

# Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Helen Cross

## No 5: Be Fearless

‘Discover real beauty in danger...’ In the fifth of the Short Story Masterclass articles, Helen Cross advises you to have the courage of your convictions in writing a short story and looks at the fearless and funny short stories written by Emily Perkins.

You want to write a great story. You’ve made a few attempts. In fact you’ve even finished a couple. But there’s a problem: you’re appalled by the stuff you’re coming up with. No, worse – more than appalled; ashamed, embarrassed, deeply unsettled. You’d intended to write sensitive tales of love and loss, or witty comic gems, or thrilling action adventures, or even, if desperate, steely social realism, but your stories don’t confirm to anything you recognise in any other writer.

Perhaps you’re sick. Or weird. Certainly these perverted people pouring from your pen are often dangerous, bizarre, outrageous and sordid. And when they get funny it’s even worse: you’re smiling in all the wrong places. No, you’re not even laughing – you’re cackling. You have to face it; your stories are full of strange lusts, disappointments, damage, perversion, lunacy and darkness. And that’s just the light-hearted ones. What if your parents, your friends, your husband, your children were to see this stuff? You’d die of shame.

Well, let me reassure you – this is your imagination. This is your gold dust. And if you’re in touch with your inner wickedness, and you’re letting it out on the page, you’re on your way to becoming a very good writer.

The reason I loved Emily Perkins’ debut collection of short stories, *Not Her Real Name* (Picador, 1996) was because each one breathed fire. Here were stories of disgrace and loneliness, awkwardness and despair, told with fierce energy and great inventiveness. She was unapologetic. She was fearless. She was funny.

The story ‘Barking’ opens with Billy, a poisonous wannabe actor, taking a clown class. Dog is Billy’s belligerent clown name. It’s proving a particularly bad

clown day and Dog is soon ejected from the class for abusive clowning. Unfortunately this is the same day that Billy's sister accuses the family of satanic ritual abuse. The furious mood of the narrator bounces right up against the hilarious tale narrated.

Our clown teacher, she was worse than most at that stupid Drama Centre – one of those deadly serious people who pretend they've got a really 'natural' and 'spontaneous' sense of fun, and it's all about learning how to play 'just like you did when you were a natural, happy, unafraid child'. Well, I'm so sorry for not growing up with the Waltons Family.

The title story in *Not Her Real Name* skips through the misfortunes of Cody, a young woman hurtling in and out of love, hope and confidence. Embracing poetry, subheadings, letters, and lists and employing a range of tenses and voices, this is a smart, brazen tale told with a devilish smile. And not just in its subject, but in its form and style. If you wanted to be po-faced you might call it post-modern; whatever, it's heady, original, daring and wild.

Cody can't do anything without analysing it.

Cody knows she shouldn't be so negative about sharing her flat. She's taken her desk and an armchair out of the sunroom. There's just enough room for a double bed and a small chest of drawers. She vacuumed for the first time in about a month and scrubbed the bath. The *Woman's Weeklys* are hidden under her bed and a couple of Kundera books are lying casually on the kitchen table. She wonders what she's trying to prove. She feels her misplaced pride dragging her around the house, trying to create the image of a fabulous self-sufficient working woman. She buys fresh flowers. This is exhausting.

We've been there. We've felt as furious as Billy, as self-conscious as Cody. All good writers eventually become confident that however oddly they view the world this is exactly how others think and feel. You have pitch-black daydreams? You find heartbreak funny? You're assaulted by crazy desires? Well, congratulations because so, secretly, does everyone. They just don't write it down – that's your job.

Whereas a novel needs an extensive structure, a range of characters, a number of questions, a short story can take any moment of madness, any barmy idea, any bizarre glimpse of humanity and make a memorable and evocative tale. Hungry

voices, which would jar and annoy over an entire novel, go off with explosive effect in a short story.

‘Some Common Mistakes’ begins with Cherry cutting off all her hair before seducing her ex-boyfriend. Two pages on things are getting worse.

The next day Cherry gets up late. She does her eye make-up again so she looks malnourished. She adds some shadows under her cheekbones for good measure. She holds her stomach in and stretches her arms above her head so she can count her ribs. She colours in her nipples with lipstick and goes to collect the mail naked.

We might not have gone quite this far, but we’ve felt this reckless.

In ‘After McDonald’s’ Marcelle and Diana are struggling to become artists in a fast-food world. But the wider culture threatens to pollute their pure creative dreams.

What would she do, Marcelle used to ask Diana, when she won some big literary prize? What would she do with the money? Donate it to charity? Buy a house? Stop waitressing?

The short story is a great place to tear down old assumptions and begin telling it like it is.

And remember your fearlessness extends beyond situations and characters, to how you play around with mood. The stories in *Not Her Real Name* create atmospheres so intense you can taste the sweet fizz of frustration, smell the singe of disappointment.

Now, of course the danger of fearlessness, of not playing by any of the rules, is indeed the very one you feared at the beginning: that you might make a great big fool of yourself. You might end up in a mess; look arrogant, incompetent, foolish, and childish. Well, so be it, and better in a short story than a long one. This is the great peril of being a writer. And the joy.

Risk it. In the short story you can, if you dare, go off like a dodgy firework, to dangerous but beautiful effect.

HELEN CROSS was born and brought up in the village of Newbald in East Yorkshire. Her first novel *My Summer of Love* (Bloomsbury, 2001) won a Betty Trask Award and was made into a feature film directed by Pawel Pawelikowski; released in October 2004 in the UK it was acclaimed as ‘an intoxicating gem ... not to be missed’. Her short stories have appeared in various magazines and anthologies and her plays have been broadcast on the radio. She was awarded an Arts Council International Fellowship to work on her writing in Canada. Her second novel, *The Secrets She Keeps*, is published by Bloomsbury.

Born in New Zealand in 1970 EMILY PERKINS now lives and works in London. Her debut collection of stories *Not Her Real Name* was published by Picador in 1996 to great acclaim. She has since published two novels, *Leave Before You Go* (Picador 1998) and *The New Girl* (Picador 2001) and is widely acknowledged as one of the most entertaining and insightful young writers around.