

Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Jackie Gay

No 3: Be Inspired

‘Make the ordinary extraordinary ...’ In the third of the short story master class articles, Jackie Gay looks at the craft of the American writer E Annie Proulx.

Alice Munro, who has been hailed as the ‘world’s greatest living short story writer’ articulated the standard a short story should aspire to: to ‘see the world in a quick, glancing light’. To me this means that a short story – whether set in Sparkhill or Siberia, encompassing ten years or ten minutes – can, if the writer is good enough and makes careful choices, illuminate aspects of human nature itself; bright flashes of emotional truth from the hairdresser’s, factory or isolated farm. It is not easy, though: many expert novelists find the short story form challenging, including Annie Proulx, whose collection of stories *Close Range* I am going to use as a model.

The stories in *Close Range* are all set in the ‘tough and unforgiving’ wilds of Wyoming and the collection was initiated when the US Nature Conservancy asked Annie Proulx to contribute something to a proposed collection of short fiction in which the stories were to be inspired by a visit to a Nature Conservancy preserve. Ms Proulx’s publisher then ‘allowed her a side trip’ and she wrote a collection of short fiction set in the state, the idea of which ‘seized her entirely’. This is important: be passionate about your subject matter, if you don’t care about it how can you expect your reader to? As well as the inspiration of the landscape – ‘The wild country – indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky . . .’ – Ms Proulx drew on her collection of regional lives and events; folktales, Wyoming history and even a visit to the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, as source material (of which I am profoundly jealous). She talked to musicians, songwriters, painters, ranchers and bar proprietors with names like Buzzy Malli – as brilliant as those she chooses for her characters – and went for ‘gripping’

plane rides over the landscape.

So, what inspires you? Is it particular characters or relationships, places, events? Never underestimate the stories close to you – none of the characters in Annie Proulx’s book would imagine they are subjects for fiction, it is her writing, her vision which makes the ordinary extraordinary. Witness this brief description of Leecil – ‘god save the one who said Lucille’ – a rancher in the story ‘The Mud Below’ who has come into town looking for help with branding some cattle:

He winked his dime-size eyes. His blunt face was corrugated with plum-colored acne and among the angry swellings grew a few blond whiskers. Diamond couldn’t see how he shaved without bleeding to death. The smell of livestock was strong.

Leecil becomes even more vivid when he speaks:

‘It’s just work. Git the calves into the chute, brand em, fix em, vaccinate em, git em out.’

‘Fix em?’ said Diamond.

Leecil made an eloquent gesture at his crotch.

Or perhaps you’re inspired by an image or metaphor which seems, to you, to sum up a situation you want to explore. In ‘A Lonely Coast’ Annie Proulx uses an image at the start of the story which immediately sets the tone – and drama – of the story about to unfold.

‘You ever see a house burning up in the night, way to hell and gone out there on the plains? Nothing but blackness and your headlights cutting a little wedge into it, could be in the middle of the ocean for all you can see. And in that big dark a crown of flame the size of your thumbnail trembles ... And you might think about the people in the burning house, see them trying for the stairs, but mostly you don’t give a damn. They are too far away, like everything else.’

And so the scene is set: isolation, distance (both physical and emotional), impending trouble. We are plunged into the world of Josanna Skiles, who cooks at the Wig-Wag and comes from a family whose herd of cows is blighted by dwarfism (a neat story-

within-a-story). 'A Lonely Coast' also gives us a great example of characterisation through a person's possessions:

'Once Josanna gave me a ride in her brother's truck ... and it was sure a down-home truck, pair of chaps hanging over the seat back, chain, beat-up hat on the floor, a filthy Carhartt jacket, seven or eight torn up gloves, dog hairs and dust, empty beer cans, .30-.06 in the rear window rack and on the seat between us in a snarl of wire, rope and old mail unopened, a .44 Ruger Blackhawk half out of the holster. Let me tell you that truck made me homesick.'

Note how the writing not only tell us about Josanna's brother, but Josanna, the world they live in and, through the last line, the narrator herself.

In 'Brokeback Mountain' two young cowboys, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, fall in love, against their wishes and the odds. We are swept along by the energy of them:

They had a high-time supper by the fire, a can of beans each, fried potatoes and a quart of whiskey on shares, sat with their backs against a log, boot soles and copper jeans rivets hot, swapping the bottle while the lavender sky emptied of color ... talking horses and rodeo, roughstock events, wrecks and injuries sustained, dogs each had owned and known, the draft, Jack's home ranch where his father and mother held on ...

Annie Proulx sketches the wider world they live in, unobtrusively slipping her story into its historical and cultural context. The story ends in tragedy and Ennis goes looking for something to salvage from Jack's possessions:

The shirt seemed heavy until he saw there was another shirt inside it. It was his own plaid shirt, lost, he'd thought ... stolen by Jack and hidden here ... the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one.

The emotional truth of forbidden love: a stolen shirt worn next to the skin.

Finally, think hard about your titles. In a short story a title is a signpost for the reader, an economic and powerful way of enticing them into your fictional world and guiding them through it. 'The Half-Skinned Steer', 'People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water', '55 Miles to the Gas Pump' – are you intrigued enough yet to go with

Annie Proulx into Wyoming? Take the particular places and people that you are interested in and care about and think about how to craft a story which shows just how fascinating this world is; create characters, voices and narratives which will draw your reader in. Be inspired; inspire your reader, then you can take them anywhere.

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Born in Birmingham, JACKIE GAY, travelled in Europe, Asia, the Far East and Africa before returning home to write. She has written two novels, *Scapegrace* and *Wist* (Tindal Street Press, 2000 & 2003), and co-edited three anthologies of short stories including *England Calling*. She currently works as an artist in healthcare and community settings, and teaches creative writing at the University of Central England. She has recently completed her third novel, *The Flickering Lamp*.

E ANNIE PROULX lives in Wyoming and was 56 when her first novel, *Postcards*, was published in 1991. Her second novel, *The Shipping News*, won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Her collection *Heart Songs* (1994) established her reputation as an inspirational short story writer. After the novel *Accordion Crimes* (1996), Proulx turned to the American West with *Close Range* (1999), powerful stories observing the hardscrabble lives of Wyoming natives with spare yet finely wrought prose, and the novel *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), set in the Southwest.