

SHORT CIRCUIT

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Vanessa Gebbie's short fiction has won over forty awards, including prizes at Bridport, Fish (twice), Per Contra (USA), the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Willesden Herald*, from final judges such as Zadie Smith, Tracy Chevalier, Michael Collins and Colum McCann.

She is a freelance writing teacher working with adult groups, at literary festivals and with school students. Her work with disadvantaged adults led to the publication of two anthologies of their writing: *Roofless* and *Refuge* (QueenSpark Publishing 2007). In 2009 she was invited to contribute to *A Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction* (Rose Metal Press, USA), a creative writing textbook that received a coveted starred review from *Publisher's Weekly*.

Many of her prize-winning stories are brought together for the first time in her collection *Words from a Glass Bubble* (Salt, 2008). A second collection, *Ed's Wife and Other Creatures*, is forthcoming. She is Welsh and lives in East Sussex. For more information, see: www.vanessagebbie.com

Writing as Vanessa Gebbie

SHORT STORIES

Words from a Glass Bubble (Salt)

SHORT CIRCUIT

A GUIDE TO THE ART OF THE SHORT STORY

EDITED BY

VANESSA GEBBIE



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CONTENTS

VANESSA GEBBIE	
INTRODUCTION	1
GRAHAM MORT	
FINDING FORM IN SHORT FICTION	4
CLARE WIGFALL	
‘I HEAR VOICES’—NARRATIVE VOICE, CREATING A FICTIVE WORLD, CHARACTERISATION, OPENINGS AND LEAVING ROOM FOR THE READER: AN INTERVIEW	17
ALISON MACLEOD	
WRITING AND RISK-TAKING	32
NUALA NÍ CHONCHÚIR	
LANGUAGE AND STYLE: A GUIDE FROM A SHORT STORY WRITER / POET	45
CHIKA UNIGWE	
SETTING	57
ALEX KEEGAN	
24: THE IMPORTANCE OF THEME	67
LANE ASHFELDT	
BUILDING A WORLD	83
CATHERINE SMITH	
MYTH AND MAGIC: BEYOND ‘REALISM’ IN THE SHORT STORY	98

ADAM MAREK	
WHAT MY GLAND WANTS: ORIGINALITY IN THE SHORT STORY	111
TOBIAS HILL	
CHARACTER, CHARACTERISATION, DIALOGUE AND LANGUAGE: AN INTERVIEW	120
SARAH SALWAY	
STEALING STORIES	131
ELIZABETH BAINES	
TRUE STORY — REAL STORY — GOOD FICTION?	148
TANIA HERSHMAN	
ART BREATHES FROM CONTAINMENT: THE DELIGHTS OF THE SHORTEST FICTION OR THE VERY SHORT STORY THAT COULD	159
DAVID GAFFNEY	
GET SHORTY: THE MICRO FICTION OF ETGAR KERET	171
MARIAN GARVEY	
ON INTUITION: WRITING INTO THE VOID	179
ELAINE CHIEW	
ENDINGS	187
PAUL MAGRS	
THOUGHTS ABOUT WRITING FICTION, AT THE END OF TERM	203
VANESSA GEBBIE	
LEAVING THE DOOR AJAR: ON SHORT STORY OPENINGS . . .	211

VANESSA GEBBIE	
SHORT STORY COMPETITIONS: HARD WORK, PERSISTENCE, LUCK AND A BOWL OF FRUIT	225
EPILOGUE: SIX SALT SHORT STORY WRITERS HAVE THE FINAL SAY:	
LINDA CRACKNELL	
BALANCING ACT	231
JAY MERILL	
SUPERCHARGED WORDS	234
CARYS DAVIES	
‘... BEFORE IT DISAPPEARS ...’	238
DAVID GRUBB	
DANCING ON GLASS	243
ZOE KING	
BUT WHAT IF YOUR CHARACTER WON’T TALK TO YOU?	248
MATTHEW LIGHT	
ICEBERG LETTUCE: WHY I WRITE, AND A LITTLE BIT OF ‘HOW’	252
CONTRIBUTORS’ NOTES	255
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	267

SHORT CIRCUIT

A GUIDE TO THE ART
OF THE SHORT STORY

VANESSA GEBBIE

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Short Circuit*, a collection of essays and interviews from winners of some of the most challenging competitions for short fiction—the UK’s National Short Story Award, the Bridport Prize, the Fish Prize, the Fish Short Histories Prize, the Asham Award, the Commonwealth Prize and many more. Writers who also teach writing.

Short Circuit is either a very good title for this book or a very bad one. It depends how you look at it. I see surprising connections, sparks and flares—more than a modicum of the unexpected. However, those who know about electricity tell me it is a bad title. Because you only get short circuits if there has been a mistake in the wiring. Something unplanned.

I’ll stick with it and hope they don’t mind. And by the end of the book, I hope you’ll see why it works well. So many of the writers here will tell you of the elusive and magical ‘thing’ that happens when story takes off and all your planning and plotting and learning of craft fades into the background. When your characters take over and use your fingers to tell their stories.

Here, you have craft issues discussed in context by twenty-four writers. If you are reading this book you are probably already writing short stories, and want to do it better. So do I. So do we all. We share with you our love of the short story form, and talk about what it is that we find challenging. Sure, we talk craft—about opening and ending a story. About characterisation, voice, dialogue, and shaping a story. About theme. Creating a world, settings. But we also share with you our creative processes, the strategies we employ to unlock those little bits of magic that are stories. We share ideas for further exploration of the processes described, and give you lists of inspirational stories.

I will leave you with two thoughts. Firstly, from the chief shortlister of the Bridport Prize, Jon Wyatt. When I asked him what he was looking for in stories that made the shortlist, he said he gave his team of readers a simple instruction. ‘I want to see those stories that make you forget you are reading.’

And secondly, this, from an interview with William Faulkner in *The Paris Review*, Issue 12, 1952.

Let the writer take up surgery or bricklaying if he is interested in technique. There is no mechanical way to get the writing done, no shortcut. The young writer would be a fool to follow a theory. Teach yourself by your own mistakes; people learn only by error. The good artist believes that nobody is good enough to give him advice. He has supreme vanity. No matter how much he admires the old writer, he wants to beat him.

With those wise words in mind, I hope you may find some inspiration in this collection of essays. I hope too that you may find the stuff of debate, enabling you to get a little closer to your

own creativity—no-one else's. But more than that, I hope it liberates you and challenges you to join us in our love of writing one of the most difficult, annoying, powerful fiction forms in existence.

GRAHAM MORT

FINDING FORM IN SHORT FICTION

In whatever way, and under whatever circumstances, the reader may link the different phases of the text together, it will always be the process of anticipation and retrospection that leads to the formation of the virtual dimension, which in turn transforms the text into an experience for the reader. The way in which this experience comes about through a process of continual modification is closely akin to the way in which we gather experience in life. And thus the 'reality' of the reading experience can illuminate basic patterns of real experience.

WOLFGANG ISER (*Modern Criticism and Theory*)

Readers ought to be a little wary of authors' accounts of their writing practice. They are invariably fictions that tidy up and give logical form to what might otherwise be seen as an unsatisfactory and untidy process, where the subconscious eruptive impulse and the conscious organising principle are mingled. But the fact that those accounts may not strictly be

‘true’ does not necessarily devalue their content—in fact it gives them the power of fiction to persuade and stimulate through a partial view that is afforded a particular intensity. Here’s my account, with that caveat, using examples from my own work—and some shameless personal detail aimed to make it less of an abstract account of how I think about writing.

The first short fiction I ever read (by which I mean the short story here rather than the novella) was in the comics and comic books I subscribed to as a child and borrowed from friends. One lad, in particular, had a constant supply of *Marvel* comics through an older brother. I’m sure that one of the enduring influences of those comics was the use of *frames* that captured a visual image and moved the action forward in a sequence that resembled a ciné film with intervening frames missing. I realise now that frames equate to paragraphs in a story or stanzas in a poem—to move between them is to move across the white space of the page, which is often a period of implied time. The articulation of those comic strips was something to do with the motion of time within narrative, and with the way in which readers imagine absences.

The comic that I subscribed to had both comic strips and more conventional stories written in continuous prose. I soon became most interested in the story without pictures—or, rather, the story that created visual effects through words.

The local library was about a mile and a half away and the walk took me along the local river as it threaded its way between dye mills and weaving sheds. Then a climb through the graveyard, past the smoke-blackened medieval church, to the mock-Tudor, 1930’s library. Books—more specifically their contents—lifted me out of that decaying Lancashire mill town to new places, people and relationships. Then with a shock of recognition, like the

shock of adolescence itself, I found the work of Arnold Bennett, DH Lawrence and Alan Sillitoe. Their stories were set in the very industrial / rural borderlands where I lived. Literature had become both an escape from and a return to reality. But that reality was changed now, somehow infused with fictional presence.

I'm still amazed by the potency of text—the way typography on a flat page (which means nothing to those not enrolled into that particular writing system)—can have such power to transform experience. When you multiply that power into a book, then into a library, with its thousands of books and millions of written characters, you begin to understand our uniqueness as a species. Our success has reached beyond mere biology and is something to do with language and the way that we pass on our knowledge, understanding—and stories—regardless of the restrictions of time, space and mortality.

My early revelation, as D.H. Lawrence said of *SONS AND LOVERS*, was that the work I was reading was 'the story of thousands of young men (sic) in England today'. Such stories broke through the solipsistic, comic-book world of childhood and early adolescence and made me feel a connection to others. About the same time, my older brother returned home from his first year at university with a box of books from his undergraduate English Literature course. I began to read novels, poetry and short fiction voraciously, not only work from the UK, but Europe, America, Russia and beyond. What had seemed an incoherent and unimaginable world was gradually joined up through literature—through what we would now describe as a form of 'virtuality'.

The short story retained a special place for me. Novels, after all, were often organised as sequential stories or episodes. But the short story could be read in one go as I lay in bed at night with

my old valve radio playing, giving off music and the scent of hot dust. There was something satisfying and stimulating about the form and it's not surprising that, after poetry, the first things I tried to write were stories. Furthermore, since writing heroes had supplanted comic-book heroes, I was determined to use my own experience as a basis for my work.

Several years and many jobs in mills, factories, hospitals and graveyards later, I had my first short story published in the *Saturday Guardian*—a piece about working in an industrial dairy in the North Yorkshire market town. Others followed, somewhat sporadically, since poetry seemed my main vocation. Then a fallow period, when short story outlets became hard to find, then, a few years ago, a much more focused return to short fiction.

Much of this new fiction developed from my interest in the narrative poem—either long poems or sequences. Switching from the rhythms of poetry to prose is never easy, but I realised that there was considerable crossover in the forms. Not only could my poems have a strong narrative content, my stories could borrow the rhythms, compression, imagery, motifs, patterning and concision of poetry. They could leave a lot out—trusting the reader to fill in—and they could, theoretically, be word-perfect. Just as I'd laboured over individual words and punctuation in poems, so I applied the same micro-editing to stories. But re-drafting was never a chore to me—it was where I found out what I was trying to say, where the first spontaneous pages of a story became more closely organised and *layered* through the choice of key narrative moments and resonant language.

I was always less interested in the grand sweep of narrative or 'twists in the tale', than in the moment-by-moment progression of narrative seen through a character's experience. If, as Philip

Larkin said, ‘nothing like something happens anywhere’*, then there was something truthful about stories that eschewed a grand excitement for a quiet epiphany. I had become fascinated by time, how we experience it and how writers deploy it, privileging the depiction of consciousness over the depiction of events. All literature explores what it is to be human and alive and this was my way. I realised that stories could not only have a conscious layer where we engage with events in time, but a *sub-conscious* layer where references and imagery triggered a deeper reaction. The use of powerful colours in a story is a simple example of this technique, triggering a subliminal, even visceral response, in the reader—a method also used in film and photography.

Other influences on my story writing were the biblical parables with their difficult moral codes, African stories and the oral tradition (when I began to visit Uganda for the British Council), and writing for radio, which emphasised and dramatised the human voice as an element in narration and first-person characterisation. Parables also related to some of the key building blocks of poetry—*metaphor* where one thing stands for another and *metonymy* where a significant part represents the whole. *Allegory*, too, is possible, where one story actually represents another sphere of action. So the shortness of the story, rather than seeming like a compromise, meant that it could powerfully suggest, if not actually achieve, the complexity of a novel.

The poet Paul Verlaine once said that a poem is ‘never finished merely set aside’. Stories were not just short in duration, but often incomplete: and not just because the craft demands endless revision, but because a story, like a poem, is *necessarily* fragmentary. They speak to our wider human experience by focusing on a

* ‘I Remember, I Remember’ (*The Less Deceived*, Marvell Press, 1954)

tiny patch or patches of time. What prevents short stories from becoming merely fragmentary — nugatory lumps of prose — is their ability to *engage* the reader.

The reader, I would argue, both experiences the story as it unfolds and *completes* it. Not in a systematic way in which a novel is completed (though it never is, it's merely fragmentary on a bigger scale), but in a speculative way that fleshes out the bones of a narrative. I also realised that shortness was not merely expedient — in fact the stories were more powerful because their very brevity enrolled the imagination of the reader. Furthermore, I began to see creative writing as a form of 'shared consciousness' — the text is left latent on the page in typographical form, and 'activated' by the reader. The result is an imaginative 'experience'.

The primary way that a story engages a reader for me is its appeal to the physical senses when evoking place (a 'sense' of place is literally that) or human characters. The fundamental appeal — as in those early comics is *visual* — but the rest of the human senses, smell, hearing, touch and even taste, can be powerfully suggested through verbal language. In fact, literature is the only art form that can achieve this synthesis, though usually not all at the same time. Here's a short passage from my story 'Resistance' set in World War II France:

Gustave broke off some stems of lavender from the rock-border and rubbed them between his stubby hands. His fingers were shiny with oil where he'd whetted the scythe. Lavender smelled good. It smelled of the earth, it smelled of sex, like the sheets of their bed at home.

The passage is rich in visual detail and switches from an implied external view of Gustave to an implied internal as the scene

appears through his eyes. Because of the ‘free indirect style’—the assumption of intimacy without actually writing in the first-person—we see his hands from above and share his thoughts, connecting the immediate smell of lavender with a deeper, more intimate memory.

The other primary engagement with the reader, of course, is through the story itself: the sequence of events, how we enter it and negotiate the changes in time as the story develops and modulates between ‘time zones’. The opening lines of a story involve other tricky decisions for a writer: tense (past, present or future), point of view (authorial, characterised, neutral), the level of intimacy (first, second or third person), whether the point of view is especially privileged and whether it is exterior or interior (commenting on the action or participating in it). The opening sentences have to establish all this quickly and succinctly. Put like that it sounds complicated! Here’s an example from my story, ‘The Prince’, that attempts this:

All summer the boy from the big house next door was dying. We saw his bandaged head flitting through the raspberry canes, saw him drifting like a sleepwalker across lawns where his father and mother watched him. Something was growing inside him, shouldering aside his life. He played slowly, prematurely aged, as if learning to be a child when it was already too late. We didn’t know that he was dying then, but we sensed that we were near a great event.

In that opening paragraph several key things are established. The story is set in the past, but a sense of an apparent or implied ‘present moment’ of narration is also established. The story is

written in the first-person and establishes a setting that the voice describes in intimate detail and has participated in. The ‘big house’ suggests a difference in social status and, although the story is set in childhood, the voice also suggests the understanding and experience of an adult. That’s the conscious layer of narrative; but the language itself carries more subliminal meaning. The reference to sleepwalking and the ‘flitting’ motion of the boy suggest a world of ghosts, a movement from life to death via sleep, prefiguring the larger theme of the story.

It’s obvious from those two short examples that any story has to take liberties with time. If we were to describe an event in ‘real’ time, then the task of writing would be eternal as we continued to experience time. There is much evidence to show that we experience what we think of as ‘reality’ just as selectively — there is too much experience to register it all and our consciousness would simply be overloaded. Here, too, memory and the subconscious play their role, so that our experience of *similar* experiences allows us to take short cuts. Even more radically, some neuro-scientists have strongly suggested that what we think of as reality is partly imagined:

Dreaming and being awake are the next of kin, if not exactly the same thing. Basically the brain is a dreaming machine, it is the brain that generates reality, it secretes reality, so to speak and that reality is modulated, is limited by the senses.*

Scientists who investigate dreams have also drawn strong parallels between dreaming and consciousness, suggesting that only

* Professor Rudolfo Llinas, *The Mind’s Eye*, BBC2, 1 August 2000

the presence of reality in the form of exterior sensation interrupts our constant dream state.

Those writers who say they never think about the reader are trying to make a point about their independence of practice, as if their writing has a kind of purity. Mostly, they mean that they don't consciously aim their writing at a particular audience, thereby avoiding association with forms of populist genre or 'designer' fiction (interestingly, short fiction is particularly rich in genres). But the act of writing does not exist as a separate act from the act of reading. As Alberto Manguel points out in his book, *A History of Reading*, the moment that writing was invented so was reading. Not only the act of reading, but the presence of the reader in the writer's head. Elsewhere, Manguel speaks of the writing being 'rescued' by the reader. In this sense, the writing simply doesn't exist without a reader.

Of course, that's a simplification of what happens when we make marks on paper or tap out a message on our computer keyboards. Even as I write this, I'm conscious that the acts of writing and reading can never be separated. To write is to constantly anticipate the next word. The instant that it appears in typographical form, we read it for correctness, location, consistency, etc. So the writing of any story, poem, novel, or even sentence is a complex mental/verbal performance. The crucial issues about writing—the need for a common language and a shared writing system, for instance—only come about when the author's 'other' (the actual reader) picks up the text. The act of writing is also based on a much deeper assumption than the compatibilities of language and writing systems—it is based on a sense of shared humanity, that what we have written will 'speak to' the reader's own experience and excite their synapses in the same way. Such identification may be only partial due to

different cultural or social structures or due to the passing of centuries, but a story written two thousand years ago and translated from Hebrew via Greek and Latin into the St. James' Bible still has the power and veracity to move me.

As a teacher of creative writing, I've always been wary of a sense of orthodoxy creeping into my workshops. Writing is about liberty and a list of prescriptions or proscriptions has always struck me as a singularly dismal approach. Every work of literature invents its own unique problems and they can only be solved through the trial and error of a heuristic writing *process*. Theories of creativity or imagination seem to desert us at the point of composition when we forge those crucial formative opening sentences, from which we can never completely escape. But it's also important to stand back from the writing process in a more analytical way to ask what writing *is* and what it *does*—how two-dimensional typography has the power to create a virtual imaginative experience that is powerful enough to supersede reality. We read a story on a train and remember nothing of the journey whilst retaining powerful memories of characters, places and events that have never really happened. Developing your own sense of this counter-intuitive process—your own sense of praxis or 'poetics'—can be immensely valuable when reading and, crucially, revising one's own work.



IDEAS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

I've already described my own reticence about creating guidelines for other writers. Writing exercises, like accounts of writing

practice, are distortions of what practicing writers really do. But maybe there are some useful things to say.

- Read widely and read analytically for technique, working out what the writer is trying to achieve and how.
- Read classic as well as contemporary work, foreign as well as UK authors.
- Focus on the first moments of a story and see how a writer sets up a story and how they carry forward the elements of the opening words and handle time until the end.
- Write ‘spontaneously’ (no such thing, of course) rather than waiting for inspiration—even scribbling down a few words will involve key narrative decisions that can be developed further.
- Write from the senses to create a detailed and vivid sense of characters and setting.
- Meanwhile, don’t worry about where the story is going or it won’t progress. It’s essential to get a first draft in order to achieve form.
- Now edit your story to remove as much superfluous detail as possible—allow the reader some space in which to imagine your story for themselves.
- If your story doesn’t work, take some coloured pens and map up all the shifts in time to reveal inconsistency, unnecessary complexity, or contradiction.
- Experiment with tense, voice and point of view, re-writing the opening paragraph of a story to find one that feels right. Finding form in this way can often liberate you to keep going.

- Don't be stubborn about criticism. It's good to have self-belief, but act upon the criticism you know, deep down, is true.
- Become a reader of your own work by arriving at a distance from it. Don't be terrified of reading literary theory — it can't hurt you, but it can stimulate you, especially the phenomenology of reading.
- Develop your own voice and style, but remember that a good writer is a ventriloquist, so don't get stuck with 'pretending to be yourself' as Philip Larkin once said.
- Don't write anything you don't really care about — life is simply too short.



REFERENCE BOOKS

It's almost impossible to recommend relevant reading without feeling that nearly everything has been left out. The stories here are 'classic' pieces that have been very influential, but you should read widely in contemporary work and listen to short stories on the radio whenever possible. The reference books relate to themes in my essay.

Alberto Manguel, *A Short History of Reading* (Flamingo, 1996)

David Lodge with Nigel Wood (eds), *Modern Criticism and Theory* (Longman, 1999)

Susan Greenfield, *The Human Brain* (Phoenix, 2002)