revision

When you look back over the collection you'll need to adjust names, professions, places where people went on holiday, who they were with at the time, and so on to make the collection consistent. For example, in one story your character is called Marcus but in another Michael. Which name will you settle for? Would you have to alter his nickname in another story? Why is there no reference to a character's children in one story when in another she seems attached to them? Is this character's hobby (prominent in

a later story) recently-enough acquired not to have been mentioned in the earlier one? And so on.

14. Additional reading

This is not less important than the list at the start of this study. Suggestions here would include Colette (1873–1954, France); Joyce Carol Oates, among the American 'dirty realists'. Also from the US: Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua/US). All the writers mentioned in this chapter are worth dipping into.

In addition, a good English dictionary (as much for browsing as for checking spellings); 'Why I Write' (essays by various authors: George Orwell [1968], David Lodge [1988]); *Good Fiction Guide*, Jane Rogers ed. (2001); *Thinking About Texts*, Chris Hopkins (2001); *Reading Groups*, Jenny Hartley (2001); Assorted Literary magazines such as: *Ambit*, *Granta*, *London Magazine*, *Paris Review*, *Wasafiri*.

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