

# **The Short Story is Dead!**

## **Long Live the Short Story!**

by Chris Power

Last night George Saunders won the inaugural Folio Prize for his short-story collection *Tenth of December*. Navigating to the *Guardian's* report on the win, I scroll in search of the question I'm sure will be there. I find it about halfway down: "After the Nobel prize given to Alice Munro, Saunders was asked if short stories were finally getting their due". It's something I imagine George Saunders has been asked many times, because it's the unavoidable narrative of the short story as neglected form, the foundling on the steps of literature that needs fattening on the pap of prizes and occasional breakout commercial success. When Lydia Davis wins the Man Booker International Prize, Alice Munro the Nobel, or George Saunders the Folio Prize, one of the first questions asked is whether this represents a renaissance for the short story.

Having written regularly about the short story for the last seven years, and irregularly for much longer than that, I've found this sense of instability, not to mention insecurity, to be the rule, not the exception. While the death of the novel remains an intellectually provocative idea to a certain degree, the death of the short story is an accepted commonplace. Puzzlingly, so are announcements of its return; just Google 'short story renaissance' and dive right in. The basic set-up suggests that the short story has declined from a position of robust health to near-death, but thanks to whatever the subject of the current article might be (a book under review, a new app, the rise of MFA programmes), it's making a comeback.

This story is perhaps only a shriller version of an idea of decline endemic in the book world. In a recent *New*

*Yorker* article a senior editor at a major publishing house was quoted as saying the industry "always has a rhetoric of the fallen age. It was always better before you got here." But when it comes to discussing the short story this rhetoric is amplified beyond reason. Look again at those Google results and you'll see they stretch back years, suggesting that the only thing really experiencing a renaissance is the "renaissance of the short story" story. It runs in a hyperbolic flap all the way from Munro and her Nobel win, through Raymond Carver and the 'dirty realists' of the 1980s, back to Edgar Allan Poe himself.

Let's consider Poe who, in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, can be said to be the original short-story theorist. Writing at a time when US copyright law made it very difficult for an author to prosper (just ask

Melville), Poe was one of few American writers to make a living from his writing. It was, however, a very poor living, and he achieved it only by producing reams of quite carefully calibrated work that he could be confident of selling. Here, at the birth of the modern short story, was an author publishing prodigiously in journals with good circulations, yet who could barely earn enough to support his family.

People often hark back to the days of the *Saturday Evening Post*, when F. Scott Fitzgerald might earn \$4,000 a story (around \$60,000 today), enough to embark on a boozy slew through France for a few months. In his introduction to *Best American Stories 2007* (excerpted in the *New York Times* with the headline 'What Ails the Short Story'), Stephen King wrote that, "Once, in the days of the old *Saturday*

*Evening Post*, short fiction was a stadium act; now it can barely fill a coffeehouse and often performs in the company of nothing more than an acoustic guitar and a mouth organ."

But rather than representing the final link between short-story writing and affluence, the *Saturday Evening Post* period was the exception: a collision of mass literacy and improved communications that unlocked a vast potential readership across the United States before there was a television in every home to suck readers' eyes away from the page. Understandable as it might be for the short-story writers of today to fixate on a time when a few stories could tide you over for the year, it only reflects one extreme part of the past, and isn't much help in measuring the relative vitality of the form over time.

Yet over the years evocations of a recent short-story Eden recur. In 2002 William Boyd compared the contemporary scene with that of his youth:

*When I published my first collection of stories, On the Yankee Station, in 1981, many British publishers routinely brought out short-story collections. Not any more. Moreover, there was a small but stable marketplace where a story could be sold. A short-story writer could place his or her work in all manner of outlets. The stories in my first collection, for example, had been published in Punch, Company, London Magazine, the Literary Review and Mayfair, and had been broadcast on the BBC... Today, in the UK especially, it has never been harder to get a short story published. The outlets available to a young writer that I benefited from in*

*the 1980s have virtually dried up.*

This makes some sense: nowadays many publishers will only buy a short story collection if there is also a novel attached to the deal, and from Boyd's list of publications only *The London Magazine* still regularly prints new stories. But in the UK and Ireland there are nevertheless numerous publications, online and off, that perennially feature short fiction: *Granta*, *The White Review*, *The Dublin Review*, *Stinging Fly* and *Five Dials*, to name only a handful. It's true to say that all of these combined don't have the circa 300,000 circulation of a 1980s issue of *Mayfair*, but when evaluating Boyd's reminiscence it's worth remembering that he began publishing during a particularly good period for British authors. Robert McCrum recently wrote an article about the increasingly unviable position of the full-time

mid-list author in which he makes the following point:

*After a period of prosperity and tranquillity for British fiction that ran for about a generation (circa 1980 to 2007), writers are now being confronted with the hardship of literary artists through the ages. (It was said of Grub Street's 18th-century residents that "They knew luxury, and they knew beggary, but they never knew comfort.")*

According to this argument, then, the 1980s and '90s were a bubble, a fantastical interlude after which writers had to return to living more like Poe, somewhere between garret and gutter. In a 1971 preface to a new edition of his book *The Modern Short Story*, first published in 1941, H.E. Bates admitted that its concluding prophecy of "a new golden age of the

short story, such as we had on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s and 1930s" had gone "dismally unfulfilled". "Even before the war", he writes, sounding remarkably like Boyd 30 years later, "the little magazines to which writers of my generation contributed and were very glad to contribute, were already dead or dying". He goes on:

*This then is the situation of the short story today; if it is not quite one of unmitigated gloom it is certainly not bright... To this pessimistic picture must be added the fact that the reading public, not only in Britain and America, but also on the continent, shows no disposition to revise its age-old prejudice against reading short stories in volume form.*

And yet Boyd cites the existence, just a few years later, of a “small but stable marketplace where a story could be sold”. Is either writer correct? Or is it more plausible to see attitudes to the short story as fugal, constantly describing the same movement between oblivion and triumph while the form remains, in fact, in more or less the same place? “Too bitter”, Jean Rhys said of her work in 1945. “And besides, who wants short stories?” Her statement could plausibly have been made at any point in the last 60 years, which indicates how unwise it is to pay heed to the multiple comebacks announced over the same period.

Speaking to Alan Hollinghurst in 1988, Francis Wyndham described coming across a then-unknown V.S. Naipaul’s stories in the mid-1950s when he was a reader at André Deutsch: “I read them and wrote Diana

[Athill] a report in which I said: ‘I know we never do short stories, but we must do these, they are incredibly good’”. Deutsch did eventually publish Naipaul’s short stories (as *Miguel Street*), but only several years later, after they had published his first two novels. In his introduction to a 1963 anthology of short stories printed in *The London Magazine*, Alan Ross bemoans the fact that the “generally gloomy economics of short story writing... have resulted in such natural practitioners as V.S. Pritchett, William Sansom and Angus Wilson writing increasingly at novel length”. Even so (and like many before and since), Ross detects “signs of a shift in fashion, so that, instead of being regarded merely as a by-product of an otherwise full literary life, the short story may soon recapture some of its old glamour, and be cherished for its own sake”.

It was then as it is now. Of the many writers producing short stories today, some will be briefly uplifted to win acclaim and perhaps even achieve sales, but most will work hard for a small readership and very little money. This will be what happens because this, outside of the 1920s and '30s, is what has always happened.

Does it really matter if people constantly gesture back towards this golden age that may have briefly (and barely) existed? I think so. Any form that includes agonising about its unpopularity as one of its basic features is going to encounter difficulties. Like the complaints of a needy friend, sooner or later you don't want to hear it any more. By constantly rehearsing the same positions critics and commentators reinforce the perception that short stories not only are, but deserve to be, a minority interest. Consider the statement from

4<sup>th</sup> Estate editorial director Claire Reihill that appeared in the *Bookseller* in December last year, announcing the publication of three new short-story collections:

*I think we have a good record for short stories, and I'd like to publish more of them. You can write about so many different things with short stories—you can be playful or serious. With a novel it's more linear, so [with short stories] there's more variety. I think it's a great tradition.*

Reihill is a skilled publisher, but this isn't likely to inspire any readers who don't already gravitate towards short stories. Wouldn't it be better if the collections themselves were discussed, rather than the form – especially in such general terms as these? When a major publisher gets behind a collection it becomes,

at least in part, a referendum on the short story entire. Imagine if every novel had to be justified not in terms of content but form (“They can be happy or sad!”). How frustrating. How exhausting. How boring.

But if publishers feel the need to talk up short stories generally, rather than the specific ones they’re promoting at any given time, isn’t that because they genuinely don’t sell? As more houses have merged, becoming absorbed by multinational conglomerates whose focus lies solely on the bottom line, fewer publishers have fancied facing the board to defend a collection that sold a couple of hundred copies. Responding to the George Saunders Folio win, Foyles’ web editor Jonathan Ruppin said, “Saunders is one of the mercurial masters of the short story that Britain’s disinterest in short-form fiction has prevented us from

championing”. Yet immediately after reading that I saw Susan Hill tweeting:

*@JonnyGeller my 3 short stories on Kindle (only) sell very well indeed. My last hb sh.st collection sold over 10K. Market out there.*

So who’s right? I think Ruppin’s position – which may well be born of genuine frustration and many failed attempts to fire the enthusiasms of an uninterested public – sells the skill and influence of booksellers short. It’s their passions and recommendations and table displays that can engage the uninterested. It was solely because of a well-curated display that I walked out of a Waterstones in Guildford one summer day in 1993 with a hardback copy of Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son* in my hands, an event that changed my life. I know



of a new story collection, published by a major house and with good pre-release buzz, for which a national book chain's initial order was a single copy. Not a stand that's likely to counteract the British public's disinclination to buy short stories.

Just as publishers and booksellers need to rethink, so do many reviewers. The regularity with which the return of the short story is bruted on the books pages of most national newspapers is remarkable. It is, apparently, just what you have to say when you review a short-story collection. Why? Because that's what all the other reviewers do. I proclaimed it once or twice in reviews of my own when I was younger for precisely that reason. What it usually means is that the reviewer isn't thinking about what they're writing, or that they don't normally read short-story collections and

therefore interpret their personal awakening to what the form can offer (their epiphany, so to speak) as a more general uptick of engagement. Rather than grasping that their own ignorance has decreased, they perceive the form's quality to have grown. In this sense reviewers are like doctors before the advent of the randomised controlled trial, extrapolating the universal from the anecdotal. When this was the way medicine was done, let's not forget, doctors killed far more people than they cured.

To take a specific example, consider Louise Doughty's *Guardian* review of Zadie Smith's 'The Embassy of Cambodia', a short story that was published as a standalone book last year. In the opening lines we find a bit of return-to-form speak: "Those who love short-form fiction have had reason to cheer recently... A

literary form declared dead on the slab a few years ago has proved to have a soft but resolutely pumping pulse.” When was this announcement of death made? Dates and specifics, as so often in the discussion and debate of the short story, remain unclear. Perhaps it was in 2002, when William Boyd recalled that “today, in the UK especially, it has never been harder to get a short story published”. But even there, it turns out, he was only creating an atmosphere of gloom to dispel it with more renaissance talk: “despite these practical difficulties,” he announced, “the short story seems to me to be undergoing something of a revival, both here and in the US”. Yet another case of the short story’s death and rebirth being announced in the same breath: the short story is dead! Long live the short story!

Back to the Doughty review, which, having defined the

current status of the short story, then attempts to convince the reader that Smith’s story “isn’t a story” but “a novel in miniature”. How so? Because it uses brief scenes that encapsulate “what many writers would take several thousand words to say”. This isn’t a bad description of short fiction in general, only here it’s being used to assert that a short story isn’t a short story. We are then told that Smith’s main character, the housecleaner Fatou, is good enough to “deserve a full-length novel”, before the delivery of the final killer line: ‘The Embassy of Cambodia’ “shows that short-form fiction can be as vibrant and as healthy as any densely realised full-length novel”.

The respective densities of works of fiction often come into a critic’s ambit when they write about short stories. According to this scale the novel, generally

speaking, is osmium: the none-more-dense. Most reviewers' default position is that the closer to osmium a work of short fiction gets, the better. This is the reason why nearly all reviews of Alice Munro's collections compare them favourably with the novel, as Michiko Kakutani does in her *New York Times* review of *Open Secrets* (1994) when she describes Munro's "slim, quick-paced narratives that magically unfurl into dense, novel-like examinations of people's entire lives". On the surface this sounds like a good thing, but Munro herself rejects the comparison. Speaking in 1986, she admitted she doesn't really get novels: "I don't understand where the excitement is supposed to come in a novel, and I do in a story". Again, I used to do just as Kakutani does in her Munro review, and Doughty in her Zadie Smith review, until I thought about it and realised how wrongheaded it is. Anyone with a decent

knowledge of short stories will know that many of them, particularly those in the Chekhovian and Joycean mould, are 'densely realised' as a matter of course. An appreciation of William Trevor's 'The Ballroom of Romance', Katherine Anne Porter's 'Flowering Judas', Denis Johnson's 'Emergency' or Joyce's 'Araby' must surely recognise that density is one of their fundamental characteristics, not a pleasing by-product. Given their length, most short stories must be dense if they are to have any effect at all. One of the great pleasures of the novel, conversely, is the possibility it allows to *not* sustain density at all times, to occasionally wander and drift. These are very different possibilities for a writer, so different as to make the two forms entirely distinct from one another (and enough to make proficiency in one form no indicator of proficiency in the other). To return again to William

Boyd, he believes that “there are 20-page short stories that are far more charged and gravid with meaning than 400-page novels”, yet he takes care to embed a distinction in his parallel: when we talk about the short story, he stipulates, we are talking “about a different category of prose fiction altogether”.

Munro and Boyd show an understanding of and respect for the difference between the short story and novel that is not heard enough. “Keep writing stories. It’s not an apprentice form for the novel”, as Kevin Barry exhorts. In March this year the *New York Times* ran a piece in which Teju Cole noted that two of his favourite writers, Lydia Davis and Anne Carson, are under appreciated: “It’s notable that neither of them is really a novelist; ‘the novel’ is overrated, and the writers I find most interesting find ways to escape it”. I agree:

Davis, who has written seven collections of short stories and one novel, isn’t ‘really’ a novelist. She’s a short-story writer. And she isn’t writing short stories to ‘escape’ the novel, she’s writing short stories because that is the artistic form through which she expresses her creativity. She is no more escaping the novel than a house record is escaping a violin sonata. (Although, as someone on twitter pointed out when I first mentioned this, you could legitimately say that Davis is escaping the short story.)

The danger of discussing the short story in the shadow of the novel is that more time is spent talking about how dark it is than the art itself. It limits the discourse, limits what a story can be, and promulgates the false idea that short stories are a stage on the developmental arc that has its apogee in the novel. It is more useful

and more interesting to discuss short stories as something as separate from the novel as poetry. Poems that reach a certain standard as poetry don't then become 'like' or 'as good as' novels, and neither should short stories.

I think we are a very long way from resolving these problems, but there are signs that inspire hope. Lizzy Attree, director of the Caine Prize, once quoted Hamish Hamilton publisher Simon Prosser as saying that "In some ways, the short story is better suited to the demands of modern life and its time-poor denizens than the novel". This has been a common enough position to take in recent years, particularly with the atomisation of reading via phones, laptops and e-readers. The only problem is that it doesn't make sense. As Lorrie Moore has said,

*"There's a lot of yak about how short stories are perfect for the declining public attention span. But we know that's not true. Stories require concentration and seriousness. The busier people get, the less time they have to read a story... people often don't have a straight half hour of time to read at all. But they have fifteen minutes. And that is often how novels are read, fifteen minutes at a time. You can't read stories that way."*

More recently, however, Prosser reversed his previous position in a thoughtful piece about giving not less but more time to shorter work:

*The appeal of the short is not that it's a pragmatic solution to feeling time-poor. In some ways it's the opposite. The best short-form writers beguile us into*

*spending more time reading less, and into reading more into, and out of, fewer words. The tension between what you are given (in extent) and what you might get (in satisfaction) is a source of the pleasure. Readers of poetry have always known this, and writers of short or condensed work rely on a similar happy attentiveness from their audience.*

This is excellently put, and shows an acceptance of the short story as something that isn't, contrary to all our experience, perfectly suited to modern life. It is not easy; it requires undivided attention; it is not mass entertainment (unlike the novel, as Joyce Carol Oates points out, the short story is "invariably literary"). And yet, despite all this it is still alive, a fact which seems more worthy of celebration than sackcloth. Last year, Sarah Hall wrote of her feeling that the short story is,

"if not gloriously ascendant in Britain, airborne and at a reasonable altitude," a measured statement of the sort that is all too scarce in this debate. And what about George Saunders? What was his reply when he was asked if his prize win meant short stories were finally getting their due? "It seems like a nice moment," he said, "but I've been writing stories since the 1970s and it's like when the women's magazines say 'red is back' and it had never gone". Someone should give that man another prize.

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