

# Tindal Street Masterclasses

## Masterclass by David Gaffney No. 8: How to make so little say so much

Ernest Hemingway once said his best work was a story he wrote in just six words:

*For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*

I'm not sure that's a short story but the writer I'm going to talk about, Etgar Keret, an Israeli who has published three collections of short-short stories, writes very, very short pieces of text which can be described as 'micro' or 'flash' fiction.

There's a lot to learn from authors who've mastered this ultra-short form – precision, efficiency, economy of language – and Etgar Keret demonstrates that in a couple of pages you can have all the qualities of a longer story contained in a tiny polly-pocket world.

'Drops', the two-page story from Keret's 2006 collection, *Missing Kissinger*, begins by dropping us right into the thick of one of his peculiar worlds.

*My girlfriend says someone in America invented a medicine against feeling alone.*

The protagonist's girlfriend heard about this magical medicine that cures loneliness on a programme called *nightline* (we don't know if it's radio or TV because you don't get much information in the world of micro-fiction) and she sent off for some right away. The medicine comes in two forms – ear drops or spray can – and she opts for drops. Who are these people? Where are they? What do they look like? We don't know. And this brings us to the first golden rule of micro fiction – *Don't Use Too Many Characters*. You won't have time to describe your characters when you're writing ultra-short. Even names may not be useful unless they convey additional story-information or save you

words elsewhere.

The unhappy girlfriend suspects the protagonist is cheating on her. She believes that the loneliness-curing drops will allow her to leave him and live alone with no negative consequences.

*No stinking eardrops are going to love you the way I love you, he tells her.*

*Except that eardrops won't cheat on her either, she says and then she leaves.*

Here, Keret illustrates the second golden rule of writing micro fiction – *Start In The Middle*. You don't have time to set scenes and build character. Within the first two sentences of 'Drops' there's a lot of information: a failing relationship, a world where loneliness can be solved by some occult medical process, and a woman who would rather opt for a medical prevention of loneliness than live with her emotionally stunted partner. You will also notice that rather than having the suspense build – will the drops arrive? Will they work? Will she stay or will she go? – the girlfriend has left the protagonist by the end of sentence two and we hear no more about the drops. We are now alone with the protagonist, and may wonder what is left to tell of this weird story.

This brings us to the third golden rule of micro-fiction – *Make Sure The Ending Isn't At The End*. In micro-fiction there's a danger that much of the engagement with the story takes place when the reader has stopped reading. To avoid this, Keret places the denouement in the middle of the story, allowing us time, as the rest of the text spins out, to consider the situation along with the protagonist, and ruminate on the decisions his characters have taken. If you're not careful, micro-stories can lean towards punch lines or 'pull-back-to-reveal' endings which have a one-note, gag-a-minute feel – the drum roll and cymbal crash. In 'Drops', Keret avoids this by giving us almost all the information we need in the first few lines, and using the last paragraphs to take us on a journey below the surface.

Withheld information is deliberate in Keret's work, but we can guess a lot from the clues he leaves lying around in his spare text. The protagonist is in a city, people are lonely, the world seems fragmented, nobody is connecting with each other, and someone has invented a medicinal cure for loneliness rather than finding a way to get people together. We know from the name of the programme the girlfriend refers to – *nightline* – that it's probably a late night phone-in show which would appeal to a lonely listenership

– insomniacs, shiftworkers, the unemployed – and we recognise a market segment some cynical advertising agency has identified as ripe for exploitation. Keret, in grand micro-fiction style, has given us all of this information just in the name of the programme, leaving us suspecting that these ‘loneliness drops’ are modern day x-ray specs or space-monkeys.

One of the ways Keret adds resonance to the story is with its title, which is the fourth golden rule of micro fiction – *Sweat Your Title*, make it work for a living. Keret would have had many options for a method to deliver his anti-loneliness drug – pills, injections, syrups – but he chooses drops: a quaint, almost medieval way of ingesting a drug. The word also makes us think of teardrops, of dropping out of the world, of a descent into something, even the hangman’s drop.

Keret ends the story by emphasising how happy the protagonist would be if he had friends to drink with, and to hug and cry in front of: *We could spend years that way, our whole life. A hundred per cent natural, much better than drops.* And here comes the fifth golden rule – *Make Your Last Line Ring Like a Bell.*

The last line is not the ending – we had that in the middle, remember – but it should leave the reader with something which will continue to sound after the story has finished. It should not complete the story but rather take us into a new place, a place where we can continue to think and wonder about the ideas in the story. A story that gives itself up in the last line is no story at all, and after reading a piece of good micro-fiction we should be struggling to understand it, and will in this way grow to love it as a beautiful enigma.

The last golden rule of micro-fiction is *Write Long, Then Go Short* – create a lump of stone from which you chip out your story sculpture. Worried about reducing your glittering prose to a bloody stump? Don’t be. A few micro-shorts now and again will amaze and delight. But do beware – one after another and you’ll feel like you’ve been run over by lorry full of fridges.

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