

Flash Fiction

I was with a group of twelve- to fourteen-year-olds. We were talking about a short story of mine they'd read and discussed with my colleague Gabriela Zucchini. This was in Italy a few years ago.

One of the boys, a rather shy twelve-year-old called Lorenzo Pacchioni, handed me something which he'd writ-ten specially for me. It was in Italian, which I don't speak. My translator, Giuditta De Concini, translated it on the spot. It moved me so much I asked Lorenzo if he would read out his original so that everyone could share his gift. When he finished there was a moment of silence before everyone broke into enthusiastic applause. Lorenzo had touched a nerve.

Here is the English version, published with Lorenzo's permission:

Can you draw your soul?

I've heard many poems about two friends leaving each other. All of them are very sad. I think the 'gold' between two people who love each other can never end.

Looking out from my balcony, I saw the sunset. I know it may sound banal, but you can see many things in the sunset, important things for you. Try that when you are

alone, and feeling bored. In so doing, you can meet anyone.

Reading my story provoked Lorenzo to write something for its author. Eighty-three words were the result. No one suggested he should do it, or what kind of writing it should be; it wasn't a school exercise; no one set a limit of length or language. He simply wrote what he wanted to write the way he wanted to write it. When he read it to an audience of strangers and was applauded enthusiastically, his face blushed from pleasure and embarrassment. This is a conflict of emotions every true author feels after publication. Because then you know more sharply than at any other moment that what you've written reveals, whether you intended it or not, your secret self – which I call 'the essence of your being' and some people call the soul.

I was pleased that Lorenzo begins his story with a question, which leads us to the heart of what makes a piece of writing a work of literature. All writing is in a literal sense drawing. I don't know if anyone had said that to Lorenzo, but what he did in more than only a metaphoric sense was draw one gene of the DNA of his essential being. The result, though prose, comes near to being a poem. When spoken in Italian, its lyric quality sings. It's dense with meanings the reader has to unpack. It's enigmatic and yet at the same time entirely straightforward. It's complete in itself, a finished language object, not an incident or anecdote or fragment.

Because no one instructed him or imposed conditions, we might say that Lorenzo wrote what came naturally. Naturally to himself as an individual; and naturally to himself as a twelve-year-old boy. He wrote as an instinctive author that which he *needed* to say, not what anyone *required* him to say. And it's very

short, presumably because he felt no need to elaborate or explain, rather as twelve-year-old boys often don't.

Lorenzo's microtext is an example of what is now called flash fiction. This is a kind of composition with roots that go back a long way but has only recently been identified as a literary form with its own defining characteristics. I came across it in an anthology, *Flash Fiction*, edited by James Thomas, Denise Thomas, and Tom Hazuka, published by W.W. Norton in 1992. I instantly felt two things. That this was a form of narrative exactly suited to our times. And that I must write some. But at the time I was busy writing *Postcards from No Man's Land*, and then *This Is All*. It was only when they were off my hands, in 2005, that I could turn my mind to work on some flash fiction.

I say 'turn my mind' because that's an accurate meta-phor for the process. For me, writing a novel is like running the marathon. It's a long, hard slog that requires a great deal of preparation, training, and dogged persistence. It's totally absorbing to the exclusion of everything else, because I have to hold the whole book in my mind, like an object almost so huge and so heavy to hang on to that it demands all my strength and concentration if it's not to slip out of my grasp and crash in pieces on the floor.

A flash fiction, on the other hand, is like running the hundred-metre dash. Yes, you have to train for it; and yes it does take concentration. But the writing requires a quick, short burst of energy. To change the simile, it's like a tightly focused brief beam of laser light that illuminates a particle of life. The key words for success with such writing are precision and concision. Everything must be exactly right and be no more than is absolutely necessary: the choice of words, the rhythm and shape of the sentences and the entire piece, the selection of detail, the subtleties and nuances that carry and indicate the deeper

meanings. And always what is meant must be more than what is said.

The novel is demanding in a different way. Carefully employed redundancy, for example, has a necessary place. By-the-way diversions, counterpointing interjections, elaborate descriptions can all be useful in a novel but would blur the singular clarity of a flash fiction.

Because the two forms are different in their demands, many novelists can't write flash fictions, and those whose minds are attuned to flash fictions can't write novels. Because I'm thought of, if I'm thought of at all, as an author of novels, I've been asked since *The Kissing Game* was published why I've suddenly produced a book of short stories, and especially flash fictions, and whether this wasn't, as one interviewer put it, 'rather a challenge.' The 'why?' is easy to answer: because I wanted to. But was it 'a challenge'? I find all writing a challenge. And it gets harder the more I write. When I asked the interviewer what she meant, she explained that as I wrote rather long and elaborate novels, she wondered if I found it easy to adjust to the very short and condensed form of flash fictions.

It wasn't difficult to make the adjustment, because, as it happens, my novels are composed of short passages any-way. In *Breaktime* and *This Is All*, for example, the passages are given titles. In *Dance on My Grave* they are numbered. My mind — the way I think — tends to work that way. I don't think or speak in long passages of unvarying tone and style. I compose a novel of passages that are gathered together, arranged and linked to form a unified and thematically controlled whole: a story about one or more characters. In a novel I'm interested in all aspects of the interior and outward life of the character. In a flash fiction I'm interested in one moment in a character's life.

Visual artists do the same thing. I've always been a fascinated admirer of Rembrandt. He painted *The Night Watch*, a huge, complexly composed oil painting, depicting many people in a dramatic scene full of (possible) stories. He also drew a very small ink sketch of a little child taking its first steps on its own with two adults keeping careful watch. In a few rapidly drawn lines he captures all the delight and tentative uncertainty of the child, all the tender attention and pleasure of the two adults. The one is an elaborated drama — a novel; the other captures a moment of universal experience — a flash fiction.

One reason for the increasing popularity of flash fictions — and a reason why I want to write them now — is their suitability for digital publication on mobile phones, e-readers, tablets, and computers because their short length fits the screen. They are quick to read and easy to return to. They appeal to our single-unit, one-byte-and-go culture.

Predictably, therefore, they appeal to young people. Besides, I knew from my years as a teacher that the short story of conventional length (about 4,000 or 5,000 words) is perfect for reading and study in school. But it isn't an ideal form for pupils to write. Many professional authors agree it is one of the most difficult of all the literary forms to tackle. It requires great skill at succinct creation of character, choice of images, precision of language and narrative. In a strange way it is just too long and yet not long enough for pupils to manage. Flash fiction, on the other hand, seems, like Lorenzo's gift, to be what comes naturally to late childhood and teenage writers. It requires precision and brevity but isn't so concerned with creation of character or the weaving together of a complex combination of images and narrative as with the expression of one self-contained idea, event,

or moment of truth. And to help pupils learn how it is done there are many examples by our best writers for them to use as models, to stir the juices of their imaginations, and to get them started. Added to which, the appeal of writing and publication on electronic devices creates excitement and motivation.

Historically, every time there has been a major development in the technology of writing, a new form of literature has emerged and become the most pertinent to that time and culture. The novel as we know it, for example, only became possible and predominant with the development of moveable type and ability to print many pages in a bound book, which could be reproduced fairly easily at a price many people could afford. It seems to me that flash fiction will evolve into a primary narrative form of the future both because of the development of digital technology and the changes in our mental processes it is bringing about. My guess is that the novel will increasingly be composed of very short passages, using many different kinds of narrative, both fictional and ‘nonfictional,’ which are gathered together in considerable number and are combined into a coherent whole determined by a variety of thematic concepts. And we will read them either onscreen or in paper books, depending on which seems best.

At the same time, my guess is that some of these flash-novels will be published both onscreen and in printed books, some only onscreen, ideally on tablets like the iPad, because of the particular, rapidly developing, exclusive advantages and qualities of digital publishing, while some will be published only in traditional books, because of their particular benefits. What these special attributes might be are still being worked out. That is the excitement for both writers and readers, and is an exploration I want to be part of.

The new doesn't necessary kill off the old, but can refresh it, just as the old has something to offer the new. Each is necessary to the survival of what we call literature, which, to use David Daiches's description in his *Critical Approaches to Literature* (Prentice Hall, 1956), is 'any kind of composition in prose or verse which has for its purpose not the communication of fact but the telling of a story (either wholly invented or given new life through invention) or the giving of pleasure through some use of the inventive imagination in the employment of words'. Literature – 'work of the metaphoric imagination', to use Harold Bloom's potent description – offers us images to think, feel, and perceive with, and from which we gain an under-standing of the nature of human life.

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A few authors and examples of flash fictions

- Aesop, *Fables*.
- James Thurber, 'The Little Girl and the Wolf', one of a number of witty parodies of Aesop's *Fables*, along with other of his flash fictions.
- Franz Kafka. His work, especially *Parables and Paradoxes*, is almost a handbook of various kinds of flash fiction – not that he thought of them in this way: invented stories, dreams, memories, philosophical miniatures, etc.
- Yasunari Kawabata, *Palm-of-the-hand stories*. The Japanese are past-masters of this form.
- Craig Taylor, *One Million Tiny Plays About Britain*. Flash fictions in dialogue form.

— Italo Calvino and Dino Buzzati, two Italian authors who wrote short fiction of various kinds.

— Samuel Beckett. Numerous examples included in *The Complete Short Prose*.

— Richard Brautigan. His work is composed almost entirely of discrete, very short, self-contained pieces that, together, form larger stories and novels.

— John Berger. Some of *And our faces my heart, brief as photos*, and *Bento's Sketchbook* offer many models of the form.

— Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*. 'A Factless Autobiography' composed entirely of very short pieces.

— Elizabeth Bishop in her fables.

Some of:

Donald Barthelme, Joyce Carol Oates, Raymond Carver, Anton Chekov, O. Henry, Thasia Frank, Guy de Maupassant, stories from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

And a useful collection:

— James Thomas, Denise Thomas & Tom Hazuka, editors, *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*, WW Norton, 1992.

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The Kissing Game, my collection of short stories, some of which are flash fictions, is published by The Bodley Head, Random House, in UK, and by Abrams Amulet Books in USA.

My novel, *This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn*, published by The Bodley Head, Random House, in UK and by

Abrams Amulet Books in USA is, in part, composed of flash fictions.

Trying It On, available only on my Tablet Tales iPad app, is a flash fiction autobiografiction.

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