



Frédéric Boyer

France

« Short Stories »

Frédéric Boyer has taught comparative literature in the Universities of Lyon III and Paris VII and equally at the La Santé prison in Paris. He headed the new translation of the *Bible*, completed collectively by contemporary writers and text and language specialists (Bayard, 2001). He is currently working in the Parisian press. As a writer, he has notably published *Mauvais vivants* (2003), *Nous nous aimons* (2004), *Mes amis mes amis* (2004), *Abraham remix* (2005) and *Patraque* (2006) all with P.O.L. publishing house.

« Short Stories : le choix des histoires courtes »

**Frédéric Boyer (FR),
Geneviève Brisac (FR),
Kirsty Gunn (Écosse),
Thomas McGuane (USA),
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à l'Institution des Chartreux
(58 rue Pierre Dupont - 69001)

Version anglaise

Translated from the French by
Denis Griesmar

« I will first offer a paradox: "to shorten" in order to capture the incredible clumsiness of living beings. This holds within it both the gag (the breakneck speed of a news item necessarily reveals the hilarity in a punchline of a slip of the tongue) and the fear (why so much in so little?). And secondly I will offer a hypothesis: There is no human thought without the ghost of the brief. »

Frédéric Boyer

I taught literature at La Santé penitentiary, in Paris. This was the end of the 1990s. Years of cruel disillusion. Three times a week, I would penetrate into Block B. Two cells, put together, made up a minuscule classroom, furnished, as of yore, with small children's desks, with a hole in the table for an inkwell. I met up with a dozen guys to read and study Corneille, Flaubert, Henri Michaud... Some of them were thieves, murderers. Some did not know why nor how they had landed there. These were sometimes the same guys.

But all of them had a funny kind of relationship with the tenses in a narrative. They who could no longer control their being locked up in waiting, were almost injured by the length of fiction time limits. Their own time had been stolen from them. They felt they needed to find another possible relationship to the flow of time. They soon appeared to me as worn out, eaten away by the stretching of time intervals, by the inevitable, indefinite presence of Time in the heart of their shattered lives. Any narrative became painful. And in this context the short story made a sharp contrast. It provided a kind of liberation, a form of healing or rest in the face of the wound caused by the inscription of a life's events in time as recounted in a story. What can be told in writing about a life once displaced or torn apart ?



meant for minor, often domestic events, forgotten details, secondary characters. Those events, figures or utterances crop up in *short stories* and doubtless nowhere else in fiction.

These prisoners made me think of my own children, who were little girls of four or five at the time, and who wanted a story to tell, and repeat, as many things, as extraordinary, as quickly as possible. Each time I understood that the question was to reach, in the temporal dimension of life, of the world, something that could not be reached otherwise. Indeed some events could not be recounted differently. Incidents, feelings, that would not 'fit' in any other way. The *novella*, or short story, takes after dreams, nightmares, gags, vertigoes.

Indeed I started then to suffer from vertigo. When you bend over a drop, you are paralyzed, attracted by the world's searing intensity. Your whole life, your sense of being, hangs from a single moment, a single vision.

In fact it is never a question of shortening, of taking in – in contrast to the infamous short format which seems to have spread everywhere across the media and world mass communication.

I understood that much with them, with those prisoners from Block B in La Santé penitentiary, as with my little girls in the 1990s. But there is something to be saved, as a call for help, in the time of the world. There are other times. Brevity here contrasts with dilution. It contrasts with continuous mass production. Lost monsters, terrifying dragons may be contained in apparently minute and simple stories. Inside fairy tales. But monsters may exhaust our patience and lose their mystery in the course of long narratives. Writing concisely may end up in the ultimate form to be capable of showing the unseen, or the overlooked. And, to put it perhaps in a more political way : of bringing to light things most people would prefer to keep hidden and to repress.

It is also a grammarian's dream. Every sentence tells a story. A life can, may sometimes be summed up in a single sentence.

This is also what we find in Saint Augustine (*Confessions*, Book 10). Says he : when I tell something from memory, I summon in turn remembrances, emotions as stored in the immense prairies of memory. From these come impressions, like sudden bursts of light. The intimate archeology of the narrative is marked with these brief forms, these dazzling experiences. Every human thought is haunted by this ghost of conciseness which is at the heart of the phenomenon of reminiscence. A vision, a color, an emotion...

It did happen, after several months, for a prisoner to tell me his history by writing, in two, three pages. These texts possessed the melancholy brevity of lives which had been buried in an instant, in an error, in a failed attempt at something. Immense temporalities then founder into a minute detail of time. And sometimes from this minuscule detail hang infinite fragments of civilization.



They wander as tiny scraps of human nature in the prairies of our memory. I only recall this to explain the paradox which is close to my heart : the necessity of writing concisely in order to capture the terrible clumsiness of living beings. This is a complete reversal of generally accepted ideas : something we do not understand about humankind may only be represented inside a concise form. This necessity had been taken into account at the beginnings of the cinema, in the quick moving silent screens, notably in Charlie Chaplin's funny little films. These first one-reelers – as a parallel to the short story – invented a kind of grammar of gags. A virtuoso's engineering of bodies for breathtakingly representing clumsiness, shame, jealousy, envy...

The gag's 'black' humanity only holds through improvisations and sudden breaks. Laughter is very close to cries of anxiety as soon as a limit to our existence has been recognized and touched. There is something the short story often shares with the gag in movies : an often absurd and down to earth reminder of our own limit, of our own condition as mortals.

What the French call the 'nouvelle' is not simply a miniaturization of the world of fiction. It is a necessity in order to free ourselves from the common models of ordinary amnesia.

F. B.