

TOBY LITT:

My name's Toby Litt, I'm a writer of short stories, novels, and a comic, and I'm a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Birkbeck College in London. I don't find myself writing anecdotal stories all that often because the kind of writers who I love and the kind of tradition that I think I fit into with short stories is non-naturalistic.

It's one that comes more out of myth and tall stories rather than the realist Chekhov tradition of 'Here is someone living a small life, struggling and here is a day on which something big doesn't happen to them', I'm much more at home with ghosts and werewolves and things like that, even though I will sometimes write absolutely realist stories, I tend to feel that the form as a whole gives you the possibility of flying a long way from reality without the reader having to have a whole super-structure of world building go on along with that.

The short story forces the writer, the beginning writer, to give a beginning, a middle and an end, and to show how they attack a whole story, the arc of a whole story, and it means that they get a response to a completed thing, not to an incomplete and there's lots of get out clauses thing.

It also forces attention to the line, attention to the punctuation, the most minute things about a work, whereas if someone hands in chapters of a novel that I think they can be scrappier because it doesn't mean so much. A misplaced semicolon in a novel is fairly trivial compared to misplaced semicolon in a short story.

I tend to want something that is excessive and I go for excessive language, and short stories allow you to do that because it's not so wearying for the reader, a long, long novel such as *Finnegans Wake* is incredibly off-putting to people when the language has a density of attack and a need to... to read it really closely. Short story, I think your idiolect, your version of the whole language can be a lot more extreme and also bearable because the... the reader can see to the end of it.

Launderama is a story in *Adventures in Capitalism*, my first book, in which a guy who lives opposite a laundrette starts looking out of the window and seeing a female ghost getting inside one of the washing machines. It's one of the first ghost stories I ever wrote and certainly I think the first one I thought was successful and it does contrast what I wanted to contrast, which was a non-Gothic place for a ghost story, 'cause Gothic ghost stories usually take place in dirty old castles, dirty and old. And this was something that you associate with being clean, a laundrette, and something you associate with being new or at least sort of fifties. And yes there is an everydayness to that, but I wanted to make the laundrette quite a weird place in itself because it's so lit up and jewel-like in the night, and I think it describes it as being full of sort of little caves, people go into the laundrette and they have to I think have that moment of horror, even if it's just an everyday trip there, when they put their hand in and they don't know if they're going to encounter someone else's sock, my god.

I do often start with the voice or the sort of vocabulary area, the energy, the rhythm of a particular speaker, sometimes they're sort of deranged, sometimes they're in some strange state where they feel compelled to tell themselves. But I usually have some sense of what atmosphere the language should convey and what I want it to... to be as a sort of sub-part of the whole world. I want this to be this weird or this extreme little part of it.

I think what you read is your main collaborator as a writer and it's the only big way that you can influence yourself in a conscious way. I have writers who I read who I feel are enablers, in other words they're like putting your foot on the gas pedal, someone like Walt Whitman who has a very flowing rhythm, who has an expansive kind of 'I want to hug the world, I want to hug the universe' view of things, makes you feel stuff is possible.

You know, conversely if I want to put the brakes on, if I feel that I'm just blathering then I can go and read someone like Samuel Beckett and he will slow me down. Everything is difficult, the transition from word one to word two is almost impossible.

And any writer I think can choose to control their writing by what they read. I remember very clearly, I got to a certain point in my novel, *Beatniks*, and I read a Patricia Cornwell novel, and my

writing, my pacing just sped up, I could probably find the page where suddenly my narrative expectations had gone zip and I needed things to start happening faster.

I've always felt quite awkward with that idea of creativity, or I am a creative person, because it seems to me that I'm often in debate with or arguing against genres and I have no choice about that, I might have a utopian view of a world without a place where genres didn't exist, but we have places in the world because we have genres, we have stories because we have genres.

My greatest hope would be to invent an entirely new genre, one that couldn't be perceived before it existed, that may be forlorn because it may not be possible, genres may just mutate one out of another, the detective story Edgar Allan Poe may not have invented it, it may just come out of the short stories that were being written 10 or 20 years beforehand.

But I want to not just be secondary, I want to go to the world and encounter it with language as directly as I can, but, in between me and the world are genres and also that the people who exist in my world as I look at them, they exist within genres too; when they perform any act, they're probably performing it in a way that's been influenced by how they've seen someone do that in a film. How they've seen someone do that on telly, or even how they've read in books people feel about things, they were taught, I think, inwardness, people were taught, readers were taught inwardness by works of art, by novels, by paintings, by songs, and I think that explains why genres are there, it's very hard to write a song that isn't a kind of song. It's very hard to write any kind of series of words that doesn't become generic within about eight of them.

I do think sometimes in terms of analogies with art and drawing, and I do think that there is something basic about the... being able to draw a straight line, being able to draw a figure, being able to put something in three-dimensional space that has a pretty direct analogy with things you have to do in prose, and similarly those drawing exercises that are about loss of control, OK, put the pencil in your mouth and then try to draw the figure, turn the picture upside down and now see what it looks like, don't draw the chair, draw the spaces in between the legs. All of those things I think there are equivalents and they are useful. I think that the strongest writing that I do is not consciously controlled, but then you have to find a way in which you can do that, that you're not vomiting forth nonsense, that you're vomiting forth more sense than you could make otherwise.

I see this in rock and roll. Rock and roll for me is controlled loss of control. Or loss of control that's under control. It's wildness at the same time as being absolutely what that person would want to do, and that's a very powerful combination if you can make that happen.

As far as creative writing courses go and me being a creative writing tutor, I don't have that much of a problem with the word 'creative' in that context because it could be a lot worse, I don't wanna talk about fictions, I don't wanna talk about text, stories is too simple, what could I be, a story fixer or something like that.

And for a lot of the students, that is the writing that they want to do, they do other sorts of writing or they've always wanted to do creative writing. My objection to the word 'creative' partly comes from the fact that you do so many drafts that most of the time you seem to be destroying stuff, and secondly, if it were truly creative then it would seem to be independent of the other things that were there already, and you are creative into language and you're created by language.

So you're more a participant than a deus ex machina you know, dropping new stuff into the world, however new you make it you are assembling it out of the wood and the nails that were already there already but you can melt nails down by burning the wood.