

Teaching the changing story

Biography

Ursula Hurley teaches Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of Salford. Research interests include: innovation within prose fiction, generic distinctions between fiction and autobiography, and the pedagogy of writing skills. Before coming to Salford, she ran the Writing Centre at Liverpool Hope University. She is currently completing a doctorate, comprising a novel with critical discourses. She has recently contributed to *How to Write Fiction (and think about it)* ed Robert Graham (Palgrave, 2007) and *Everything You Need to Know About Creative Writing (but knowing isn't everything)* ed Heather Leach and Robert Graham (Continuum, 2007). She was also the featured poet in the August 2007 edition of the journal *Erbacce* (www.erbacce.com).

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Abstract

This paper begins with a brief survey of the state of contemporary short fiction practice, with particular reference to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, leading into a reflective account of pedagogical approaches to short fiction on Creative Writing degree programmes; an examination of expectations of Creative Writing courses from the point of view of students, teachers and the publishing industry; and consideration of how teaching methods can accommodate or respond to potentially conflicting aspirations. An account of delivering a short fiction module, and an evaluation of personal teaching practice, lessons learned and principles extrapolated concludes.

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The short story isn't what it used to be. Until recently, practitioners and readers of the genre would say this amid much head-shaking and tooth-sucking. Publishers didn't care for short stories: they just wanted novels. Only big-name novelists got short story anthologies published. Nobody got anywhere by being a great short fiction writer. Readerships were falling. The short story was stagnant; a declining genre.

Such was the concern that in 2004 the Arts Councils of England and Scotland, together with New Writing North commissioned a report entitled *The Short Story in the UK: an overview of the current state and exploration of opportunities for new initiatives*. While this report served to confirm many suspicions about mainstream publishing's prejudices, there was also much to encourage optimism. Independent publishers were stepping in where the large corporations feared to tread. Readers would engage with short fiction, if they were provided with choice and quality.

2004 seemed to mark a turning point in the recent development of the short story; whether it was the publication of the report, the ongoing work of the Save Our Short Story Campaign, or just something in the air, it felt like things were beginning to change. Dave Eggers' wonderful *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* was anthologised, and in 2005 was issued in paperback by Penguin. Ailsa Cox published her intelligent and inspiring guide to writing short stories, so much more useful than the 'how to' guides which had proliferated in previous years. There was talk of a national short story conference, which happened in 2006 and again, on an even more successful scale, this year, accompanied by a prize for the best short story collection by a single author from the British Isles. Hosted by Edge Hill University and attended by people who individually and collectively comprised literary critics, writers, teachers and publishers, the prize-giving and conference show-cased the short story as a dynamic chimera of evolving subgenres and multiple incarnations. Collaborations have begun there which will have exciting consequences, and a more formal short story research centre is now being discussed.

Out of this newly-seeded terrain grows a question: how do teachers of writing prepare their students to deal with the challenges and exploit the opportunities offered by the metamorphoses currently taking place within this genre? We find ourselves teaching the elements of narrative craft when those elements may very well then be carefully discarded by students who wish to embrace particular modes of innovation. And what of other students who wish to continue working within more conventional definitions of short fiction? How do we support and respect decisions about genre while enabling exploration and the testing of generic boundaries?

Such a host of challenges swarmed into view when I was tasked with developing and delivering a short fiction module to second year students on the BA English and Creative Writing programme at Salford University. These students had received 5 weeks' tuition on the basics of short fiction during their first year. Now they were expecting me to turn them into Chekovs and Mansfields. Some wanted to learn how to craft commercially successful

stories for popular magazines. Others wanted to explore the boundaries of innovative practice.

The research presented by the *Short Story in the UK* report was a constant consideration. One anonymous editor elaborated on the relative unpopularity of the short story within the publishing industry: 'There is a slight cottage industry feel to this – young writers have been taught how to craft short stories by the creative writing courses'. This chimes with Doris Betts' wariness of the 'cookie-cutter mould'. I was therefore very concerned that my teaching did not contribute to the perceived 'writing by numbers' tendency that seems to be doing such a disservice to graduates of creative writing courses. I decided that my role was to guide, to point out technique and how it might be used, then to stand back and let the students find their own way through it. Easily reproduced formulae and prescriptive tuition may have proved more popular with some students, but it would be worth engaging with resistance and attempting to surmount it in order to reach the prize on offer: autonomous writers able to plot their own courses through a constantly shifting but also liberatingly diverse context.

Reading for the module was an obvious choice. The only text that could possibly encompass my teaching aims was the *McSweeney's* anthology. Described by the Irish Times as 'the one true literary movement to emerge from America in over a decade', this anthology contains the best of the first ten issues of the journal *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Experimental, genre-blurring and sometimes hilarious, this anthology drags the short story kicking and screaming into the realm of innovation. Nevertheless, it includes beautifully crafted stories firmly rooted in the traditions of nineteenth century realism. Jim Shepard's 'Tedford and the Megalodon' is just a great piece of literature: moving, accessible, and a really useful example of a well-structured plot. With 'The Hypnotist's Trailer', Ann Cummins presents a piece that works like a very well put together story, apart from its bizarre and inexplicable subject matter, which may or may not be allegorical. Other contributions, like Sean Wilsey's 'The Republic of Marfa' appear to be pieces of journalism, high quality non-fiction, or autobiography. Then there are gems like George Saunders' 'Four Institutional Monologues', which seem to have very little resemblance to what we would recognise as a short story, and are sitting on or outside the boundaries of this genre.

As Eggers states in the Introduction, 'The only point is to see what can be done.' For me too, the point of this module was to see what my teaching could do. What would it produce?

In the first class of this module, I introduce an issue of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. I use Issue 16, simply because this is the one I happened to pick up out of idle curiosity while browsing in a London bookshop. Any issue would do the job. Each is unique, and produced in Reykjavik, home to the only printer in the world who can accommodate the *McSweeney's* project. Every issue is a joy to discover, crafted with extraordinary imaginative flair and painstaking attention to detail. Some are illustrated like old-fashioned books with glossy colour plates. Some have accompanying audio CDs, containing soundtracks composed specially for the journal. One comes in envelopes bunched together with elastic bands, masquerading as a pile of junk mail. Issue 16 looks like a rectangular box, covered with white fabric which sports a tasteful beige print of tree trunks and branches. The box folds

out one side at a time. The first side opens to reveal a dark green, embossed paper lining, in which is tucked a black comb with the word 'Timothy' engraved in silver letters. Here's what happens:

Some students laugh. Others snort with derision. 'Where's the story?' asks one.

'Perhaps the comb *is* the story,' suggests another, 'or perhaps Timothy is a character in one of the stories.'

'Yeah, right! Or maybe we should comb our hair and smarten ourselves up before we sit down to read?' retorts the cynic.

'Maybe the comb is meant to provide a stimulus for our own writing.'

'You mean they want their readers to write their own stories?'

'Perhaps...'

The next side of the box opens to reveal a conventional-looking, high quality journal nestling in its embossed green pocket. The cover is deep brown, sports silver text, and depicts a small engraving of a tree. A different species of tree appears at the beginning of each of the stories, with no obvious connection to the content. These covers house work by well known writers, including Roddy Doyle. We discuss why Roddy Doyle may wish to appear in such a vehicle.

'He's already rich and famous, so he's got nothing to lose,' is the communal response.

When I ask whether a new or less well known writer would benefit from appearing in this journal, we decide that it wouldn't hurt, it's a prestigious publication, but how many readers would pay the £20 that these imported journals cost, and who would get past the packaging and actually notice who the authors were? When I add that Dave Eggers is a commercially successful writer, best known for *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, who could afford to subsidise *McSweeney's* as a pet project, some group members become angry, and the cynic snorts even more loudly.

'Ha! He's just playing. Why should we take it seriously?'

The implication is that I should be teaching them how to do something they can make a living at. We are wasting time humouring the toys of a rich author.

The next side of the box folds open to reveal an over-size pack of playing cards. The backs of these cards are patterned, but the fronts contain text, as well as their suit. This is a story by well-known innovator Robert Coover. Brief instructions claim that providing the first and last cards remain in place, it is possible to shuffle all the others, producing a different, fully functioning story every time.

'How do we know that's true? Who has the time to find out?'

'That must be really hard to work out,' adds someone who, thankfully, has begun to consider the writing processes involved.

'Why present a story like that?' I ask.

'Dunno.'

'He's just weird.'

'It's cleverness for the sake of cleverness.'

I ask whether it draws attention to the physicality of the reading process, and the assumptions implicit in conventionally presented texts. Brows furrow. These students want to win prize money, get in enough

journals to attract a publisher. And as far as they are concerned, readers want to do just that: read.

Things are going badly so I call a break. During the recess, I invite students to examine the *McSweeneys* journal for themselves. Some are so hostile to it that they pointedly ignore me. Others come and unfold it. Some smile. They play with it. No-one reads any of the stories.

I have to regain momentum with this group, or none of us is going to enjoy the next 10 weeks of the course. Contemplating my own role in this looming failure, I decide that I need to interrogate my assumptions and motivations. I re-examine my fundamental beliefs about how writing classes should operate.

Doris Betts states that beyond an affirmation of the rudiments (mastery of mechanics and spelling), there are only two approaches to teaching writing: wholes-to-parts or parts-to-wholes. The 'wholes-to-parts' method relies upon a process of osmosis, whereby students are fed a constant diet of 'good' writing in the hope that they will internalise its characteristics and reproduce it in their own work. In contrast, the 'parts-to-wholes' method picks out and practises one technique at a time. It believes implicitly in the writer's toolbox (advocated so eloquently in Stephen King's *On Writing*): each tool is examined, its use explained, skills to wield it effectively are practised. It returns to the toolbox sharpened and ready to use.

The former, 'wholes-to-parts' method is a large scale, top-down approach, which in my opinion is unreliable and non-specific in its effects. Besides, students who are so minded can do this in their own time. People who have paid to join a writing course deserve better. I am firmly of the opinion that the latter, 'parts-to-whole' approach makes for more effective teaching and learning. For example, you don't have to wait until work is submitted for marking to see that someone needs to strengthen their use of dialogue – you look over their shoulder during the class on dialogue and you help them sharpen it up. Chances are they do better in their assessed piece, gaining confidence and motivation.

Something else that Betts said reminded me why I do this job: 'What works in all writing classes is what the teacher knows best and can transmit passionately – without being doctrinaire.' Thus re-invigorated, I planned the rest of my module with renewed hope and enthusiasm. Each session would look at one of the techniques in the writer's toolbox, and each technique would be demonstrated with reference to the authors I was most passionate about. There would also be a conscious decision to demonstrate each technique twice: once in a more conventional, perhaps older text, and again with reference to the *McSweeney's* anthology.

To illustrate, transformative moments were demonstrated with reference to James Joyce's *Dubliners* and his conception of the epiphany. Students were then invited to find their own instances in *McSweeney's*, 'Tedford and the Megalodon', and Amanda Davis' 'Fat Ladies Floated in the Sky Like Balloons' being favourite choices. Understanding how the technique could be taken from the most respectable texts of the literary canon and transplanted with great success into the frontier lands of innovation proved a transformative moment in itself for many: 'Hey! I don't have to write like Joyce in order to use his tools.' Having looked at examples from both classic and contemporary texts, students then deployed the tool within guided writing

exercises during class time. The decision as to whether to include this method in the story they would submit for assessment was entirely theirs.

Similarly, point of view was introduced via a detailed examination of Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'. The invitation to find effective instances of point of view as a narrative tool in *McSweeney's* was then issued. With practice, students proved surprisingly astute at identifying the principle of a technique beneath the camouflage of innovation or controversy. David Foster Wallace's 'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VIII)' was the popular choice.

Having resolved to attempt some innovation in my teaching methods (in keeping with my stated aim to 'see what can be done'), I introduced the 'Crazy Point of View' generator, whereby students undertook a lottery-style selection of different narrative elements, randomly combined to produce some very challenging situations. For example, a typical result would be: *Charles Darwin meets Genghis Khan in the British Museum in the year 3000AD. Use the future tense and the second person.* As well as providing much amusement, this exercise generated excellent, innovative work. While some students went for the more obvious devices of time machines, we also had dream sequences, hallucinations, fantasies, parallel universes, science fiction technologies, films, computer games, reality TV shows and found texts. Collectively, the group realised that innovation could be fun. The cynicism and resistance disappeared, as those who were concerned with commercial success realised that the techniques being taught in class could be employed in that direction *if that was the choice of the author*. More than anything, I felt that I had empowered these students to make their own decisions.

So, was my experiment successful? Almost all students passed the module, and most passed with marks comfortably into Upper Second territory. There was a pleasing amount of First Class grades, and several produced pieces approaching publishable standard. I know of one student who has since placed her story with an innovative UK regional journal, although no-one has, as yet, been accepted by *McSweeney's*. On paper, the numbers look good. What of the learning experience for those who participated? Anonymous module evaluation questionnaires signalled a 100% satisfaction rating, with over 80% being 'extremely' or 'very' satisfied. Teaching style, learning new techniques, approaches to innovation and the choice of *McSweeney's* as set text were all mentioned specifically in the 'comments' section.

One student wrote:

Stimulating workshops – well-structured module. Techniques well covered. Felt comfortable attempting work. Interesting material to engage with and learn from. Felt it provided a good grounding in terms of 'state' of short fiction today.

While all positive comments are of course hugely pleasing, I was particularly delighted to see that the 'parts-to-whole' decision on my part had been appreciated by the students – several mentioned how useful the model of teaching by technique had been to them. The above comment also shows that students appreciated my attempt to ground the module within the

contemporary state of the genre, rather than relying on classic or traditional texts within a hermetically sealed academic bubble.

There were, however, some negative comments, which related almost exclusively to the choice of *McSweeney's* as set text. Some students seemed to find the emphasis on innovation restrictive. One wrote that it 'might have been good to read some other book as well as *McSweeney's*.' Which, of course, they were welcome to do! In addition to the material from Joyce, Mansfield, et al distributed in class, the module handbook contained an extensive supplementary reading list, which possibly indicates that it is the idea of innovation, rather than innovative texts themselves, that students find threatening.

To conclude: was this module worth undertaking? Undoubtedly, yes. It made me reaffirm the basic tenets of my teaching practice and re-examine some of my most fundamental beliefs about writing. The students, in the end, seemed not only to have succeeded in terms of academic grades, but also to have gained an appreciation of the short story's changing nature and their ability to contribute to it. The process was uncomfortable at times: it takes courage for an inexperienced writer to find a new path over unfamiliar ground rather than follow the rutted road towards homogeneity. Of course, some of my students may also choose to follow this road. But at least I have given them that choice.

Will the module run again? It has, and is, with double the number of students this year. As for the future, *The Best of McSweeney's Vol 1* has gone out of print. While we may draw our own conclusions about what this indicates regarding the commercial potential of innovative short fiction, I can only hope that a British replacement will come along some time soon. Who knows? When my class are all rich and famous, they'll start their own journals in the spirit of *McSweeney's*.

The short story isn't what it used to be. And a good thing too!

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Notes

Short Story Conference 'The Story Shall Be Changed': Tales and Re-tellings in the Short Story. Saturday 21st July 2007, Edge Hill University.
<http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/Faculties/FAS/English/CreativeWriting/NWShortStory07.htm>

The Edge Hill Prize for the best short story collection by a single author from the British Isles.
<http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/Faculties/FAS/English/CreativeWriting/NWShortStory.htm>

More information on the teaching at Salford University is available from:
http://www.espach.salford.ac.uk/english/info_for_students.php

Ursula Hurley
University of Salford
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