IN A NUTSHELL

The short story
Alex Clark

I edit a magazine (*Granta*) where we tend not to get too ruffled by reports of the short story's demise: we simply turn back to our inboxes and our sacks of post and reflect that, whatever the problems the genre might face, scarcity is not one of them.

People send short stories to *Granta* because it is one of the most prominent places to publish short fiction in this country and, I hope, a forum in which it is clear that the form is one that we value. Like every other publication we are constrained by space; we publish perhaps three or four stories in each quarterly issue, a total of a dozen or so per year. And although we have published work over the course of the last 12 months by such well-known names as Alan Hollinghurst, Annie Proulx and Rick Moody, we are always on the look-out for new talent. That's why we began a 'New Voices' section on our website, posting short stories by unpublished writers, alongside brief interviews to contextualise their work: the idea has been to showcase new writing and to increase the amount of material that we are able publish. Thus far, we have published half a dozen at monthly intervals. The creation of short stories is only half the picture – it's what happens to them after they've been written that tends to fuel the pronouncements of the doom-mongers: that short-story collections don't sell and publishers lose money hand-over-fist on them; that they are how writers make up their multi-book contracts when they don't want to deliver a novel; that, in any case, nobody wants to read them any more.

It's hard to formulate a riposte to something that seems part of a larger argument about how we value literary endeavour in a publishing culture that is increasingly driven by novelty and instant accessibility. But one answer is to point to the growing number of initiatives designed to enhance the short story's profile and to encourage its practitioners.

The BBC's National Short Story Award, established in 2005 and funded by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), puts a hefty £15,000 on the table for the year's best single short story, thus far garlanding the careers of James Lasdun, Julian Gough and Clare Wigfall. In Ireland, the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Prize is similarly munificent; with a purse of 35,000 euros for a collection, it is the richest short-story prize in the world. This year, it caused some controversy by picking its outright winner – Jhumpa Lahiri, for her brilliant collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* – in lieu of announcing a shortlist. The winner had been decided with such unanimity, said Patrick Cotter, the director of the award, that 'we decided it would be a sham to compose a shortlist and put five other writers through unnecessary stress and suspense'.

The minor furore that greeted this decision was instructive; it centred not on the fact that a collection had emerged from the field that dazzled the panel to such an extent that they thought further debate was unnecessary, but that those on the shortlist-that-wasn't had been deprived of the uplift in sales a mention in dispatches might bring.

At the time, this struck me as a faintly depressing reminder of what we now expect our literary prizes to do for us, but also as clutching at straws. How many more copies of a collection could a publisher really expect to sell as a result of the Frank O'Connor? And – put more brutally – how big could the numbers really be?

Not big enough, in all probability, to satisfy the accountants. But there are few short-story writers who, like Lahiri, will win a Pulitzer Prize for their debut collection, or sweep to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list with their second. Lahiri is an exceptionally gifted short-story writer and she joins a list of other stand-out talents of recent years: Lorrie Moore, Helen Simpson, and Yiyun Li among them.

These writers take their places in a long tradition of those who have adopted the form and inhabited it completely – luminaries such as Alice Munro, Raymond Carver, John Cheever and Sylvia Townsend Warner. To understand why the short story remains an important form, all one has to do is read their work, or the work of Grace Paley, Katherine Mansfield, Carol Shields or William Trevor. It is its own answer. Writers such as these write short stories because they want to; because what they want to say and the way they want to say it is best accommodated and enhanced by writing over a shorter distance. It should be no more complicated than that.

Like all other forms of fiction writing – and much non-fiction – there are practitioners of different abilities, writing in a wide variety of styles. We prescribe what a short story should be, its limits or its scope, at our peril. And if we announce its imminent demise, or bemoan its lack of relevance, we risk depriving ourselves of some of the most interesting, innovative and ambitious writing currently on offer.

I don't think that's going to happen at any time soon. Not long ago, I was given the manuscript of a debut short-story collection called *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, by Daniyal Mueenuddin, which will be published in the UK by Bloomsbury this spring. I started reading it on a short tube journey and, in the time it took to get from Tottenham Court Road to Notting Hill Gate, I was gripped; I knew that I wanted to publish at least a part of this work in *Granta*. The story that we eventually settled on (they were all exceptional) is called 'Provide, Provide' and details the life and career of a land manager in Pakistan. It unfolds slowly and unshowily, over some years, slowly revealing a portrait of a marriage, the political and agrarian life of a region, and the disappointments

and compromises of fatherhood.

Whether Daniyal Mueenuddin will write another short-story collection, or whether he will turn his attention to full-length fiction or to non-fiction is a matter for the future, and in the meantime his publishers are to be congratulated for having the conviction to publish a collection from a first-time writer. But the excitement of chancing upon a genuinely new and exciting writer is enough to make me want to keep opening the envelopes that keep coming through the door.

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