

Brendan in Paris by Amanda Kaye

The cafe is pumping for 7:15 am. Not full but filling up. They are playing music that sounds like a car chase scene from a French new wave film and Brendan can see it in his mind's eye. He sets it at midnight so there's no gridlock and also, so he can enjoy the City of Lights lit up like a postcard. The music leads him through the streets on the tail of a Citroën DS, and from the cabin of a late model Peugeot 208, Brendan can see it all. The speeding and mad lane changing down the Champs Élysées, the screeching around Place de la Concorde, skidding off on to a road he doesn't know so well, pushing up through the gears and fanging it up to la Défense for the big finish. You'd think the younger Peugeot would have the advantage, but the Citroën driver knows his stuff and takes a last minute sharp turn and the Peugeot overshoots and comes to rest in just the sort of deserted car park in Courbevoie where you really shouldn't be messing about at midnight. It's just in time too, because the next track is Stevie Wonder's You are the Sunshine of my Life, and you can't speed through the streets of anywhere to that.

Swan Song by Philip Hammial

Three members of a quartet would like to emulate the folly of bathers—in over their heads & then, just before going down for the third time, sing a song, a wonderfully sweet song, a song with a melody that would seduce the lifeguards away from their bevy of girls, scattering them like bowling pins as they race to the rescue. However, the fourth member will have none of it. Fed up with the whole affair, his only wish is to make an end to it, a clean break, no mess, no relatives shedding tears in a funeral parlour, no speeches over a grave, & so he refuses to sing. A barbershop quartet with only three singers, it simply doesn't work, the harmony gone askew, the melody snagged on a rock—no hope of wooing the lifeguards from their girls as down it goes, a quartet to a watery grave.

Traffic Jam by Philip Hammial

A six lane highway. No one has moved for an hour and won't for several more. Bumper to bumper, how to get across? Noticing my plight, a young woman, a stunning brunette, steps out of her car, opens the back door & helps me in, a feeble old man obviously in need of assistance. She then walks around to the other side of the car, opens the back door and helps me out, another young woman, a gorgeous blonde, in the next lane already waiting with the back door of her car open. And so it goes until I reach the other side of the highway, safe & sound, my faith in humanity, at least in the female half, fully restored.

FLASH FICTION

If you've never heard of Flash Fiction, then look it up on Wikipedia and be prepared to be amazed. As someone who struggles to write a story of more than 55,000 words (weren't most Penguins and Pelicans about that length—how has it become usual for a book to be closer to 90,000?), this is a description that instantly caught my irritated attention when I read recently of someone described as a writer of 'micro fiction'.

I asked a couple of published writers what their thoughts were on flash or micro fiction and was met with blank looks. 'Never heard of it', was the reply.

It's probably the name 'flash fiction' which gives the impression of an utterly modern and up-to-the-minute rapping type of a read. English writer David Gaffney has a lot to answer for with its new popularity.

He explains: 'A few years ago, I published a book of flash fiction called *Sawn-off Tales*. But until only a little while before that, I hadn't heard of flash fiction or micro-fiction or sudden fiction or short-short stories. Then, on poet Ian

McMillan's recommendation, I parcellled up a manuscript made up entirely of this stuff and sent it to Salt Publishing, a poetry specialist. Fifty-eight stories, each exactly 150 words long.'

He sent it to a poetry specialist? It sounds as though flash fiction has evolved from poetry or is it that poetry is evolving from very short fiction?

Definitions by word length vary from under 300 words to under 1,000 words. According to David Gaffney there are a number of essential features to which he also adds some advice: Start in the middle; don't use too many characters;

make certain the ending isn't actually at the end; the title is all important; the last line should not complete the story but take the reader to a new place; and, write long then make it short.

So flash fiction requires a protagonist, conflict, obstacles and resolution, and its brevity means that some elements are not stated but are simply implied in the story, allowing for differing interpretations.

A recent call-out from *Little Fictions* invited submissions (www.shortaustralianstories.com.au) for what they describe as a unique literary event in which actors perform readings of flash fiction in front of a live audience. Begun four years ago in Adelaide as *Spineless Wonders Presents*, their present home—the very cool Knox Street Bar—is in Sydney's Chippendale. *Little Fictions* has been part of the 2015 Sydney Writers Festival and the Sydney Fringe Festival. The works they select are under 1,000 words and in the form of micro fiction, microlit or dramatic monologues.

Short fiction or very short fiction has been around for a very long time with no set definition except that it is a style of fictional literature of extreme brevity. During the 20th century the usual description was short short story.

A 1992 anthology entitled *Flash Fiction: Seventy-two very short stories*, edited by James Thomas, described a work of flash fiction as a story which would fit on two facing pages of a typical literary magazine. The Chinese name for this style, a 'smoke long', evokes a scene of a group of people

(probably men!) sitting around smoking and reciting their stories, the way poets in many cultures have always shared their words in a sociable smoky haze. Nobel Prize winner, Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz comes to mind with his *Echoes of an Autobiography*.

Cosmopolitan magazine is credited with popularising short short stories in the 1920s. Greats of literature have practised the form, indeed some on the magazine's pages. Anton Chekhov, O. Henry, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury all wrote short short works. Hemingway's first short story collection *In Our Time* consists of 18 very short stories. Robert Olen Butler's short-shorts make up *Severance*, each of the 62 pieces describing the last 90 seconds of conscious awareness in decapitated heads!

Clearly the internet has increased the interest in flash fiction. There are zines and websites devoted to the genre and some of the terms gaining use are indicative, such as twitter fiction (twitterature) which has 140 characters, about 23 words.

Several poets and a micro fiction author participated in Varuna's, the Writer's House, recent project called *Whispering Trees* (see issue 6 of OZ ARTS), where people passing trees would suddenly hear voices speaking words of poetry. Micro fiction author Amanda Kaye's contribution was called *Legend has it* and is printed here, together with several prose poems from Philip Hammial's collection called *Swan Song* (Picaro Press, 2004), all of which read like flash fiction.

Carolynne Skinner

Legend has it by Amanda Kaye

Legend has it there was this lady who loved birds. She lived in Blackheath and she watched them in the trees and on the grass and sipping the pollen out of the grevilleas. She loved the birds very much, but truthfully, the birds loved her more. They watched her from the trees and the grass and the blossoms. Some of them watched her very close. They would perch on her shoulder and pick at the threads in the sleeve of her jumper, and make soft, happy sounds in her ears. They would walk up her extended arms like post-op patients taking their exercise. People were quite scary things generally, and not to be trusted, but the lady was different, and the birds knew it. She was taller than the bottlebrush. She knew how to be as quiet and still as a scribbly gum. They made up songs about her and they sang these in the mornings, full throated and strong with melodies that stretched almost as long as a summer afternoon. The birds loved the lady and the birds lingered. They kept an eye on things. That's what I hear.

Caught by Philip Hammial

'Are we here forever?' 'Only for another three days.' 'Why three days?' 'Because it will take that long for the rat to eat enough cheese to uncover the spring-loaded switch that will trigger the lever that unlocks the door on the ape's cage who, smelling the bananas in your lunch box (whatever you do don't eat them) will, if my calculations are correct, give one tug on the door of this closet & we're out.'

TREASURE in the world's smallest receptacle—the left eardrum of an Egyptian child who, had she not been poisoned, would have become the High Priestess of the Temple of Neith at Sais. Of course my old friend Abdul, retired from the arms trade & living in a luxurious villa on the Nile, knew where it was. His Uncle Hosni had it locked up in a safe in his pawnbroker's establishment, & it was mine for a mere 30,000 piastres. Why so cheap? I soon found out. My *Ah!* when I finally had it in my possession set it off. Sensitive to the slightest vibration, it roared like a launched rocket, a sonic blast that has left me deaf to this day.

Philip Hammial