

The Short Story edited by Ailsa Cox

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What makes this collection of short story criticism unusual is that the fourteen pieces are authored by a mixture of practitioners of the form, academics, and some which straddle both disciplines. This creates an assortment of writing covering a broad range of topics from artistic, practical and scholarly perspectives on writing and studying the short story and its subsidiaries. Every short fiction proclivity is catered to, ranging from Martian short stories to crime short stories broadcast for radio to Japanese female sadism. Well-known authors and less-well-known authors are examined under the lenses of postcolonialism, postmodernism and gender studies; there is something here for everyone, no matter how obscure your interests are.

The first contribution is a transcribed speech given by A.L. Kennedy entitled, 'Small in a Way That a Bullet is Small', which serves to define and defend the short story. This kind of argument is often voiced in collections of short story criticism; for nearly thirty years in fact short story criticism has been on the defensive, attempting to right the injustice of the short story's commercial unpopularity. A.L. Kennedy, however, is on the offensive and instead focuses on the distinctiveness of the short story and how it enjoys its place as underdog in the literary world because it allows for experimentation and evades any strict definition. A.L. Kennedy's speech reads like a call to arms; to forget what is being said in the publishing world and to write for writing's sake in the hope of affecting people.

The next essay, ‘The Short Story: What is it exactly, what do we do with it and how do we intend to do it?’ by John Beevers, is a practical approach to the issue of the unpopularity of the short-story. If A.L. Kennedy’s speech is a call to arms, Beevers’ essay is a battle plan. By outlining current definitions of the short story in order to demonstrate that it is a distinct genre, Beevers highlights that the short story is marketed inadequately and indistinctly and that its synergy is ignored. The placement of these two essays together sets the tone for the collection as artistic experience and scholarly thought come together.

The following two essays focus on more marginal aspects of the short story, namely the short story sequence and the short-short story. ‘The Whole Story’ by Lucy Collins and Kathy Flann again combines writer and critic as Kathy Flann considers the use of the short story sequence in her own collection, while Lucy Collins gives a critical context of Joyce’s short story sequence *Dubliners* (1914) and the ‘scarcely connected’ collection, *A Year of Our Lives* (1995), by John MacKenna. The essay combines paragraphs of quoted reflections by Flann on the worthwhile but arduous experience of writing a short story sequence, surrounded by Collins’ critical analysis on short story sequences.

Ashley Chantler’s contribution, ‘Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-Short Story’, attempts to chart a history of the short-short story and to then find an adequate definition for it. His first paragraph reveals that his intention was to write ‘The Short-Short Story’, but on finding the process so complicated and vast instead wrote ‘Notes Towards the Definition...’ which, as he describes, is “tinged with the optimism that ‘The Short-Short Story’ might one day be written” (p38). The resulting effect of these two

essays is that the reader is given the suggestion to try it themselves; the essays become places to start, encouraging the attempt at writing or continuing the research of others.

The remainder of the essays address a mixture of topics that attempt in small ways to define what the short story is and what the experience of writing one is like. These essays take on a more formal and traditional approach where non-traditional authors and themes are compared and contrasted. They are varied and unusual and combine to give the reader an awareness of the critical ideas surrounding the short story.

The final essay in the collection, 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' considers, through the extended metaphor of the ghostly and the gothic, the thorny subject of the creative experience. I say 'thorny' because often this kind of essay can turn into self-indulgent ramblings of an author's very personal accounts of inspiration and writing. This, like a remembered dream re-told, is often far more interesting to the author than the audience. Newell avoids this by mixing statistics in with speculation. Alongside quotes from authors such as Jeanette Winterson describing their attempts to capture 'ghostly', beautiful ideas, there are scientific summations in bullet-point lists for ease of understanding. The result is pleasurable; one feels they have gained an insight into the mind of a short-story writer through facts rather than oblique references to mysterious concepts such as the stories writing themselves or characters conversing with their creators.

The appearance of the book is simple and straightforward with individual bibliographies of primary and secondary sources for each of the essays and a decent index making referencing easy. The plain

presentation of *The Short Story* suggests that functionality is the concern of the editor. First and foremost, this book is a stimulating read for both writer and critic. But this is contradicted by consistent printing errors occurring throughout the collection which niggle and distract the reader. This becomes hard to ignore and the interesting, diverse articles become overshadowed by slightly sloppy production. Despite this, *The Short Story* covers a great deal of ground, including many new topics, in a series of worthy and insightful essays that address the creative and the scholarly aspects of the eponymous genre; the kind of text which is long overdue for those practicing creative writing in academia.

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