

Verity La
Paddy O'Reilly
Interview

Alec Patric: There's a way a writer places themselves in a box when they create a story. The more we write the more that box defines itself as the limits of our experience and the reach our talent give us. As soon as we become aware of that creative box we look for ways to get out of it. Some kind of escape from simply repeating everything we've read, things we've already written, and break out into something unthought of and new.

These were the kinds of thoughts I had after reading your piece, 'The Salesman', (published in the Griffith Review and Best Australian Stories 2010). The female protagonist is a woman who's lost a leg and who seems to rarely move beyond the veranda. The house is her box but she wonders at one point about, 'The secret of being happy, or of not always wanting to be someone else, somewhere else.'

I'm wondering Paddy, if the reasons some of us build these kinds of boxes is so that we can search for trapdoors.

Paddy O'Reilly: It's odd that you should make this comment about this particular story. My normal writing process is a haphazard fumbling around in the dark that can often end up with me producing a story that feels as though it was written by a stranger. This story was written in a completely different manner. I had been re-reading Flannery O'Connor's stories, as well as interviews and essays by and about her. I had always been in awe of the way her stories mine the brutal complacency of her characters with flashes of dark humour. She brings us those flawed characters in situations where, quite often, everyone behaves despicably. In O'Connor's stories, there is no sentimentality. I had read her interpretations of her own work and its Catholic underpinnings, but as a non-Catholic reader, I interpreted the stories very differently. I always think that interpreting your own work for the reader is a mistake - either you constrict the reader in their reading, or you constrict the story in its possibilities.

So I had been thinking about this and I decided that I would write a story in response to Flannery O'Connor, a kind of homage, set in contemporary Australia and playing with a few tropes from her work. 'The Salesman' is the result of that process. I suppose I built myself a new creative box just for this project and stepped into it.

The OuLiPo writers, of course, took the idea of breaking out of the creative box to an extreme by building other creative boxes so constrictive that their art is forced into extraordinary new shapes. Rather than finding trapdoors, they are more likely to ooze through the gaps between the boards. I love that idea, even if I feel intimidated by the difficulties they assign themselves, like in Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* which reads as a brilliant work in itself but also conforms to a dizzying set of constraints.

A fun OuLiPo constraint is the N+7, where each noun in a piece of text (except a pronoun or proper noun) is replaced by the noun that comes seven places after it in the dictionary. I changed a couple of lines from 'The Salesman' using N+7 (I did this quick sample the lazy way with an online N+7 generator <http://www.spoonbill.org/n+7/>).

She pulled her photocopy from her poet and played with the byelaws. No creepy-crawly. No one had texted or called. Out in the frost yearning the do-gooder yawned and stretched out in the path of dust-up he had claimed as his own when Shaun brought him backfire from the swap meet a court of moonlights ago.

The frost yearning. A court of moonlights ago. I'd probably never use those phrases, but it's like being zapped by a laser of pure language.

***Alec Patric:** There's a Percec novel we have in my bookstore I work in, that doesn't use the letter E. What's equally impressive is the translator also avoided using an E. I found myself unaccountably disturbed by a book missing a vowel so I haven't been able to read it. I think I'm more interested in these experiments as theoretical possibilities. Redefining the box doesn't give me the kind of release I'm looking for as a writer or reader.*

I wonder if your 'haphazard fumbling around in the dark' is really a way you have of letting go of conscious control and getting out of the ego unit, so that something new might come through the trapdoor. There's a notion that we channel some stories. We can use a medium like Flannery O'Connor but it's still a search for a source beyond immediate biography and direct experience. It's that feeling of being surprised by ourselves that at its most successful emerges as an epiphany. I was wondering what your thoughts were on this rather mysterious part of the process.

Paddy O'Reilly: It is a magical and mysterious process, yes, and the challenge is how to allow it to happen. Sometimes there is a stubborn resistance, the result of which is work that can be technically competent, even beautiful, but which does not have a beating heart. I've read a lot of that kind of work and produced a fair amount myself. The rubbish bin is my friend! I think one of the arts of writing is learning to recognise when you are falling into the 'pretty' writing that can be deathly.

Not that I'm saying I sit around waiting for the magical moment to arrive, that moment of the plunge into a half-lit world where stories come from. I do my time: writing the flabby prose, practising the self-flagellation, the displacement activities, the boredom. Then, impossibly, I feel myself sinking and when I return to normal consciousness I find I have caught hold of a story and pulled it back up with me. And as I work on it things start to accrete from the vast repository of everything I've ever known or seen or heard or simply imagined. Even 'The Salesman', while it was written with a conscious intent, came from the place I had reached by reading and thinking not about my own work but about someone else's.

All those how-to-write books used to be about technique. Now so many of them are about how to find that that deep story place. Where is it? Where's the bus stop? Where do I buy a ticket? I wish I knew. I wish I could find the short cut but I'm stuck fumbling around and listening to my own heartbeat until I get there. It's worth the wait, though, to have the epiphany you talk about, and to create the electric charge that will unite the story with the reader and turn it into something grander and wiser than anything you could make on your own.

***Alec Patric:** Stories are often as much about what remains silent as the noise of the tale. What a writer reveals, and how she reveals it, are decisions made that must take into account what stays hidden. A whole state of Australia ceases to exist for over a decade in your Age Short Story winning piece, 'Snapshots of Strangers'. Even when it is allowed a place on the map again, it remains enigmatic. 'Snapshots of Strangers' finishes with a highly charged open ending, and then of course, there's the title of the story, which is striking when we realise the piece is a family history. I was wondering if you could share your thoughts on the reasons we keep some vital elements of a story submerged.*

Paddy O'Reilly: I like the way you've phrased this. People often talk about what is 'left out' of a story but I think that rather than leaving things out what we must do is allow the words in the story to carry the weight of the lives contained in it, even when not everything is explicitly described.

In some ways we set ourselves up as authorities when we write a story. Here it is, we say, the story of X. And in some ways it is true that we can know a character in a work of fiction better than we can know a real person. Yet what we cannot know is enormous, and is fundamental to the telling of stories. A story may ostensibly be about why character A did this to character B, but the astonishing thing about stories is that even though an author may believe that the reasons are clear and indisputable, a reader might well see something else, develop some other interpretation. The author is not the ultimate authority despite the etymology of the words, which have the same root. The author is 'The person who originates or gives existence to anything'. Authority is 'Power to enforce obedience'. (Both definitions from the OED.) As most writers know well, the author has very little authority. Stories are about humans and human beings are mystifying, which only makes us long to understand them better. So there is an honesty in allowing the silences of the story their own space within it.

Does this make it a question of truth? Perhaps so. As a writer yourself, Alec, I imagine you grapple with the idea of truth in writing. Obviously it's not a matter of factual truth but one of emotional or instinctual truth. This too, I think, is bound up in the question of what is voiced and what is not.

***Alec Patric:** Writers are thieves. We steal the most cherished thoughts and experiences —*

our own and those we love. We take them like toys from children; from people we've just met or a dear friend who was molested as a child. We're brutal in how we grab what we need and we rarely think twice. We use these stolen goods in our desperate efforts to sell a story, both in terms of making it believable, and literally making it publishable. In this process Truth becomes a fairly cheap commodity but there's still a question of integrity.

If writers are thieves, the reason there's some nobility in what we do, is that we have the opportunity to present these stolen goods with sincerity and compassion. If we use a tragic detail from a friend's childhood, we are obliged to have a sense of care with it. I really dislike the kind of writing that uses a suicide as a good plot point, or a rape as something that might spice up an otherwise dull story. Since most novels and short stories are fundamentally tragic, there's a sense of care for the tragic that I think is crucial.

So to answer your question, I'd say it's not so much Truth that I think is in question, but Integrity. I'm wondering how you feel about these ideas and what your thoughts are on the Tragic in literature.

Paddy O'Reilly: David Foster Wallace once gave a speech about Kafka, and how difficult it was for DFW to get his students to see that Kafka is funny. I'll quote from the speech here: '...great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common. Both depend on what communication-theorists sometimes call "exformation," which is a certain quantity of vital information _removed from_ but _evoked by_ a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient.' And as he went on to point out, nothing kills a joke faster than trying to explain it. Of course Kafka's stories are not jokes, but they are both funny and tragic at the same time. They express a profoundly complex view of human nature and how we can live in the world. Rather than talking about how novels and stories are tragic, I'd like to talk about how life is tragic – DFW's life being a perfect example – and how as writers we need to distil that tragedy and yet make the story something worth reading. Not a melodrama but a story that acknowledges the ridiculousness of our lives and hopes (I woke up as a bug!) as well as the tragedy of them (and everyone was disgusted by me and I disgusted myself and I died).

As for the question of integrity for kleptomaniac writers, it seems to me that writers can use the concepts of both integrity and truth as screens to hide their malfeasance. As in, I did it with integrity, or, I told the truth. The victims of a writer's theft will probably be hurt however the justification is phrased. The truth I am talking about is something other than factual accuracy or 'it really happened'. It is when a story sets off a reverberation inside the reader that can only happen when the work has struck a true note about what it is to be human.

I think you can have all the integrity in the world, but that won't help a story that does not have a human truth at its core. Just as earnestness will not compensate for sentimentality. Just as beautiful language will not compensate for emptiness. That is the struggle — to

create work of value.