

review | Louisa Syme

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UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM: AUSTRALIAN SHORT STORIES

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- Robert Drewe (ed.): *The Best Australian Stories 2007* (Black Inc., ISBN 9781863954181, \$27.95)
- Nam Le: *The Boat* (Penguin, ISBN 139780241015414, \$29.95)
- Angus Gaunt: *Prime Cuts* (Ginninderra Press, ISBN 9781740274593, \$18)
- Tiggy Johnson: *Svetlana or Otherwise* (Ginninderra Press, ISBN 9781740274616, \$18)
- Benny Walter and Leigh Rigozzi: *Below Tree Level* (Inscrutable Press, ISBN 9780980474503, \$16.95)

The short story is rarely discussed without reference to its big sibling, the novel; its distinctive traits, relative merits and commercial viability are often viewed through the prism of its not being a novel, as if novels and short stories are poles between which the world of fiction is organised. Grand and contradictory claims are made about the short story - on the one hand that it is a dying form that readers have abandoned, on the other that, in the landscape of contemporary fiction, it is where innovation and experimentation live. Conventional publishing wisdom holds that readers of

fiction don't buy short-story collections, either single-author volumes or compilations. There is a curious disparity, then, between what the reading public is understood to be interested in, and how writers are published. Many first see their names in print in one of the journals that publish short fiction. Robert Drewe, editor of *The Best Australian Stories 2007*, notes in his introduction that stories from twenty publications are reproduced in the anthology, and claims that 'there have never been more story-friendly Australian publications than at the moment'. If this is true, then these stories are finding some kind of audience. But is it true that there is no broader audience for short stories published in a more mainstream fashion? More interestingly, if short-story publications are insulated from the market's bottom line, are they freer to experiment?

The Best Australian Stories 2007 goes some way towards answering both those questions. The collection is often a 'bestseller' (over 6700 copies of the 2006 edition were sold), meaning that in an Australian context it moves serious numbers. Clearly this volume attests to an interest in short stories that is sufficiently widespread to make this collection a going concern year after year. As for whether it might be a record of innovation, according to its introduction, as a collection *The Best Australian Stories 2007* aspires to a 'diversity of form and content' and presents both established and new writers, stories that have been previously published and those that make their first appearance in print. However, if these stories are representative of what is being written in Australia, then the reader would have to conclude that social realism remains the dominant mode across the literary-fiction landscape. This mode is employed with powerful effect in Cate Kennedy's 'Tender', about a married mother of two anchored in the drudgery of domesticity. Faced with the prospect of her own mortality, she reflects on her husband and two children, 'the ardent rush of helpless,

terrible love' they inspire, the life they have created together, her own failed aspirations. Peter Goldsworthy's 'Slowly Last Summer' which examines a carefree childhood friendship that is set to fracture across tensions of race, class and other corruptions of the adult world, and Karen Hitchcock's 'Some Kind of Fruit', about a passionate, ostensibly platonic friendship between a gay man and a straight woman, are examples of what can work so beautifully in this genre: the stories are authentic and moving, providing a mirror for the reader to recognise some kindred experience and perhaps make a deeper sense of that shared humanity.

Paddy O'Reilly's 'Speak to Me' and Shane Strange's 'Gulag' are among the stories in this collection that venture into more experimental territory. A thumbnail sketch of the plotlines of speculative fiction can make the stories sound absurd - witness O'Reilly's strange alien creature, as helpless as a baby, who has suckered feet, reads romantic fiction and is called Viscount Ryland Pennington. The Viscount is cared for by an earthling, Julie, who, in looking after him, gains a hitherto elusive sense of purpose. Julie is herself a writer of science fiction, and in the collision between the fictive world about which she writes and her real-life existence she is confronted by a disruption of the conventions of science fiction ('I am no heroine. I have no guide, the messenger is dead, and I am weak with grief.'). The story itself challenges these conventions, creating a human and emotional story. This is also true of Strange's story which imagines a post-revolutionary world that should be a kind of utopia: 'There we were on that first day, after the work was over, and our bodies felt tired. But that didn't matter, because we were, after all this time, where we wanted to be.' As the story unfolds, this new world seems more sinister than ideal. The city is in the grip of chaotic violence, and it becomes confrontingly clear that the narrator, a revolutionary, has a stake in the new order: 'What a feeling. To be there at

that time and to have believed in it all.’ Those deemed to have been powerbrokers in the old regime are executed in a haphazard, frightening manner. Strange’s examination of what happens when the revolution goes wrong is deeply unsettling and resonates beyond the brevity of the story itself.

In a move that defies conventional wisdom about what the big publishing houses will consider for publication, Penguin has just released in Australia Nam Le’s short-story collection, *The Boat*. Rights to publish the book have been sold around the world. This is despite the fact that Le, a young, first-time author, hasn’t yet published a novel (usually a prerequisite for the publication of a single-author collection of short stories). So why are these short stories deemed worthy of backing by a big, mainstream publishing house? No doubt the international hype vibrating around Nam Le won’t harm sales figures. But the chief reason is much more generous and exciting than that. It is surely the recognition of the captivating imaginative power at work in these stories. Le creates a diversity of authentic voices in whom you believe, love, and are heartbroken by.

In ‘Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice’, a friend tells the narrator, a writing student of Vietnamese background, that ‘You could *totally* exploit the Vietnamese thing. But *instead*, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans - and New York painters with haemorrhoids.’ This sentence is an introduction to the subject matter of the stories that follow, and a statement of ambition. It is also a caution against reading this first story as anything other than fiction - the lesbian vampires are the only characters mentioned here who do not make it into a story in the collection, but if they are fictional, then any detail in this apparently autobiographical story (like

the writer, the narrator of this story is a former lawyer from a Vietnamese family, writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the United States) could be too. The postmodern knowingness in this first story does not surface in any of Le's other stories. Here, it is an appealing wave to the reader, signalling that Le is not above game playing and audaciousness. And considered from a distance, the stories as a whole play out like an exercise in virtuosity, in proving that Le can make a fourteen-year-old 'hitman' living in the Colombian slums, or an elderly New York artist, come alive as adeptly as he can a young Vietnamese-Australian writer. However, close up these stories are so beautifully crafted as to fully absorb the reader. Even the self-consciousness of the first story doesn't have the distancing effect that this device can create in fiction. In the end, what impacts most powerfully is the sorrow of a father and son unable to bridge the distances created by both their shared and unshared histories.

If 'Love and Honour ...' acts as an introduction to the concerns of this collection, then Le creates a neat bookend with 'The Boat', the final story. It is as if 'The Boat' has been written to test the accusation levelled in the first story by the friend of the narrator, that so-called 'ethnic' literature is 'a licence to bore ... the characters are always flat, generic'. The Vietnamese refugees in this story, embarked on a terrifying escape from their homeland, are anything but flat. In fact they feel sometimes uncomfortably, unbearably real: 'Then she felt Quyen's face, cool with shock, next to her own, rough and wet and cool against her knuckles, speaking into her ear.' Like all of the stories in this collection, 'The Boat' deals with the recurring theme of children abandoned by their parents (through circumstance, necessity, death, sometimes for their own good) and the way in which parents' histories shape the lives of their children as much as the children's own experiences. Variations on this theme are hardly new

in fiction, but Le's writing around the parent-child binary is strong and fresh and exquisitely nuanced.

Mockingbird, an imprint of Ginninderra Press, has recently produced two volumes of short stories by little-known authors Angus Gaunt and Tiggy Johnson. Their venture is experimental in more ways than one, having launched these new writers into a publishing landscape that is supposedly hostile to unknown authors and short stories. The format of the books is also unusual. They are slim volumes, each measuring no more than half a centimetre across the spine, humble looking and easily passed over on the bookshelf. There are just three stories included in Gaunt's *Prime Cuts*. One can imagine reading and finishing one of these stories on a train journey or in other snatched moments. Gaunt claims in his author autobiography in the back of the book that 'these stories were all written on the 7.22 between Normanhurst and Central'.

This collection's first story, 'Porky Prime Cuts', is as meaty and satisfying as its title claims it should be. Naive, awkward outsider Krystel, a teenage girl grappling with the cruelties of high-school existence, finds a little haven of acceptance in the cafe in her town, newly taken over by Paul and Gareth, a gay couple from Sydney. Paul and Gareth are oblivious to the fact that she is social poison amongst her peers, and reach out to her, first with conversation and eventually with a job at the cafe, kindling a sense of acceptance and newfound self-confidence that has her mother commenting to her father, 'it's been so good for Krystel ... They're teaching her how to cook. She told me she wants to be a chef. It's the first time I've ever known her to be interested in anything.'

But in a town where the prevailing attitude is that 'You can get perfectly good coffee at home out of a jar for free', the ambitions of the new owners

are an uneasy fit, and their business and their relationship are treated first with veiled suspicion, and as time goes by with open hostility. Krystal, whose growing confidence has led to a fledgling acceptance amongst her peers, is tempted into using her privileged access to Paul and Gareth to betray them, in order to try and cement her place on the fringes of a group of potential friends.

In a subtle and sophisticated way this is a modern take on the morality tale, though the 'baddies' (Krystal's dad, the high-school bullies and ultimately, tragically, Krystal herself) are shown to be no more or less than all of us: at risk of being too weak, scared or ignorant to overcome their own human failings, suggesting that the heart of darkness beats quietly in ordinary complacency and alienation.

Tiggy Johnson plays with postmodern forms in her title story 'Svetlana or Otherwise'. In the five-page story she swings between the Svetlana of the title and the other 'I', Svetlana's creator. The second 'I' is writing a story in which Svetlana is the main character. Svetlana's story is told both through the italicised 'excerpts' from the writer's story, and through the narrator recounting in the first person what will happen to Svetlana in the story he or she is writing. This is one of several sleights of hand employed in the story. While the writer-narrator claims not to be able to write in the third person, Johnson, the invisible puppet master, is making him or her do so anyway in recounting what will happen in the story. Curiously, this does create some remove between the reader and Svetlana that interferes with the reader's compassion. Though the details of her life in post-Chernobyl Russia are harrowing, told like this, it's like absorbing facts from a newspaper article, rather than engaging with the emotional life of the character as she

experiences such things. The mechanics of the story are engaging but ultimately the piece is unaffectionate, despite the tragic subject matter.

Svetlana or Otherwise cautions the reader not to equate the 'I' with the author. This 'I', a writer, complains about the trouble he or she is having bringing a character, Svetlana, to life: 'I want to write in the third person, because I don't think I can get the thoughts and emotions right for my characters if I write in first. But then nothing comes. I'm a first-person writer.' Johnson, by contrast, includes several stories here with authentic third-person characters, like Jazz in 'Wooden Spoons and Ladybirds', all bristling young rebellion with her Doc Martens, old-lady coat and shaved head. Johnson is also able to create a living Svetlana through the first-person snippets in the title story.

Benny Walter has published a slim and lovely looking little book that contains just one illustrated short story, *Below Tree Level*, written by him and illustrated by Leigh Rigozzi. There's a certain physical pleasure involved in reading this book; its paper is heavy and glossy, and the black-and-white line drawings on almost every page are beautiful, if macabre. The drawings, along with the story, depict a frighteningly fecund wilderness: 'the forest is flooded, fat with moisture and ready to burst. Fog thickens the air and insects crumple logs the size of dinosaur bones.' The narrator is an alien and profoundly isolated body in this landscape.

The narrator, on leave from work, flounders in the new 'space in [his] mornings and afternoons'. After he begins to question his identity, his brother Mike urges some time in the bush to 'Retreat. Re-evaluate.' The author uses unusual metaphors and language that is unexpected, even discordant, to describe the narrator's experience, creating a pervasive unease in the story. The narrator, describing the disorientation caused by

taking leave from work, says, 'My mind was full of oily hands that couldn't grip anything for more than a moment.' But his nature retreat offers no clarity, and everything about the experience seems wrong. His fire 'slumps', he ventures less and less far from the hut in which he is staying, the morning ritual of boiling the billy for coffee is his 'one hopeful moment of the day'. An older woman arrives at the cabin, and despite the tiny space that they are going to share, says nothing to the narrator. He, bewildered, is also quiet, and that first lull grows into an unbreachable silence. In contrast to the narrator, the woman is adventurous and rarely in the hut, but her belongings encroach on most of the space, and she takes over the bench and the billy without asking. 'The woman has stolen my morning.' This is a mysterious, even strange story that raises many more questions than it answers but there is a charm in its inscrutability, as much as in the lovely, uncanny language and the decorative adornments.

One might assume that a fringe benefit of the perceived lack of financial viability in the publishing of short stories might be the liberation of their writers to experiment with less popular or populist ideas, styles or genres. But if they do exist, perhaps those experiments rarely see the light of day; for the most part, experimentation is no more or less a feature of the collections reviewed here than of contemporary novels. As for interest in the Australian short story, the bestseller status of *The Best Australian Stories* and the excitement with which *The Boat* has been received suggest that fears around the demise of the short story might be exaggerated. In any case, distinctions drawn between novels and short stories are often artificial; the concerns explored are not necessarily different, and the stylistic devices are not inherent to either form. The two coexist on fiction's continuum. What is occasionally on display in the collections reviewed is proof that even a two-page story can become a microcosm that is almost

palpably, painfully, thrillingly real. And therein lies fiction's bewitching hold.

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