

Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Alan Beard

No 2: Be Indirect

‘Less is more for added interest ...’ In the second of the Short Story Master Class articles, Birmingham writer Alan Beard examines William Trevor’s mastery of the short story.

Because of space some feel stories should be relentless, single minded in their plots, marching irrevocably to resolution. However this can lead to stories being too dependent on plotting, twists in the tale and too glib a resolution. Stories like that can be well written, exciting but often can be dismissed after reading because they are too firmly resolved, they are sealed off. I’m more interested in stories that stay with you and make you think about the characters, their lives and relationships and how there are connections with your own life; where resolutions are not straightforward or possible and various subtleties are employed to get the reader involved. These stories you read slowly and they linger in the mind until you re-read and get more from them each time. To write stories that will stand up to re-reading is difficult, and sometimes calls for an oblique approach. One of the masters of this type of story is William Trevor, and his latest *The Hill Bachelors* is marvellous.

Trevor came to writing relatively late (in his 30s) and had been a sculptor, or as he says, attempted to be one – he was doing abstract sculptures and found his interest waned – he missed the human touch, people. His stories make up for this – they brim with real, awkward, hard to categorise individuals. They are people with foibles, obsessions, plans and hidden passions. People who live lonely lives are a favourite – in bedsits, above a club, in hill cottages; the urge for contact makes them blind to dangers, deceits, the predatory, or accept them. The need to communicate is often entangled with the need to conceal and manipulate. Like the daughter in ‘Good News’ who cannot tell her mother about the man who is molesting her for fear of damaging her mother’s reunion with her stepfather.

‘Good News’ in fact is a perfect example of the oblique approach. The child abuse is central but is never referred to directly. This makes it all the more powerful because it suggests how such things can slip by unnoticed in real life, also the reader is left with the horrible task of thinking about what might have happened. In this way the reader becomes involved and feels the awfulness of the situation. The girl’s point of view is evoked wonderfully through one or two scenes: a tear in the visiting stepfather’s jacket is noticed which gets worse, unstitched, as the story unfolds over several weeks. Not only does this tell you a lot about the man’s home background, but because the tear is at the girl’s eye level (‘just above the pocket’) you also start to see things from her height, and how they must seem. For instance she watches adults talk from behind plants, not hearing properly what is being said, mirroring her inability to understand or interpret what is happening to her. She tries to find someone to tell, but no one seems appropriate. The reader gets an idea of the complex motivations and twisted patterns of people’s lives, all in a few pages.

The story ‘Death of a Professor’ centres around premature newspaper obituaries for an academic. In different hands this would have become a whodunit and why, but we never find out, instead the obituaries are used to highlight the don’s relationships with his fellow academics, and especially his marriage to a younger wife. It is beautifully handled, the professor’s puzzlement leading him to have a few whiskies in a pub, very much out of character, and the wife coming to re-assess their relationship after she found herself unable to tell her husband about the obituary which she tears from the paper. ‘Whoever the perpetrators are she feels she belongs to them, has added to their cruelty’ by trying to shield her husband, but by the end of the story she has come to realise why she loves him, despite the age gap, his dryness. She loves him for his wisdom.

‘Not brains, they all had brains, not skill. Not knowing everything ... his wisdom is almost indefinable, what a roadworker might have, a cinema usher or a clergyman, or a child’. Somehow, by following him about on this day, by eavesdropping on what his colleagues say, and watching how his wife reacts, Trevor enables us too to see this wisdom.

Trevor never wastes a word, his every detail works hard. Take food: meals and snacks and treats are in almost every story. In ‘Against the Odds’ the widowed turkey farmer eats every week in a café and follows a ritual: ‘There was one piece of meat left, its size calculated to match what was left of the potatoes and peas.’ The implications of this simple sentence can stand in for a whole paragraph of explication.

Or a meal can act as an authentic background to a crucial conversation, as in this one from ‘The Mourning’, also in a café. An ex-patriot Irishman is explaining to another who’s recently come to London: ‘Feeney leaned forward over a plate of liver and onions. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “They wash the ware twice after us. Plates, cups, a glass you’d take a drink out of.”’

Elsewhere food can signify a (seemingly) loving relationship. “‘A loin of lamb,” Vera says, and takes it from the fridge, a net of suet tied in place to make it succulent in the roasting. Parsnips she’ll roast too, and potatoes because there’s nothing Sidney likes more.’ In ‘Good News’ the breakfast cereal that the ex-spouse likes re-appearing on the table signals a renewed relationship.

So what I am recommending is to approach your subject from a side angle, or at least not to tell us too much directly. Let your imagery do the work for you, to imply is sometimes better than to tell, because the reader has to do some work, and therefore becomes more involved with the story. It would be difficult to emulate Trevor, but you can learn from him. The way he captures interest with the humanity of the characters, making stories authentic by use of ordinary, telling detail, eschewing the obvious, are all elements to consider. Re-reading the stories for this essay has been such a pleasure. I had hoped to quote more but it is difficult to pick moments as the experience of reading the whole piece is what counts, the cumulative effect. All I can suggest is you read these stories of priests and actors, conwomen, labourers and farmers, salesmen and academics and you will be enthralled.

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ALAN BEARD’s stories have appeared in many magazines including London Magazine, Panurge, Malahat Review and Cosmopolitan; anthologies such as Best Short Stories, Neonlit and Telling Stories; and on BBC Radio 4. His ‘truly fine’ collection Taking Doreen out of the Sky was originally published by TSFG and subsequently by Picador (1999). He has won the Tom Gallon Trust Award for a short story. In 2003 he edited the ‘spiky, eclectic and idiosyncratic’ Going the Distance (Tindal Street Press), an anthology to celebrate 20 years of Tindal Street Fiction Group. A librarian at the University of Central England, Alan has lived and worked in Birmingham since 1982.

WILLIAM TREVOR was born in County Cork in 1928. His first novel, A Standard

of Behaviour, was published in 1958. His fiction, set mainly in Ireland and England, ranges from black comedies characterised by eccentrics and sexual deviants to stories exploring Irish history and politics. He is the acclaimed author of several collections of short stories, including *Angels at the Ritz and Other Stories* (1975) and *The Hill Bachelors* (2000); and of many novels, including *The Old Boys* (1964), *Fools of Fortune* (1983) and *Felicia's Journey* (1994). *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.