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PhD Thesis English 001F

The Only Voice

**A creative and critical exploration of the modern short story in context, and
the emergence of the author as an essential force**

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Abstract

For a century, writers and critics have been debating the short story, yet there are few attempts at a definition beyond length and the suggestion that there is something mysterious about the form. Frank O'Connor identified loneliness as a defining characteristic in his seminal work, *The Lonely Voice*. I will argue that O'Connor's idea is incomplete. I will also suggest that there is an essential influence from outside the text, specifically from the author. This thesis comprises two volumes; an original collection of short stories, *Approval*, and a critical analysis, *The Only Voice*, which focuses on the role of the author in short fiction and includes extensive interviews with four contemporary writers of short fiction. My intention is that the combination of research as a practitioner with in depth analysis of the literature and interrogation of the ideas of current writers will contribute to future discussion of the form.

I will argue that the author responds to his or her circumstances, not only within a general social and political context, but in a personal and immediate way. Because the short time often taken to write the story, the author's situation and feelings impact directly on the creative work. The author makes deliberate choices at the moment of writing about how to describe the world, and each has an unmistakable signature. I will argue that the author is very much alive and that his or her style and unique response to the world places the author at the centre of the meaning of the story.

Autobiography plays a significant role in the short story either directly or indirectly. It is shown that the author's own life and feelings are intrinsically linked to the life of the protagonist, which is largely absent from the text. Even when authors

deliberately distance themselves, there are instances of their life affecting the story. New theories of memory show that a person invents a new version of their history each time. This means that the emotions of the writer of a story at the time of writing may influence the text more than had previously been thought.

Since Hemingway, the idea of omission has been considered vital to understanding the short story. That which is left out is argued to be essential, and links are shown between omissions and the energy of the story. It is suggested that the implicit, that which is merely left out, is different from things that are absent, in the sense of never having existed. These absences, such as the absence of a child, impact on the story from outside the text and belong to the author as opposed to the character.

The thesis concludes that each author has a unique approach to poetics, and that it is he or she that defines each story. This operates in a unique way in the short story because the author is never fully detached from the character. Universal theories cannot define the short story. Discussion, reading and practice contribute to the ongoing narrative of understanding. Each author writes in his or her individual way, influenced by their immediate concerns and contexts, and in a way that only that one person could have written. This is the author's Only Voice.

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1 A Perfect Day for Bananafish: Introduction to the thesis

Origins of the research

This thesis began with a belief as a writer and reader that there was something vital and intimate in the relationship between the author and the short story. I wanted to explore the mysterious energy created from what is not present in the text.

Decades ago I first read 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish' by JD Salinger (1948), and it lingered. In the story a young man, Seymour Glass, has an innocent conversation at the seaside with a five-year-old girl while his self-absorbed wife makes a long-distance phone call. Seymour returns from the beach, picks a fight with a woman in an elevator, ignores his sleeping wife, takes out a pistol, and blows his brains out. There was something powerful acting on the story from outside the text that I could not know. In October 2012 I was re-reading Salinger's short stories, and I attended an event at Lancaster University. Rodge Glass answered a question about his novel *Bring Me the Head of Ryan Giggs*. He said that the reader did not need to know who Gary Neville (the footballer) was to enjoy the novel. It is self-contained; all the information the reader needs is included in the text. I knew that was different to the short story. Salinger had seen a newly liberated concentration camp as a soldier during World War 2, and said that the protagonist 'was not Seymour but myself' (Slawenski, 2010:161). The desperation of his character represents an inability to reconcile that horror with the post-war materialism represented by the wife. Salinger said that he 'found it impossible to fit into a society that ignored the truth he now knew' (Slawenski, 2010:161). Salinger makes a direct link between himself and his protagonist. There is a fundamental relationship between the author's life and contexts and the meaning of the short story. The story is not self-contained like the

novel. When I discussed this story with Adam Marek he didn't know about Salinger's war experience. He said, 'I still love that story, and I don't think Salinger wrote it expecting people to get what it was about. It's very well concealed' (Marek, 2015). This indicates that something mysterious is at work, an influence from outside the text, not known to the reader, and coming from the author.

A single idea

The research for this thesis took me on an adventure through the literature of the short story, creating grand hypotheses, and a journey as writer and researcher that included many deviations. However, one central idea has remained throughout, the notion of 'the only voice'. Frank O'Connor's seminal work, *The Lonely Voice*, first published in 1963, contains a widely-accepted theory about the short story. He argues that human loneliness is central to the short story and that the protagonist is isolated from society. He describes '... essence we don't find in a novel, remoteness, loneliness' (O'Connor, 2004: 19, 21). This thesis will argue that O'Connor's theory is incomplete. I believe a greater understanding of the short story can be gained by considering the author and the contexts within which he or she writes. I will show links between the lonely voice of the protagonist and the author's Only Voice.

A triangulated approach

The research combines three sources: Firstly, examination of the literature and critical theory, in particular O'Connor; secondly an original collection of short stories, *Approval*; and, thirdly, primary research in the form of interviews with contemporary authors. By examining the author past and present while developing

my own poetics on the short story, and I have found themes that I hope may contribute to understanding the form.

The concept of *Approval*

Approval is a semi-autobiographical cycle of short stories. The stories were written individually, and the concept developed when most had been completed and, in several cases, published. The cycle uses the approval process for adopting a child as a mechanism to link the stories focussing on a character named David. Each story is prefaced with a fictionalised version of one of the questions in that process (family, relationships, work, and so on). There is brief discussion of the short story cycle within the chapter on the implicit because a story may work differently if information omitted from one story appears in another in the same volume. There is only brief discussion of the cycle, since it is not the central idea of this thesis.

Thesis structure

Chapter 2 considers relevant quotations from the literature about the short story. It shows there is no consensus about the definition of the short story beyond its shortness. Differences between the short story and the novel are also briefly considered in order to identify the characteristics of the form. It is shown that writers and critics in the past have indicated that there may be some kind of energy, light or defining characteristic, but have been unable to identify it. O'Connor's text is scrutinised to find what he said about the relationship between author, text and contexts. Attitudes of interviewed authors show that not only is a definition hard to pin down, but that there is resistance to universal theories. Brief discussion of my

own hypotheses of creating a model and defining a force shows that a narrative approach, led by the author, is more suitable than a scientific one.

The following four chapters explore particular aspects of the external contexts of the short story. The relationship between the world at large and the author's response to it is considered. The unique and personal thumbprint or signature of an author is shown to be vital, and Barthes' 'Death of the Author' is questioned. Memory and autobiography are examined, showing powerful links between the author's life and the meaning of his or her short story. It is shown through critical analysis by authors who have written about the short story, discussion with authors in face-to-face interviews, and research as a practitioner that the author is intrinsically connected to the protagonist and acts as a force on the text.

The implicit and absence are discussed in chapter 7. Absence emerges as a supporting idea allowing connections to be made between author and text. Here I am using *absence* in the sense of never having existed, as distinct from implicit – that which is left out of the story. There are aspects of the meaning and power of the short story that are not implied in the text or related to the life of the protagonist within or beyond the text. These absences come from the author, his or her unique way of translating personal feelings and experiences.

The discussion drawn from these chapters includes further thoughts from the interviewed authors about the essence of the short story. It is concluded that the force of the story comes from things not present, from outside the text and not always implied in it, specifically from the individual who created it. The emphasis is on the

author rather than the protagonist. *The Only Voice* is shown to be a development of *The Lonely Voice*.

Literature Review

An extensive reading list is appended in addition to (but not duplicating) works cited. Wide reading of short stories, and analysis and criticism including biographies, of acclaimed authors, all inform the central ideas of this thesis. The authors most quoted are those whose writing has influenced me and who have discussed the author and the short story including Carver and Hemingway. The chapter titles are (in this order) titles of short stories by Salinger, Self, Chekhov, Carver, O'Connor, Munro, Ballard and Kafka.

Interviews

The authors selected for the research were Zoe Lambert, Adam Marek, Toby Litt and Carys Davies.¹ Each has been short-listed for the Edge Hill Short Story Prize, and Davies won the prestigious Frank O'Connor Prize in 2014. All four regularly speak at events and conferences on the short story. They are contemporary authors whose work I admire and who have spoken and written about the short story form. There are interview questions about past theories and O'Connor, autobiography and memory, the implicit and absence, and the relationship between author, reader and text. These questions were used as prompts for wide-ranging discussion, so full transcripts of the interviews are appended because only a fraction of the material from the transcripts appears in this thesis.² They can each be read alone in relation to

¹ Brief profiles of the authors are included in Appendix 4

² Full transcripts are in Appendix 5

the poetics of each writer, specifically on the short story form. The interview questions are appended together with signed consent forms.³ Each author was given the opportunity to comment on a transcript of their interview and no significant changes were indicated. The writers interviewed all point to a personal relationship between themselves and their writing. Each has a unique and personal approach to understanding the writing process and his or her own poetics.

Definitions

There are certain key terms that recur in this thesis. For clarity a dictionary definition is given first, and the intended use in this thesis is explained:

Internal: of or situated in the inside or visible part (Thompson, 1998: 463). Where this is used it is intended to mean within the actual text of the short story.

External: of or situated in the outside or visible part (Thompson, 1998: 306). This refers to anything outside the text itself.

Context: 1 parts that surround a word or passage and clarify its meaning; 2 relevant circumstances (Thompson, 1998: 181 Here this means those parts that surround the text, the relevant circumstances, such as the situation of the author at the time of writing and the greater environment in which he or she exists.

Force: 1 power, strength, impetus, intense effort; 2 influence tending to cause a change in the motion of a body influence (Thompson, 1998: 341). The latter, as used in physics, is the intended use. It is used in preference to *influence* where an indication of power and strength is intended. An example of this can be seen in the

³ Appendix 3

essays of Raymond Carver; ‘Influences are forces – circumstances, personalities, irresistible as the tide’ (Carver, 2009: 28).

Essence: fundamental nature; inherent characteristics (Thompson, 1998: 295). Here it is used in reference to the defining characteristics of the short story.

Essential: necessary; indispensable (Thompson, 1998: 295).

Implicit: implied though not plainly expressed (Thompson, 1998: 441). This is discussed in Chapter 7. It means that which is suggested in the text but not included, such as events that take place outside the time frame of the story.

Absence: 1 not present 2 not existing (Thompson, 1998: 3). Here absence is used in the sense or non-existence of lack of something as opposed to simply being away. The word is used to differentiate between that which is merely not there directly or at the present time from something that was never there and cannot be inferred from the text.

Modern: of present or recent times (Thompson, 1998: 572). In this context *modern* refers to the era of fiction from the modernist movement at the start of the twentieth. The research considers the modern short story, which is interpreted as approximately the last 100 years.

Lonely Voice: refers to the hypothesis created by Frank O’Connor that loneliness is an inherent characteristic of the protagonist in a short story. It is discussed at length in the next chapter.

Only Voice: is a new term created during this research. It refers to the unique and personal influence of the author on the short story. It goes beyond style and autobiography and points to a powerful relationship between author and text. It is not a specific theory. It is a name that brings together several strands of thought about the author.

2 The Quantity Theory of Insanity: Past theories on the short story

Definitions of the short story and length

The research originally began with an extensive literature review to look for attempts to define the essence of the short story. This was a starting point from which to consider its key characteristics and then identify possible gaps in the literature.

Seeking the essence of the short story

The first characteristic of the short story that has been widely agreed upon is length. In his 1837 review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe says 'the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance' and that this effect can only be achieved if the reading can be completed in one sitting (Thompson, 2004: 521). In 1907 Brander Matthews, in his *Philosophy of the Short Story*, also talked of 'essential unity of impression' (May, 1994:73: 94). James Cooper Lawrence, author of *A Theory of the Short Story*, discusses brevity and coherence as defined by Poe, and concludes that, 'any attempt to limit the definition of a short story beyond the statement that it is "a brief tale which can be told or read at one sitting," is for our purposes inadvisable, if not impossible' (Cooper Lawrence, 1917: 277). Raymond Carver, described by Stephen King as 'surely the most influential writer of American short stories in the second half of the twentieth century,' (King, 2009) goes on to suggest that a story should also be written in one sitting (Carver, 1999: ix). Critic and author Philip Hensher, editor of *The Penguin Book of the British Short Story*, makes a relationship between length and energy: 'The energy of short stories may come from an understanding of scale' (Hensher, 2015: x). He suggests that a short story may be up to 15,000 words long (Hensher, 2015: xii). In the 200 or so books in the bibliography of this thesis very few stories are close to that length.

Writers have been trying to define other essential characteristics beyond mere shortness for a century. Since Poe's essays, which Hensher says has been taken very seriously since (Hensher, 2015: xi) many writers have focussed on a single idea that dominates each story and have tried to 'explain that a short story must consist of a single situation, a short space of time, a small number of characters (Hensher, 2015: xi). In his *Short History of the Short Story* William Boyd agrees with Poe, and goes on to indicate that all modern short stories have this effect, citing stories by Melville, Chekhov, Hemingway, Mansfield, Carver and Borges as examples. 'We cannot summarize or paraphrase the totality of effect of these stories, try as we might: something about their unique frisson escapes or defies analysis' (Boyd, 2006). Boyd argues that Poe's definition should be developed and that, 'the great modern short stories possess a quality of mystery and beguiling resonance' (Boyd, 2006). Leading short story critic Charles E. May refers to compactness in his most recent book on short story theory *I Am Your Brother*.⁴ He cites Walter Benjamin:

The story has a compactness that defies psychological analysis, argues Benjamin. Whereas realistic narrative texts, such as the novel, focus on the relatively limited areas of human experience that indeed can be encompassed by information, characters in story encounter those most basic mysteries of human experience.

(May, 2013: 70)

Writers often resort to mystical notions and indicate some kind of mysterious effect. American author Alfred C. Ward said that short story authors, '...meet in the regions

⁴ Frank O'Connor says this title (which comes from Gogol's story 'The Overcoat') could have been an alternative title for *The Lonely Voice* indicating his influence on May. (O'Connor, 2004: 11)

of half-lights, where there is commerce between this world and the other world' (Ward, 1924:16). Acclaimed Irish short story writer Elizabeth Bowen says in her introduction to the *Faber Book of Modern Short Stories* that a short story 'approaches aesthetical or moral truth' (Bowen, 1936: 7). Julio Cortazar, who published ten collections of short stories between 1951 and 1982, talked of the short story, 'illuminating something beyond itself' (May, 1994: xvii). Pulitzer Prize winner Eudora Welty also used a light analogy, 'Some stories leave a train of light behind them, meteor-like, so that much later than they strike our eyes we may see their meaning like an after-effect' (Welty, 1994: 77). Welty's discussion of Hemingway's early story 'Indian Camp' provides a suggestion of the nature of the essence these writers are seeking:

As we now see Hemingway's story, not transparent, not radiant, but *lit from outside the story, from a moral source*, we see that light's true nature: it is a spotlight. And his stories are all taking place as entirely in the present as plays we watch being acted on the stage. Pasts and futures are among the things his characters have not. Outside this light they are nothing.

(Welty, 2002: 9 emphasis mine)

This idea of something outside the text shedding light upon it goes to the central theme of this thesis. The moral source from outside the story may be the writer. William Trevor suggests the importance of omission in his *Paris Review* interview.

I think it is the art of the glimpse. If the novel is like an intricate Renaissance painting, the short story is an impressionist painting. It *should* be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more. It is concerned with the total exclusion of meaninglessness. Life, on the other hand, is meaningless

most of the time. The novel imitates life, where the short story is bony, and cannot wander. It is essential art.

(Stout, 1989)

So, a short story is short and has a single, indefinable, mysterious effect, and this is not the same as a novel. Several of these writers talk about light, explosion, energy. But where does this force emanate from? Welty suggests it comes from outside the text. Trevor directly connects meaning and omission. The short story almost always focuses on a single character, as there is so little space to inhabit because of its length and limited scope. Welty and Trevor lead to a characteristic that is central to Frank O'Connor and his discussion of the loneliness of the character, a subject who has no past or future. Academic Wendell V Harris, who has written about short fiction and meaning, talks about how the short story isolates a person or moment 'detached from the great continuum' and of the short story being, 'a vehicle for the moment whose intensity makes it seem outside the ordinary stream of time or outside our ordinary range of experience,' (May, 1994:131) These ideas of isolation and detachment lead to discussion of Frank O'Connor and *The Lonely Voice*.

The Lonely Voice

The Lonely Voice by author and critic Frank O'Connor, first published in 1963, is a seminal work on the short story. It is still widely cited by short story analysts such as Charles E May and is still a pillar of teaching in creative writing.⁵ Richard Ford, himself a renowned short story author and Pulitzer Prize winner said,

⁵ This has been a core text at courses run by Comma Press (2012, 2013), Lancaster University (2011-2102) and at Edge Hill University (2013-2016). It is cited in contemporary text books on the short story by Paul March Russell, Ailsa Cox, Susan Lohafer, Venessa Gebbie and others.

The *Lonely Voice*, O'Connor's little book of essays on the short story, is certainly the most provocative and attentive there is on the form, and is probably where anyone, including me, who has an overview of the short story – American and European both – got it.

(Ford, 1992: introduction i)

O'Connor discusses form as being vital to understanding the short story. He says that the novel is defined by its length and the story by the form. He explains the difficulty in creating a definition.

For the short story writer there is no such thing as essential form. Because his frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it, and each new selection he makes contains the possibility of a new form as well as the possibility of a complete fiasco.

(O'Connor, 2004: 8, 21)

This indicates that there cannot be a single definition of the form and introduces two ideas that will be explored in later chapters. Firstly, there must be things left out of the story, and secondly, that there is conscious selection by the author during the composition (and that this is an individual process).

O'Connor's differentiation between the novel and the short story begins with a statement that 'the novel is bound to be a process of identification between the reader and the character' (O'Connor, 2004: 16). He says that one character in the novel must represent the reader 'in some aspect of his own conception of himself,' and that this leads to a concept of normality. He argues that the novel depends on the concept

of a normal society (O'Connor, 2004: 17). Using Gogol's 'The Overcoat' as an example, he says that in the short story there is no hero or character with whom the reader can identify and regard as 'normal'. Later, in his criticism of Kipling, he argues that Kipling is playing to the audience and describes, 'this consciousness of the individual reader as an audience who, at whatever cost to the artistic process, must be reduced to tears or laughter or rage' (O'Connor, 2004: 101). O'Connor does not discuss the link between author and character in this text, but does indicate that identification between reader and character is a function of the novel but not of the short story. This leads to my central question about the role of the author. If the reader cannot identify with that character as he or she might in a novel, perhaps the writer can.

The absence of the normality one expects in a novel leads to O'Connor's central idea of *submerged populations*, 'outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society' (O'Connor, 2004: 18). 'That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation' (O'Connor, 2004: 17). He discussed this in an interview for the *Paris Review*. 'Creating in the novel a sense of continuing life is the thing. We don't have that problem in the short story, where you merely suggest continuing life' (Whittier, 1957). In *Approval* the central character in most of the stories, David, is an outsider. He has left his business job and failed in his previous marriages. He is a misfit in a society where he is perceived to represent outdated views and ways of speaking. He belongs to a new submerged population, a businessman raised in the twentieth century by conservative Catholic parents with views that are in conflict with the world he inhabits. There is a risk that *Approval* approaches one of the characteristics of a novel defined by O'Connor, as David is set

up in opposition to society and will either master society or be mastered by it (O'Connor, 2004: 17). Also there is some chronological development. However, I have selected key moments that represent his life, and in each story I have left out sufficient information that *Approval* can never have the sense of completeness that exists in a novel. The stories are each separate short stories supplemented by framing material.

Human loneliness is O'Connor's central idea about the short story. Citing JD Salinger as a typical example of American storytellers, he says, 'though his theme is still human loneliness the loneliness is specific instead of generalised' (O'Connor, 2004: 41). It is about a lonely individual, rather than an isolated group or category. In an interview for the *Paris Review* a few years before publishing *The Lonely Voice* he makes a direct link between omission and loneliness using Hemingway as an example.

Hemingway will not allow the character to have had any past...I admit that from the point of view of the short story, you ought to be able to say, 'Nothing that happened before this short story is of real importance, nothing that happens after it is likely to be of great importance.'

(Whittier, 1957)

Here again it seems that the author has a role to play in the life of the protagonist. He or she *does* know what happened before and after the story and has a key role in telling the story The reader does not. In the same interview O'Connor refers to 'the story you are telling'(Whittier, 1957) He. also believes that 'great storytellers speak

to us with a lonely human voice, almost as though we were strangers and they were apologising for their intrusion' (O'Connor, 2004: 105). Here again he is drawing attention to authorial involvement. He is irritated by Kipling because, 'he is not speaking to me in his private capacity as an individual author' (O'Connor, 2004: 105).

So, O'Connor says that the short story is about a lonely character and that, unlike the novel, there is no opportunity for the reader to identify with a character or a hero. The protagonist has no life outside the constraints of time provided by the scope of the story. He also says that the author makes decisions about what to leave out and that the author himself is a lonely individual speaking to the reader. If the protagonist has no life outside of the text, where does the indefinable energy or light come from? I suggest that the role of the author is essential, and that of the reader in creating meaning may be reduced.

Rejecting a theoretical approach

O'Connor gives us at least one defining quality of the short story – loneliness. Beyond shortness and a general undefined sense that there is something mystical there are no other agreed theories. This is summarised by Lorrie Moore. 'The short story is pretty much theory-proof. One pronounces upon it with spluttering difficulty.' (Moore and Pitlor, 2015). Susan Lohafer, author of *Reading for Storyness, Coming to Terms with the Short Story, Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* and other texts on the short story and reception theory, says that she was drawn to the form because it had 'a certain quiriness, a maverick quality, a resistance to ideology' (Iftekharuddin, Rohrberger and Lee, ed.: 171).

At the outset of this research I was keen to develop a grand unifying theory and several of the interview questions addressed this. I was examining the forces that act on a story from outside the text as opposed to the mechanics of the story, the workings of the text itself.

I had seen repetitive use of words like *singularity*, *light*, and *explosion* in texts about the short story and put forward a concept in two parts. Firstly, I created a diagram representing a model, akin to the Standard Model used by physicists to explain the Universe. This was an attempt to identify the complex interactions between text, reader, writer and the various contextual forces that act on each of them. Secondly, I suggested that a name be given to the missing essential light, force or energy that is alluded to by past writers. I followed the approach that scientists use when confronted by an unexplained phenomenon such as Dark Energy, the unknown form of energy which is hypothesised to make up two-thirds of the Universe (Nasa, 2016). I hypothesised that there was a similar energy in the short story. The fundamental flaw with both is that the short story is not made of matter and energy in the same way as the physical world. There is nothing that can be measured and observed in an empirical way. In fact it has already been identified that there is something more elusive, spiritual even. The use of words such as light and force are not analogous to science, they are merely descriptive. Discussion of these ideas at conferences and with writers informed my understanding and moved my ideas to a practice-based personal methodology and a narrative approach to analysis. It is impossible to consider the story's context and its relationship to the author and reader without

examining craft and form and what happens within the text. This is the way the writers interviewed in this research think about their craft.

I put the question of unifying theories to Zoe Lambert (Q2: There is no clear unifying theory or hypothesis that addresses all short stories since O'Connor – to what extent do you agree). She suggests that theoretical approaches have seldom gone beyond definitions:

I would slightly disagree with question number two because the problem is that short story studies is eternally caught up in the use of definition and never gets beyond it, to do with it being a minor form. You never hear the novel going around trying to define itself all the time.

(Lambert, 2015)

We discussed the forces that may be at work and the idea that there may be a light (Lambert, 2015). She acknowledged that there may be something almost spiritual but opposed a scientific approach:

This goes with Charles E. May's thing about the story being mythical. They are writing about existence beyond the material, about something sacred...The problem is this isn't physics. There would be your truths, the hypotheses that have been argued. This is different. The reason why there is no clear unifying theory is that it is always up for debate, there's not one answer to the universal. I don't think you're going to get one theory that everyone agrees to and obeys like the bible.

(Lambert, 2015)

Toby Litt also resists scientific theories because of the complexity of the story:

I'd agree that there isn't a consensus about a theory of the short story in the way of a theory, partly because there is a divide between those who are doing the theory and doing the actual writing of short stories, and partly because short stories are a more irresponsible form than the novel, so it's harder to put certain rules around them... I think if I were to take a scientific view it's such a complicated system that you might as well think about it in a magical way.

(Litt 2015)

When thinking about mapping the short story and its various concepts, he pointed out that there would be practical limitations as well as ideological issues. The Universe, despite its vastness, can be modelled because it is physical. That is not the case with a short story. It does not have particles, matter, or energy in any way that can be measured. I outlined the idea of a Standard Model. He spelt out its limitations.

So, my answer to your diagram [a diagram showing the short story and its contexts] is it would have to be a quantum diagram if it were to approximate to what's going on because I don't think it could be flat and static. All the elements would need to be broken down, there's not only the reader but reader broken down into the physiological reader. How do you account for the hairs standing up on the back of your neck for instance?

(Litt, 2015)

When discussing his approach to writing he also provided insight into the complexity of the process, and, importantly for the development of my own ideas, makes a strong link to the author himself referring to writing a story called 'The Bug':

In terms of the writing I remember that I sat down and wrote it in two hours or so, but I couldn't have plotted according to

the Newtonian version of writing that story. I had to trust that the quantum things all happen.

(Litt, 2015)

When I write I follow Carver's approach and create a first draft in one sitting. Here Litt shows that this makes a scientific, planned approach impossible. He explained this further in a way that shows how complex any model might be.

What we teach [in creative writing] is Newtonian physics. In other words there are laws of narrative say to do with point of view, and this is how this works, these are things you should wisely use and the problems if you don't. But for me the writing is quantum physics, and all of the physical laws that are asserted and all the things you can generally say are broken where you can have the same object in two places at once, or can travel back in time, or things that are essentially both a particle and a wave.

(Litt, 2015)

Adam Marek, unlike Lambert and Litt, does not have an academic background in literature. His definitions echo some of those of O'Connor about the differences between short stories and novels, but he too indicates that universal theories are impossible. He is against a theoretical approach. 'If I was to spend a lot of time looking at other people's theories that could be quite damaging to the creative process' (Marek, 2015). He did consider the idea of a model, but rejected it.

It would be an interesting exercise. I'm sure you could draw lots of stories that follow the same principles, but there would never be a unified theory that you could apply to all of them, if you could find some physics that applies to all stories you'd be a very wealthy, happy man.

(Marek, 2015)

He also feels that compactness and compression are essential characteristics:

I think as soon as you start to generalise about what a short story is you can find a hundred examples that don't do that, but I think on the whole short stories take *a moment in a character's life*, a moment of change and as close to the end of that moment of change as possible to get the maximum intensity in the shortest space possible, whereas with a novel it's about development. It's about change over a longer period of time or over a small period of time but through a series of changes...

(Marek, 2015, emphasis mine)

Here again there is focus on a moment and a single character. It is about a single moment in the life of a solitary character.

It's about being all compression and getting the maximum amount of narrative in the shortest time possible, but I think the ones that work really well... Angela Carter said about the short story not being minimalist but being rococo. It just takes a tiny moment, but it's about the detail.

(Marek, 2015)

Carys Davies also opposes theories and feels that each story has its own unique and individual form. There can be no universal idea of form:

I am aware of the Frank O'Connor thing, but as a writer I deliberately don't spend much time reading theories because I really do feel that every time I sit down to write I am having to try and re-invent the wheel. That's one thing I feel very strongly. Almost every time I sit down I feel I don't know how to do it...

...I think every story has its very own form so it's always felt to me it's not very useful to try and have some sort of theory about what form is in an abstract way you might have because you have to write it to write it, so I'm not very big on theory.

(Davies, 2015)

This shows a personal approach to the writing process and concurs with O'Connor's view that there is no essential form. Davies emphasises the immediacy of the

moment in a similar way to Litt's response to his environment. The single moment described in the story may be connected to the single moment of its creation, which here, Davies suggests is unique. This is an idea that Michel Faber agrees with. He prefers to let the idea lead the process and asks, 'what does this idea need?' He says he listens to the story and what it wants to grow into.⁶ Eudora Welty has a similar approach; '... all my work grows out of the work itself. It seems to set its form from the idea, which is complete from the start, and a sense of the form is like a vase into which you pour something and fill it up. I have that completely in mind from the beginning, and I don't realize how far I can wander and yet come back' (Kuehl, 1972). All of these writers are indicating that a sense of their personal poetics prevails over any concept of a generic form.

This investigation was a vital part of my own development as a writer. I have consciously and subconsciously picked up techniques and approaches from my reading, but I have not followed any theoretical method in writing. I write from an idea, phrase or image and never consciously decide which tense or point of view I will employ in the first draft. I am unable to describe formally or draw a picture of the process. Only at the editing stage am I conscious of deliberate decisions about how to present a particular story. Each of the four writers I interviewed has a unique approach to their craft, reinforcing O'Connor's statement that there can be no essential form. I must conclude that a universal theory is both unattainable and of no value. Writing a short story is a unique and personal experience for each author, and the author's role is central. The approach to analysis must be specific not general.

⁶ Reading at Edge Hill University 7 February 2017

Summarising past ideas

So, a short story is short, it has a single effect, and the loneliness of the protagonist is a defining characteristic. But none of this completes an understanding of the form, and writers are unable to define or agree on any possible term for the essence of the short story. In fact in my research I have found that there is opposition to a theoretical approach, and a personal and practical approach is favoured by all four interviewees and by esteemed writers throughout the last century. In order to gain an understanding of the form a narrative approach must be used instead. In much the same way as O'Connor, it is only possible to cite examples of writers and consider the writing process then to discuss characteristics that emerge from their poetics.

The remaining chapters will focus on external contexts and the role of the author. It will be shown in each chapter that there is a direct link between the author and the text and that this manifests itself in a unique way in the short story.

3. A Sign of the Times: The world and the author's response to it

Having drawn a connection between the author and the text, consideration must next be given to the relationship between the author and the context within which he or she writes. No writer can be separated from the social, cultural, historical, technological and political environment within which he or she lives and writes. The author will have emotional and personal responses to the world which influence their fiction either consciously or subconsciously. Decisions will need to be made by the author about how to describe and interpret their world and how to create a fictional world.

Representing the real world in a short story

O'Connor said that the merits of the short story are recognised in terms of plausibility and clarified this as follows: 'By this I do not mean mere verisimilitude – that we can get from a newspaper report – but an ideal action worked out in terms of verisimilitude' (O'Connor, 2004: 13). He argues that a character cannot be seen to behave in a way that is inexplicable (O'Connor, 2004: 13). This means that the author must create a plausible world, which in turn means that there is a personal set of decisions to be made by the author. It does not mean that the fictional world must be an accurate representation of the real world. Carys Davies, whose stories in *The Redemption of Galen Pike* are mostly set in imagined places, resists the use of contemporary or real details.

I often find stories, if they're bristling with lots of contemporary references, they just feel a little bit unreal to me even if they're full of real references to music or television programmes it all feels a bit stuck on to me.

...Giving just a few details makes it much more real than if you went into a tremendous amount of detail. Sometimes the detail makes it feel less real.

(Davies, 2015)

She invents a world unlike the real world and yet representing it. ‘And people say to me “I can’t really tell what time, what era your stories are of.” So I wouldn’t say I’m a writer who’s thinking about the real world, but at the same time there’s a particular kind of, if you like, not real setting for a story’ (Davies, 2015). What I have taken from this is that stories need some descriptive detail but not so much that they become grounded in a real place and time or bogged down in description. O’Connor praises the work of AE Coppard, who published twenty collections of short stories between 1921 and 1957. ‘...his formal range is remarkable – greater I should say than that of any other storyteller’ (O’Connor, 2004: 168). O’Connor discusses Coppard’s inability to resist a descriptive flourish and says it is a universal experience that, ‘Some nervous weakness drives us to cheerful irrelevancies even when we are anticipating what we know perfectly well will be the end of the world for us’ (O’Connor, 2004: 169).

I have tried to avoid too much descriptive detail and have selected such ‘cheerful irrelevancies’ in *Approval*. In ‘Looks like Rain’ there is a notice about items that might be stolen from a hospital including false teeth. I have used this to show the need for distraction in an environment where all the characters are determined not to say anything meaningful. I have each character discuss the parking arrangements because that allows them to appear to be communicating when, of course, they are doing nothing of the sort. In ‘Our Lady’s Toes’ David focuses on the details of a

statue while he is being abused. There is religious imagery, but there is a moment where he concentrates on what the statue is made of to distract himself from his situation. The story is written in the second person to create distance because David cannot admit what happened to him. In 'Sealed with a Kiss' he notices a knot in the wooden table and the smell of furniture polish, memories from 'Vitam Impendere Vero I and II'. Here he is both blanking out the pressure of the meeting and being reminded of stressful situations in the classroom and the headmaster's office. Moments later the combination of those memories and the tension he feels cause him to blurt out that he was abused. 'The Baby Book' is built around the idea of looking closely at the detail of an empty photo album. It highlights David's continued inability to speak about his losses.

The author's response to the world at large

The author cannot avoid being influenced by the world he or she inhabits at the time of writing, and his or her response will be unique and personal. O'Connor points out that there are as many ways of expressing verisimilitude as there are writers (O'Connor, 2004: 13). Zoe Lambert comments on the relationship between the story and the world:

If anything, often short stories are more intensely poetic and lyrical and not engaged with politics and the social world. And they can often be entirely imagined. They have that mythical sense beyond the real world, so they aren't dependent on the real world at all. But as writers we are all dependent on our contexts. You can't divorce any writer from that, they all write from a certain position in culture and history, so lots of stories are the opposite of that. So it's not an either /or thing.

(Lambert, 2015)

Eudora Welty makes a direct connection between the text of the short story and its author in her chapter 'Writing and analyzing a short story,' in *On Writing*. This indicates a more personal, intimate connection between the writer and the world, one that is individual and cannot be subjected to generalisation.

The outside world and the writer's response to it, always differing in the combining; they are always – or so it seems to me – most intimately connected with each other. This living connection is one that by its nature is not very open to generalisation or discoverable by the ordinary scrutinies of analysis. Never mind; for its existence is, for any purpose but that of the working writer, of little importance. But it is of extraordinary, if temporary, use to the writer for the particular story.

(Welty, 2002: 31)

This use of the outside world was a theme of the interviews. The topic of refugees was a major news item throughout 2015. Inevitably it came up in discussions with interviewees. Carys Davies had recently been asked to contribute a story to an anthology on this topic, and Lambert's *The War Tour* is about refugees. Toby Litt points to an individual response to news and world events using this topic as his example:

And what is news? What comes to us through the media? It's not just distorted, it's a common view or an assimilable series of events somewhere you're not most of the time. To me I want to take it in but give it as little attention as I can, so I can figure out what's likely to be less deluded about what's going on. So the things to do with asylum are very much about point of view, and if I was to script it, what happened

with the body on the beach?⁷ It was impossible to de-individualise that image.

(Litt, 2015)

This moves the discussion from a general sense of context, of what is happening in the world at large, to a more intimate one. ‘Impossible to de-individualise’ stresses how personal that process is. Litt described how his immediate environment is directly related to the writing of a story. The impact of specific circumstances will be more intense when a story is written in one sitting or in a small period of time, which is not the case when writing a novel, when the influence of the circumstances is reduced because it is written over a long period of time. Litt explained that his methodology is different for each story. His concept of *performing* a story is a thought I had not encountered previously and indicates something very personal and immediate to the writer:

There is story I wrote called ‘The Bug’, short for ‘Call it The Bug Because I Don’t Have Time to Think of Better Title.’ That one was written in circumstances very close to those I describe. My mother was very close to dying, and it was a performed story in the sense that I had to write it at that moment. The timescale was three hours. Now partly I write when in those situations which is unusual in that if I’m in a hospital waiting room in a situation where you might dwell on a situation I might do it writing. I won’t necessarily publish or even re-read those things. I’ll write in situations that are quite extreme, and I think that’s more interesting than a neutral space where everything is ready and laid out. So the things that I’ve written that I think are the best are the things I’ve produced in the most extreme emotional circumstances.

⁷ This refers to an incident in which three-year-old, Alan Kurdi, drowned while trying to escape to Greece with other Syrian refugees in 2015. Images of his dead body went viral.

(Litt, 2015)

The story 'The Bug,' which was short-listed for the Sunday Times EFG prize in 2013, deliberately points out the use of omission by bracketing information that might have been included: '(isn't this where the story would have started to go wrong, to disappoint you)' (Page, 2012: 229). The Comma Press anthology, *Biopunk*, which included this story, pairs authors with scientists to respond to developments in medicine and science. In my review for Lancashire Writing Hub I noted that half of the stories were about the author's sick mother (Lancashire Writing Hub, 2013). This suggests that Litt is not alone in applying his personal circumstances to his writing. Litt is determined to look at writing as an individual response and is opposed to the idea that the writer is simply a filter of his environment:

I think to write off a news agenda is, in a way, to accept the rules of the game we don't really want to play. A practical example was there was a train accident years ago where it was such an inferno that the bodies were unrecognisable. Simultaneously about 5,000 writers in London decided to write a story about someone who was meant to be on that train but decided to get off. It wasn't worth writing unless you were to fuck with it in a significant way.

(Litt, 2015)

This is an indicator of the intensity of the relationship between the author and his story. Litt went on to make analogies with improvised jazz and sports performance. He describes how his story 'John and John' also demanded a spontaneous performance and had to be written in one go.

I think I could not have written that story by planning it. I could only perform it and the idea was that what I was doing was a mental farce where different thought streams, thinking

about meditation, thinking about porn, thinking about flights, thinking about the woman downstairs. They come in the way characters come in in a farce... I had to do it in one.

(Litt, 2015)

Raymond Carver discusses influences in his essay 'Fires'. He writes 'the imminent removal of the chair from under me was a constant concern' (Carver, 2009: 31). He links his own circumstances to form. He says that to write a novel, 'a writer should be living in a world that makes sense...that will for a time anyway, stay fixed in one place...is not likely to go up in smoke in the process' (Carver, 2009: 35). He knew that this was not the case in his life of transient addresses and itinerant jobs and this led to him focussing on the short story.

Carver also responds to more specific events. He describes how he was interrupted by a phone call while writing. The caller was a black man asking for someone called Nelson who he then included in his story. 'I see it is right and, I believe, aesthetically correct that Nelson be there' (Carver, 2009: 29). He describes 'a coincidental rightness I had the good sense to trust' (Carver, 2009: 30). Here the writer is using the environment in a spontaneous way, but is still making a choice. Carver refers to VS Pritchett's definition of a 'something glimpsed' but adds his own philosophy.

The short story writer's task is to invest the glimpse with all that is in his power. He'll take his intelligence and literary skill to bear (his talent) his sense of proportion and sense of the fitness of things: of how things out there really are and how he sees those things – like no one else sees them.

(Carver, 2009: 27)

This indicates an active personal intervention, a choice using skill and a unique way of seeing the world. Toby Litt has another angle on the ways in which the author intervenes. This goes beyond merely following the current trend or reflecting the world. It also indicates a more individualistic involvement with the writer's environment:

The thing is for me that the writer is trying to intervene in a turbulent way rather than just flowing along with the direction that cultural practice is already in. The writers that I value most are those who seem to have done something that's as close to being not a-historical but unexpected in their context.

(Litt, 2015)

Litt describes how the writer is affected by the room they are in and cites an ache in a knee, amongst other factors:

You are aware of the ache in your knee and you are aware of the characters, and you're getting the light in the room, and you are also aware that the writer has just used the word corpuscular, and you are also aware that you've got half an hour before you catch the train, all those things at once.

(Litt, 2015)

This leads to consideration of how these contexts act on the stories in *Approval*.

The impact of the writer's environment in *Approval*

Litt mentioned an ache in one's knee. I had a minor knee injury when I was writing the story which became 'My Knee'. It begins 'My knee hurts quite badly.' There is no reason at all why David in the story would have injured his knee when assaulting the woman except that my knee was sore while I was typing. The reader cannot

possibly know this. The story was written when I was angry at a social worker's judgements about my first marriage during the adoption approval process. My anxiety at the process, and indignation at her opinion that I was culpable for my first wife's infidelity, translated themselves as rage. That is why there is violence in the story. My personal circumstances in 2014 affected the story more than the time when the story is set. The previous story chronologically, 'Green Gables' shows a poignant reflection on the end of that marriage. Between 2013 when it was published and 2014 when 'My Knee' was written there was a dramatic change in tone and mood. Tension about the approval process led to a different view of old relationships.

There are other examples of both the world at large and my specific circumstances impacting on the story in the stories in *Approval*. The stories are about how I see things – like no-one else. The whole collection is driven by events in my life in 2013-2015 during which time I was applying, with my wife, to be approved as an adopter, a process made more emotional as it came in the aftermath of several miscarriages. In real life, and in the fiction, cases such as *Re B-S* have delayed the adoption process,⁸ so the whole tone is influenced by a socio-political context. In fact, had that case not led to a reduction in the number of children available for adoption at the time of our application there may have been no motivation for the book at all. This is more than a general environmental backdrop. The energy and emotion that drives the stories and the motivation for them to exist at all comes from a personal response to my environment.

⁸ In this case the judge talked about inadequacy of reasoning by local authorities in adoption cases and suggested that adoption be considered a last resort. In practice this means that further investigations are made into a child's relatives making it more difficult for a child to be taken into care. (Tickle, 2014)

The second part of the story 'Motivation' is written in a cold and clinical third person voice, again not allowing feelings to be expressed, to expose the empty feeling of David when he realises that Cici is never going to have a baby. It is impossible to separate that from real feelings, though the events are fabricated. In real life I have been conditioned not to show emotions in that situation, so David only has an internal moment where he feels he is drowning. I have carefully chosen the closing line 'Thank you very much' (*Approval: 15*) as the blandest and least expressive phrase possible. This use of cliché is repeated in 'Her Shoes' and 'Looks like Rain'. They are the words that are at hand when the character cannot deal with the complexity or intensity of his present situation, so he speaks without expressing anything.

I changed the stories 'Looks like Rain' and wrote 'David's Thing' as a direct response to my dad suffering a TIA.⁹ My feelings at the time of writing caused a more sympathetic writing of the dad character and emotions about the possibility of losing him. In the first story, which is narrated in the third person, I allow Dad's inner thoughts to be expressed in a few places, defining it as his story. It is not a story about the mother's death. It is about the peripheral role of the father. In 'David's Thing' I added a few moments of humorous direct speech from the Dad character and gave more of his point of view to address his isolation.

I had already written 'Vitam Impendere Vero Part 1: The Last Sister' when I found out in 2014 that Reverend Morris, one of my teachers from St Ambrose College, where I attended from 1975 to 1982, had been convicted on a large number of

⁹ A TIA or Transient Ischemic Attack is a "mini stroke" often a pre-cursor to a stroke.

charges of sexual abuse at that school. This is an example of Carver's 'co-incidental rightness'. The first story was originally a light comic piece about an embarrassing classroom moment and was first drafted while I was at Lancaster University, a time with relatively few anxieties. It now became a darker tale. I wrote the second part, 'Our Lady's Toes,' to express my own anger at that school, where I had been unhappy. I used the second person to distance the character 'you' from the events described. The third part explored wider aspects of David's character and allowed the antagonist, Mr Austin, to say unpleasant things about David and his mother including insults that I could not allow any other character to say. There is a complex series of relationships between real events, imagined events and the story. The stories are, ostensibly, about sex abuse. The author's intention is to use that as a way of expressing anger at a less specific adolescent unhappiness.

I edited 'My Knee' and other stories in response to criticism at David's refusal to speak in a politically correct way. This is a different response to environmental factors. Writers and critics have given negative feedback on the parts of the stories where David and Dougie speak to each other.¹⁰ I had deliberately drawn them both as men of middle age that grew up in the nineteen seventies when sexist comments were less taboo. It was a planned way of showing David's exclusion from society and a reason for his tension during the adoption process. 'Motivation' was written to show contrast between David's apparently dismissive, boyish jokes about fertility treatment, and the real pain he feels inside and cannot express. By toning down their humour I have sought to humanise them.

¹⁰ '...there's a kind of clumsy refusal to make his characters 'right on' that I didn't take to (on the adoption process: 'They have targets for gays and minorities') and I'm afraid I huffed out loud at the 'nurse wasn't my type. Moustache' gag.' (The Short Story, 2016)

The wording of the linking pages before each story, which are paraphrased versions of actual questions in the adoption approval process, is designed to reflect a cumbersome and overbearing way of managing inclusion and diversity including the offer that translations are available in Polish, a potentially inflammatory suggestion in central Lancashire, one of the most aggressively pro-Brexit places in the UK.¹¹ The words, ‘heterosexual, bi-sexual or transsexual without discrimination’ (*Approval: 71*) are deliberately missing a comma before *without* as a personal response to the lack of thought applied by local authorities in managing sensitive issues.

In all of these examples it is the author that prevails. It is he or she (or I) who *decides* how to react to the world at large and to more personal circumstances. This leads to a closer look at the author’s signature and questions about the role of the author.

¹¹ All 14 districts in Lancashire voted to leave the European Union (BBC, 2016)

4. Where I'm Calling From: The author's signature

Selection decisions by the author

Two ideas are emerging; selection by the author, and the intimate and personal nature of those selection decisions. As discussed in Chapter 2, O'Connor relates this selection to form; 'Because his frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it...' (O'Connor, 2004: 8). Lorrie Moore discusses how writers use abbreviations for the world, again indicating there is a personal selection:

It is difficult for a short story to create a completely new world or a social milieu in its entirety or present an entirely unfamiliar one or one unknown to the author—so little time and space—so stories are often leaning on a world that is already there, one that has already entered the *writer's mind* and can be assembled metonymically in a quick sketch and referred to without having to be completely created from scratch. To some degree the setting is already understood and shared with the reader, although *the writer is giving it his own twist or opinion or observations or voice*.

(Moore & Pitlor, 2015: ix)

Raymond Carver goes further in his belief about intensity of the relationship between author and text. According to Carver, it is an individual approach.

Every great or even every very good author makes the world over according to his own specifications. It's akin to style what I'm talking about but it isn't style alone. It is the *author's particular and unmistakable signature* on everything he writes. It is his world and no other.

(Carver, 2009: 22)

This is a view with which John Cheever, 'the living American author that Carver most admired' (Sklenicka, 2009: 232) concurs. In the *Paris Review* Cheever said 'Oh

yes, oh yes! When I speak as a writer I speak with my own voice – quite as unique as my fingerprints – and I take the maximum risk at seeming profound or foolish.’ (Grant, 1976) George Lukacz argues that the lyrical nature of short stories results from the fact that short stories deal with fragments of life and this stamps the work with its origin in the author’s will (May, 2013: 54). Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin explains language in terms of narratology, repeating the word *intentions*.

There are no neutral words and forms – words and forms that belong to no-one; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions.

(Bakhtin, 1981: 293)

Here Bakhtin is linking language and contexts. He resists the idea of a single authorial voice:

Instead of a single objective world, held together by the author’s voice, there is a plurality of consciousnesses, each with its own world. The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears to each character.

(Robinson, 2011)

However, this is disrupted in the short story where there very often is only one lonely character. I would argue that that character is intimately linked to the author and his or her intentions.

Eudora Welty also points to intentions and links the power of the story to a force within the author. Perhaps this is the moral source that she says sheds light on the story. She indicates that, rather than simply being a filter of words in context, stories originate from within their author:

It seems likely that all of one author's stories do tend to spring from the same source within him. However they differ in theme or approach, however they vary in mood or fluctuate in their strength, their power to reach the mind or heart, all of one author's stories carry their signature...

(Welty, 2002: 30)

In the case of JG Ballard the signature is so distinct that the author has a word in the dictionary, *Ballardian*, to define it. Will Self describes Ballard's work as 'the most significant single contribution to English literature in the past half-century' (Self, 2009). Toby Litt has said 'The effect of his books isn't comparable to any other writer' (Litt, 2009). William Boyd explains the use of the visual in Ballard's work and how he has unique tropes:

Ballard's models for his haunting stories are closer to art and music, it seems to me, than to literature...image and symbol dominate with a surreal and hypnotic intensity, and the language reflects this. Ballardian tropes – empty swimming pools, abandoned resorts, psychotic astronauts, damaged doctors, the alluring nihilism of consumer society – are unmistakably and uniquely his.

(Guardian, 2011)

Charles E May has also written about the personal nature of short stories. He says 'Most writers have testified to its essentially subjective nature' (May, 2002:122).

May quotes various short story writers including V.S. Pritchett who says, ‘the good short story writer knows he is putting on a personal, individual act’ (May, 2002:122). Again there is an indication of a subjective intervention, a performance even. An example of this is the way Adam Marek’s unique style is influenced by responses to his own unique circumstances:

I grew up addicted to science fiction films. I was exactly the right age when Star Wars came out, and I love all those fifties B movies with rubber aliens and flying saucers on strings, and I love the lo-fi... and all my family were massive horror fans so I grew up surrounded by that, and in my family when they talked about books they always talked about the horror books they were reading.

(Marek, 2015)

His story ‘Testicular Cancer and The Behemoth’ is an example of that imagery, his personal thumbprint. The author is choosing specific cultural references and images, each being part of his experience and being the natural way that he speaks, thinks and writes. Marek describes the process as transmitting a code to the reader:

I see the story like there’s a camera on my head... The writer’s job is to transmit that film as faithfully as possible and the words are the code. The more ability and skill you have the more faithful that is in the head of the reader.

(Marek, 2015)

He cites the story ‘Dead Fish’ from his collection *The Stone Thrower* which addresses the reader in the second person as if directing a film and goes on to discuss how the reader will accept extraordinary things: ‘The trick with writing fantastical stories is to suspend their disbelief.’ (Marek 2015)

May also argues that short stories are apt to be timeless in a way that novels are not. They are less dependent on social context and so are more personal. 'They, therefore, are more apt to focus on basic desires, dreams, anxieties, and fears than novels' (May, 1994: xxvi). He suggests that this makes stories exhibit more authorial control. The evidence from Carver, Ballard and Marek, each of them writing in different styles and different generations, shows that each author makes selections and chooses their own way of describing the world. It is the author who controls these decisions and has authority over them and in the short story these selections are directly influenced by the author's circumstances and feelings in the moment of writing.

Selection of reference points and symbols in *Approval*

My selection of images, descriptive details and cultural references is personal and unique. Owing to my non-literary life for decades before this research I have a wide library of film references and many musical references but almost none from literature. The texture and flavour of each story is determined not just by the general environment in which an author lives, but by his or her personal and unique selections of the cultural influences he or she has experienced and may choose to include in each story. I alone could have made this exact group of selections. They are intertextual references but they are peculiar to one author. Some come from my own favourite films. David refers to *The Great Escape* in 'David's Thing' and discusses *Cool Hand Luke* with Dougie in 'Ten Ten am.' In 'Three Women and a Roundabout' I used a recurring rhythm to introduce the three women; 'Inside the taxi / ambulance / coach is a coat. Inside the coat is a woman' (*Approval*: 47-53). I borrowed this from a scene in the film *Once Upon a Time in the West* in which the

hero is confronted by the leader of the bad guys soon after despatching three of his men. He grabs the coat (called a duster) of a henchman and says ‘I saw three of these dusters waiting for a train, and inside the three dusters were three men, and inside the three men were three bullets’ (Leone, 1968). It stuck with me because I grew up on Westerns, so I used the mechanism because I liked its rhythm, and it helps to connect the stories of the three women. ‘So, at a roundabout are three vehicles, inside the three vehicles are three coats, inside the three coats are three women’ (*Approval*: 52).

I use horror film references in ‘Vitam Impendere Vero’ not because I want to point out the potential horror of the situation, but because it is both relevant to the period and a personal memory of mine. Like Adam Marek, I remember the Hammer Horror films as a childhood excitement in the 1970s. The film *The Wicker Man* (1973) is about religious extremism, but it also was the first film in which I saw a naked woman. It links horror, religion and sex, so it suits the story, but it is a personal choice. I have used my own palette to show how the character, David, is feeling at that moment.

The title of ‘Sealed with a Kiss’ comes from a song. The reason this song came to mind was a personal memory, not of a romantic nature but of a traumatic event. In 1986 I was involved in a quite serious car accident on the way to work in Cheshire. That song was on the radio and I still have a reaction when I hear it because the shock in the slow-motion moment before impact has caused it to be imprinted in my mind. For this critical thesis it does not matter whether the critic or reader likes the device or the choice of song in the story, though it may affect their response. What is at work here is that the author has selected a specific song that has a specific

resonance to the author. There is an emotion attached to the song that is not connected at all to the story. It is absent and cannot be known by the reader. This is evidence of one aspect of the Only Voice. Not only has the author made a unique selection, but also its reason for inclusion and the nature of its meaning are known only to the author.

The life of the author

Any discussion of the author would be incomplete without acknowledging Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author*, and it is clear that I am placing the author in a central role, perhaps to the extent that he or she might even make a case for a capital A. I have pointed out the author's will in the selections the author makes about how to translate the world into fiction, and the personal nature of short stories. Barthes' work is subject to a great deal of discussion and criticism, and there is no definitive reading. However, a brief discussion of some of his themes is necessary to acknowledge the role the reader plays in creating meaning, and to consider my idea of the short story author in his or her context.

Barthes begins by questioning who is speaking in Balzac's story 'Sarrasine', stating that all literature consists of multiple indiscernible voices and that the identity of the body that writes is lost. From the examples and quotes discussed in this chapter I must concur that when and how the author acts and the mechanics by which he or she selects filters and translates myriad influences is a mystery. It is not the author alone that creates the text, and I am aware of at least two voices when writing; the spontaneous emotional writer, and the student editing to fulfil expectations and meet some of those Newtonian rules about, for instance, consistent point of view (with the

echo of tutors and other writers in my ears). There are multiple voices in the writing and there are various definitions of the reader, but the author is amongst the voices.

Adam Biro talks of this multiplicity when he describes the characters in his collection *Two Jews on a Train*:

I don't resemble any of these people. I don't recognise myself in them, yet I know from the outset that that one of these two is me. And so is the other. These Jewish stories of which not a single one happened to me, and which I did not invent a single one, do describe me, do characterise me, do explain me. They are always my own story.

(Biro, 2001: vii)

Toby Litt spoke about a linguistic study that was using some of his fiction. He said it is hard to write as different narrators. 'It's hard to stop doing sentences in the way you write' (Litt, 2015). There is a multiplicity of voices, but they are intrinsically centred on the author. Litt also spoke about the different parts of his own brain. 'I have thought it would be interesting to have my brain scanned while I'm writing. I assume it would look a bit like a thunderstorm with flashes of synaptic flashes of lightning, and that it's accessing bits that aren't used for riding a bike' (Litt, 2015).

This can be applied to *Approval* and causes questions about 'I' the real person (and the multiple constructions of that), 'I' the narrator, who may be a version of me or the character, and David, the character who is also a manifestation of me – deliberately renamed so that I can more clearly differentiate. There are the deliberate intentions that I want to show in the character's behaviour and there are the subconscious emotions at the time of writing. It can only be concluded that the author and the real person must both be part of the writing process. Any scientific

analysis is unlikely to accurately determine who is writing and how much of the author's voice can be heard through his or her character, but that voice does exist.

Barthes rejects what he calls the tyranny of the Author, or at least the way the Author has been the centre of arguments about literature, and is opposed to always seeking an explanation for a work in the person who produced it. He goes on to discuss the ways in which Proust blurs the lines between author, character, life and the process of writing itself. He suggests that language itself prevails and cannot be destroyed, only modified, 'the Author is never anything more than the man who writes... language knows a "subject" not a "person"' (Barthes, 1974). Barthes talks of the 'absence of the Author' and the 'Author diminishing like a tiny figure at the end of the stage' He says that 'the text is henceforth written and read so that in it, on every level, the Author absents himself' (Barthes, 1974). I am arguing that the author, his or her signature and his or her life are significant, and that the author is not a passive constructor of words but deliberately makes choices, and has free will. Here I would dwell on Barthes' use of *absence*. Does he mean that the author has gone away or is missing? Or is he suggesting that absence is more permanent, that the Author never was? I have used the word *absence* both as a theme in *Approval* and a topic for a chapter in this analysis. It refers, in this context, to all of those things outside the text. I would argue that the absent author exerts such a force on the story as to render it meaningful, or at least be a major influence on the meaning of the text. He or she is absent from the text, but exists in the short story. His emotions and intentions, his circumstances at the time of writing, exert a force on the story. The Author may be absent, but cannot be dead.

Richard Ford discusses the role of the author in his introduction to the second volume of *The Granta Book of the American Short Story*. He asks ‘What is it that short stories uniquely *do* in the exercise of their audacious authority?’ (Ford, 2007: introduction. ix). He says that all art is at least partly about the exercise of authority, indicating that he might subscribe to allowing the author a capital A:

The writer, for her part, exerts herself on otherwise unorganized language, creates utterances that provisionally subordinate our concerns to hers and – as we’re induced to read on – draws us away from what we think toward what *she* thinks. And once we’ve, so to speak, surrendered in this way (a giving-in to authority...) she tries in all the strenuous, guileful and felicitous ways fiction can act upon us to authorize our response to every single thing she makes happen.

(Ford, 2007: introduction. ix)

This goes to the very heart of my argument. Ford is making a direct connection between the authority of the author and the meaning of the story.

In his insistence that a text cannot be explained through the Author, Barthes dispenses with the need for criticism and the Critic which he pairs with the Author saying that ‘the space of the writing is to be traversed not penetrated: writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning’ (Barthes, 1974). Here I can only revert to my newly established position as a member of the anti-theory team alongside four acclaimed contemporary authors. I cannot subscribe to a view that deconstructs meaning and refutes any concept of the individual author (with or without a capital A) when my own evidence, from talking to authors and reading what authors have been

saying for a century, is that writing a short story is a personal organic process that cannot be explained by theory or reduced to meaningless words not assigned to anyone. O'Connor, Welty, Carver, Ford, May, and the four contemporary authors interviewed all point to the author as an individual with a unique, unmistakable signature who employs skill, guile, a unique voice and style, and authority. Even Poe attributes the single effect of the short story to the way the 'skilful artist' has constructed a tale 'with deliberate care' (Thompson, 2004: 521).

Finally Barthes says that 'the true locus of writing is reading' (Barthes, 1974). He argues that there is only one place where the multiplicity and complexity of writings can be understood, and that is in the reader. 'The unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination' (Barthes, 1974). The final line of *The Death of the Author* emphasises this reversal, 'the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author' (Barthes, 1974). Here, allowing that Barthes is not advocating the actual death of the author, I will argue against the death of the author with the support of some substantial authors. Raymond Carver says the movement towards interpretation and reception theory is incomplete:

This is an example of how an interesting theoretical concept has limitations, not owing to any lack of rigour of argument or depth of investigation, but because conclusions are made about an effect without relating it to a related and possibly opposite affect – that of the author.

(Carver, 2009: 31)

How can a text be empowered by all the skill, judgement and decision making of the author if that author has suffered death at the hands of the reader or been diminished

to a mere scribe? A reader may have an awareness of the broader contexts within which Lambert, Litt, Marek and Davies, and a thousand others write, but the reader cannot ever have access to the personal and private experiences that influence the text. Claire Hanson argues that the reader cannot ‘lapse into assumptions that what she/he is reading about is ‘life’ and that there is ‘some kind of disjunction between reader and text’ (Hanson, 1989: 30). This indicates that the reader cannot be equipped to be the only person able to understand the text. Toby Litt even begins to deconstruct the reader:

They are engaging in a practice that they haven’t invented. A lot of what they are doing is predetermined or comes within a form that dominates them... they are part of a much wider society and history which involves certain cultural practices, one of which is the act of reading short stories. The thing is for me that the writer is trying to intervene in a turbulent way rather than just flowing along with the direction that cultural practice is already in.

(Litt, 2015)

Here again the deliberate intervention of the author prevails. It is the reader who has become a function of wider contexts. This thesis is not the place to rewrite deconstruction theory and my discussion of Barthes may be simplistic. But, I must argue that all of my research, my reading, the interviews and writing practice all indicate that the author is very much alive and acts on the short story in a powerful way. He, she or I are not simply recorders of words or a neutral subconscious filter of many voices. I am not recommending the death of the reader, nor did Carver, and the four interviewees discussed the reader at length. But I must argue for the author as an essential force which acts upon the story. The author imparts a unique view of the world in a way that only one person could do – through his or her Only Voice.

5. A Life of Your Own: Autobiography and the short story

What has been said in the past about autobiography

Frank O'Connor said that a good book of stories is 'the summing up of a writer's experience at a given time' (O'Connor, 2004: 101). *Approval* is most certainly that. It comes from my feelings and the contexts within which I am writing. Author and critic Tobias Hill describes the relationship between author and protagonist: 'I think it is because the author is often so close to the central character, in many ways, it is an embodiment of him / herself, and therefore he assumes an understanding about that character that the reader cannot have' (Gebbie, 2009:123). The central character in *Approval*, David, is an embodiment of me in significant ways. His life has followed a similar path and he inevitably has many of my characteristics as well as some invented ones.

Raymond Carver said 'None of my stories really happened – I'm not writing autobiography – but most of them bear a resemblance, however faint, to certain life occurrences or situations' (Carver, 2009: 30). Here I must clarify that *autobiographical* is used as an adjective simply relating the story to real life, in the style of autobiography, as opposed to literally being a recording of real events. Carol Sklenicka's comprehensive biography of Carver includes a quote from publisher Leonard Michaels: 'You can't really write (a Carver story) unless you came from where he came from and listened all your life to the way his people talk. The people he dealt with and lived with were all participants in his writing' (Sklenicka, 2009: 198). That biography draws a relationship between real life events and many specific stories. Carver himself made the same link in his *Paris Review* interview, 'We found

ourselves in roles we didn't know how to play' and, 'The fiction I am most interested in has lines of reference to the real world' (Simpson, 1988).

Ernest Hemingway is reported to have said, 'Write hard and clear about what hurts' (Goldberg, n.d.). Tessa Hadley, whose own short stories often focus on family relationships, concurs. Her advice to fellow authors is 'What you're writing should hurt and make you feel slightly anxious, and almost ashamed' (Clark, 2011). In writing about parents, failed marriages and miscarriages I have done precisely that. The influence of my own experience exists on the page, and off it.

Margaret Atwood's *Moral Disorder* is a short story cycle in which the same character recounts her experiences at different times of her life. It is thought to be partly autobiographical and informed my approach to *Approval* by demonstrating that a series of stories can be loosely linked but do not need to be chronological or directly connected.

Atwood entices us to flip through the photo album of a Canadian woman who closely resembles herself. Come here, sit beside me, she seems to say. Then she takes us on an emotional journey through loneliness, love, loss and old age.

(Miano, 2006)

She discussed the grey area between autobiography and fiction.

I recently read an account of a study that intends to show how writers of a certain age – my age, roughly – attempt to 'seize control' of the stories of their own lives by deviously concocting their own biographies. However, it's a feature of our times that if you write a work of fiction, everyone assumes that the people and events in it are disguised biography—but if you write your biography, it's assumed you're lying your head off.

(Atwood, 1996)

This is a central theme of *Approval*. It is most certainly not an autobiography, but as Carver suggests of his own writing, there is a resemblance to real life events. A key decision in *Approval* was to focus on a group of semi-autobiographical, personal stories at the expense of several more speculative and surreal stories because there was more opportunity to convey emotion in the stories that became *Approval*. I wanted to show real feelings about lost love, sadness and disappointment.

In my wider reading I came across a letter giving advice to a novice author that sums up this idea of writing personally. In 1938, eager to gain feedback on her work, aspiring young author Frances Turnbull sent a copy of her latest story to writer and family friend, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who had written many short stories with themes of loss and despair:

November 9, 1938

Dear Frances:

I've read the story carefully and, Frances, I'm afraid the price for doing professional work is a good deal higher than you are prepared to pay at present. You've got to sell your heart, your strongest reactions, not the little minor things that only touch you lightly, the little experiences that you might tell at dinner. This is especially true when you begin to write, when you have not yet developed the tricks of interesting people on paper, when you have none of the technique which it takes time to learn. When, in short, you have only your emotions to sell.

This is the experience of all writers. It was necessary for Dickens to put into *Oliver Twist* the child's passionate resentment at being abused and starved that had haunted his whole childhood. Ernest Hemingway's first stories 'In Our Time' went right down to the bottom of all that he had ever felt and known. In 'This Side of Paradise' I wrote about a love affair that was still bleeding as fresh as the skin wound on a haemophile.

The amateur, seeing how the professional having learned all that he'll ever learn about writing can take a trivial thing such as the most superficial reactions of three uncharacterized girls and make it witty and charming—the amateur thinks he or she can do the same. But the amateur can only realize his ability to transfer his emotions to another person by some such desperate and radical expedient as tearing your first tragic love story out of your heart and putting it on pages for people to see.

That, anyhow, is the price of admission. Whether you are prepared to pay it or, whether it coincides or conflicts with your attitude on what is 'nice' is something for you to decide. But literature, even light literature, will accept nothing less from the neophyte. It is one of those professions that wants the 'works.' You wouldn't be interested in a soldier who was only a little brave.

In the light of this, it doesn't seem worth while to analyze why this story isn't saleable but I am too fond of you to kid you along about it, as one tends to do at my age. If you ever decide to tell your stories, no one would be more interested than,

Your old friend,

F. Scott Fitzgerald

P.S. I might say that the writing is smooth and agreeable and some of the pages very apt and charming. You have talent – which is the equivalent of a soldier having the right physical qualifications for entering West Point.

Figure 1: Letter from F Scott Fitzgerald to Frances Turnbull.

He invites her to use her most painful emotions, citing Hemingway and concurring with Hemingway's views about writing about what hurts.

Another aspect of the relationship between the forces at play is the very nature of biography. Smith's *New Essays on Hemingway's Short Fiction* discuss this at length. In that book the biographer Michael Reynolds is quoted, 'We, the scholars of the trade, have created, in our time, Ernest Hemingway' (Smith, 1998: 114). Smith explains how the biographer 'chooses a story from the many that his culture makes available and selects the facts that will make his story cohere' (Smith, 1998:114). A comparison of the Hemingway biographies by Baker and Lynn is cited as an example (Smith, 1998: 116). So any discussion of autobiography must allow that the author is making choices about how to present selected information about the subject. He or she chooses a story from many alternatives. This reinforces that the subject (the character in the fictional story even if the story is autobiographical) is distinct from the author.

Contemporary short story writers on autobiography

Kirsty Gunn (2015 winner of the Edge Hill Prize), discussed the nature of the short story at an event in 2016.¹² She quoted John Cheever who described how, in a writing a story, 'you embellish a time in your life'. In the same debate Jessie Greengrass¹³ talked of the interrelationship between experience and fiction in her first collection; 'even the most direct autobiography is still constructed. You are imposing a narrative, so it is both yourself and not.' This is certainly true of my own

¹² Edinburgh 27 August 2016 launch of HeadLand – the anthology of ten years of the Edge Hill Short Story Prize

¹³ Winner of the Edge Hill Prize 2016

writing. It is mostly true, but none of it happened. Here I would draw on my discussion with Toby Litt's thought about quantum physics. A simple Newtonian measure might cause a conclusion that a certain percentage is true and certain percentage is fictional. In a quantum way it might be asserted that they can be more than one thing simultaneously, and I would argue that many of the events in my short stories are simultaneously both true *and* fictional, rather than being partly true. Anneliese Mackintosh states, at the start of her debut collection *Any Other Mouth*, that 68% happened and 32% did not happen (Mackintosh, 2014). I would prefer to say of *Approval* that 100% is 'true' in that the stories are an accurate representation of my feelings at the time of writing and therefore have an intrinsic truth. They are simultaneously 100% fictional, because none of them actually happened. All of the stories in *Approval* have some basis in real life and some, such as 'Green Gables' are representations of real moments, though none happened as written. The essence of what is said in the stories is true, possibly more truthful than what actually happened. For example, it is true to me now that I was accepted in the family of my first wife. However, none of the dialogue in 'Green Gables' was ever spoken, it is fiction. My parents are both still alive, but the story 'Looks like Rain' is exactly how I imagine the whole family will deal with the situation described. It is a very truthful description, yet it did not happen.

Carys Davies makes an interesting challenge about autobiography which allows an examination of this concept through examples from her stories:

I couldn't write about what I know. I couldn't write about – well not consciously – about people I know...

...I always describe myself as *not* an autobiographical writer. I like to travel a really long way away from my own life. I don't consider my own life interesting at all. I haven't had a life of any particular interest or tragedy.

(Davies, 2015)

Despite her assertions that she distances herself from real life, even an author who is determined not to be autobiographical describes how at least one story is defined by her own life:

There's another story in there [in *The Redemption of Galen Pike*] called the 'The Travellers' which is very much based on the fact that my husband and I argue bitterly when we drive anywhere. We argue horribly.

(Davies, 2015)

In this story a traveller in Siberia leaves his wife outside on a sledge to die, and she chooses to stay there. Davies admits that she only realised the connection retrospectively. Here the author is not writing about herself. She is deliberately doing the opposite, but some sense of her motivations and feelings still pervades the stories and in this example they are at the heart of the story. The same theme came up again.

All my family is Welsh and I have a curious relationship with that because I don't feel particularly Welsh, but my entire family history is Welsh. That's definitely part of my writing. There's a story in this collection called 'On Commercial Hill' which again I wasn't conscious at the time, but the narrator who is called Will, the name of maternal grandfather who I never met. He was the sort of missing person. I never knew him, he was a miner, he died young. I can see now that the story was a way of inventing this person but that feels like quite an unusually close story.

(Davies, 2015)

In contrast to Davies, Adam Marek was emphatic in his belief that short stories can *only* come from the writer's experience:

In all of my stores there's an element of emotional experience in there. You can't actually say that's an actual experience, everything's mutated but it's built around real experience. I think that's what gives the story tangibility and plausibility. I think it would be very hard to write a story when you haven't experienced any of it in any way. We can only build the story from our own experience. We have millions of pieces of experience in our brains and we cut little pieces of them out to make a sort of collage that is the story and make it look as seamless as possible. But we can only use things we have experienced in our lifetime.

(Marek, 2015)

Marek does use his own experiences but he too distances himself from his stories, though in a different way to Davies:

Yes, so my experiences of parenthood all come out in those [stories in *The Stone Thrower*]. It's a rich theme of inspiration. So I start with my own experiences and build fantastical worlds around them...Having absorbed so much science fiction and horror, whenever I sit down and write it always ends up being through that lens. Whenever I'm writing about mundane, ordinary things like family life and relationships, something monstrous or fantastical always walks on the stage representing the conflict of their situations.

(Marek, 2015)

Marek went on to describe personal details of how his fear for his children directly impacts on his work and how the writer's imagination feeds back in the opposite direction because he can imagine all the things that might go wrong. This is the theme of his collection *The Stone Thrower*. In a Guardian interview he said, 'my worries for my son became metaphors in stories: seabird chicks choking on fish, a child coming apart at the seams' (Marek, 2012). He is describing real life, but in a fantastical world. He talked of the fear of losing someone and ends with; 'we all fear

being alone. We are not alone in that fear' (Marek, 2012). This connects back to O'Connor's essential loneliness and perhaps offers a suggestion that the writer helps to address the fear of loneliness.

There is further evidence that autobiography is not a factor that can be applied in a generic way. When asked about autobiography Toby Litt said it is a factor, but not in a linear way. His way of connecting his life to his writing is quite different:

Again it's a very complicated thing. I can see things in my own autobiography in the way I grew up and the people around me. I had a feeling that I had nothing to say or was coming from a place that was not sayable – whatever came out of Bedfordshire that anyone wanted to read? A lot of people might say that about themselves. I've been writing about this recently. What made me different was the extremity of how much I feared that I wasn't different from other people and the lengths to which I'd go to use writing to not be the same which would be in a sense agreeing on a common view of reality.

(Litt, 2015)

This emphasises his difference and identifies that his own fears were about identity. I empathised about having an unremarkable life, perhaps I had nothing to say. I summarised my working life. Here Litt gave a useful insight about the quest to find an identity:

I started to examine that and it turns out that you do have a subject, that the lack of subject or the difficulties of subjectivity are equally valid. Obviously an adventure story about a man that wears a suit and drives around in an Audi for 25 years is not great. But the subjectivity of that can be as valid as any other.

(Litt, 2015)

Zoe Lambert has a fourth different approach. She said about her short stories in *The War Tour*, 'The book is also very personal. There's a lot of me in it, just not where you might expect' (Lambert, 2015). She explained to me how the story '33 Bullets', which is about an academic, a writer imprisoned while seeking asylum, has a personal element:

And he's trying to write about a Kurdish poet and he's failing to write and it was written when I was writing my PhD, and it was a literary PhD, and I was failing to write. It's very much about the failing of academic endeavour. So the character is very other and different to me with a connection through a job, through trying to do literary things put a lot of my own feelings into the character, and that's how sometimes the autobiographical is not just a straight line and is often seen simplistically when actually it is very complex. All writing is intensely, inherently autobiographical.

(Lambert, 2015)

This is an indirect influence that belongs to the author and is not apparent in the story. In fact only Marek, who has spoken publicly about family issues, could be said to be writing stories that are obviously related to his own fears. All of these writers past and present are pointing out that there is a strong link between the author and the character in the short story. Some of his or her own life finds its way into the story.

This leads to questions about the very nature of the author and his identity. Litt clearly differentiates between the author and the subject of the story. His comment points out that my stories, driven by my emotions, are valid because they are mine, and they have reality in them for that reason, even if aspects of that life are without drama.

Paul March-Russell's essay 'Tales of the City' describes how Iain Sinclair responded to accusations about writing characters that were not representative of London (in an anthology about London). He said 'I can only speak for myself. I have no obligation to speak on behalf of other people. That idea is too compulsory, extremely patronising and politically correct' (March-Russell, 2009: 80). I absolutely agree with Sinclair. I cannot write a fictional self completely disconnected from me. Nor is there any obligation upon me to do so. I may attempt to create distance, and, as Litt suggests 'I try to other myself' (Litt, 2015), but I cannot detach myself from the stories I write.

Autobiography and craft in *Approval*

At this point it is worth examining the stories in *Approval* to see how I have translated real life into fiction. Any analysis is incomplete without examining the poetics of the writing and the techniques used. I will briefly look at what I have learnt about craft in some of these stories and how I have attempted to express feelings about my own life and my own attitudes through fiction.

Approval is based on a real experience. I did go through that process with my wife. We were approved for adoption and fostering after almost eighteen months. I made a conscious decision to write the collection mainly from David's point of view so that there is a single coherent voice.

Litt's comment emphasises how the unique and personal voice of the author can still be worthwhile if he has not had an extraordinary or dramatic life. My life has been unremarkable (wearing a suit and driving around in a company Audi) but only I

could have written 'Favourite Bit of the M6' (Rutter, 2012). Only I can write stories about a man from a Catholic family and Catholic school who has been married three times and is seeking to adopt a child whilst abandoning a business career in favour of a new life writing and teaching. 'Ten Ten am' is a true reflection of many years of my life, and I have deliberately employed clichés to show how dull that existence was. By adding thoughts in David's monologue about children I have sought to make his story more sympathetic, and I have employed comedy more obviously than anywhere else in the collection to stress the absurdity of his situation and break any potential monotony.

I have used real life information directly and indirectly. In 'Her Shoes' a key detail is the rash David has which in the end is used as a means of trapping him in his perpetual self-destructive cycle. My feelings about domestic violence and alcoholism are drawn from a version of events many years ago and from incidents from other people's lives. The rash is a result of discomfort while writing the story caused by an allergic reaction to Himalayan Balsam in my garden.

Repetition as an example of craft

In 'Her Shoes' and other stories I have deliberately used repetition as a device. David is talking to the reader and to himself to reassure himself that a) it is all over and b) everything will be alright (which two outcomes are mutually exclusive). He cannot show any real insight or understanding because then he would have a breakthrough and realise the absurdity of his actions and the desperation of his situation. Having lived through exactly what the character is feeling, I know that repetition of lies and unbelievable statements makes them feel truer. So he begins

with ‘That’s it. As I lock the door I’m finally ending that whole sorry chapter. We couldn’t have carried on’ (*Approval*: 62). He uses bland phrases and clichés because he is unable to properly engage with the subject. Lies are easier than the reality of being a participant in an abusive relationship where both parties follow patterns of addiction. He reassures himself that everything will be alright, which the reader can tell is untrue, and David must also know at some level. This is a technique that Hemingway used in his very short story ‘Hills like White Elephants.’ The man and the woman repeat the same phrases throughout in a way that does not impart any new information and could have been written more succinctly (Hemingway, 2004: 259-263). There are seven lines of dialogues about whether she wants water (Hemingway, 2004: 260) and repetition in a passage analysed by O’Connor;

‘... I don’t care about me.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I don’t care about me.’
‘Well, I care about you.’
‘Oh, yes. But *I* don’t care about me.’ (Hemingway, 2004: 261).

O’Connor says that this stylistic approach is pure art because it is not nature (not realistic) (O’Connor, 2004: 157). He also feels that the contrast between narrative and drama is blurred and that the way it is stylised causes it to lose impact. My own view is simpler. The very repetition points out the significance of what they are not saying, something absent from the text (about an abortion), by repeatedly not saying it. O’Connor explains that this repetition shows that the dialogue people use when what they are communicating is missing (O’Connor, 2004: 158), a theme that runs right through *Approval*. This tendency represents my feeling about my real family. In ‘Sealed with a Kiss’ I have written a scene of almost four pages in which the

teenage girl, Leah, makes an inappropriate sexual advance to David, and he resists (*Approval*: 129-133). I am aiming to build tension. I want the reader to have long enough to feel the discomfort of the situation. There is no plot reason to repeat the same question and response, as the reader will have understood what is happening in a few lines. By lingering in this uncomfortable place I hope to give the reader time to consider alternative outcomes and judgements. In the same story there are two pages of mostly dialogue between David and Cici (*Approval*: 127-129) about the form-filling exercise in which the couple are asked to say whether they would accept or consider a child with certain difficulties, conditions and problems. This scene could have been summarised in a few lines, but I have repeated their questions and answers at length because each one is a potential source of emotional conflict for the couple, and for any reader. I have taken the risk that dramatic tension will be lost in favour of lingering on this difficult scene.

The repetition of phrases about coats and ‘the life she had before etc.’ in ‘Three Woman and a Roundabout’ has a different use. By using the exact same phrases four times the words draw attention to the words themselves and highlights that this is artifice, a story being told. It is being told by the only person that could know this information, the man in the house in Brooks Drive: David. The statement at the start and end that it is not a story about him draws attention to the fact that it is. He is the central character. He is absent from the story in all but the last couple of lines and the point and meaning of the story is the connection between the three women, which is that they all married David. This story replaced a story called ‘John Peel Day’ in which the same coincidence is discussed by David and Dougie. ‘Three Women and a Roundabout’ is not unsympathetic towards them and gives some brief examination

of their feelings and experiences. In real life I have had cause to wonder about the life before and the life after the time I knew someone. In this story I only include a few key details that David could know about their life after the time he would know them because he could not know more. It is an example of not including the life before and after the events described in the text. I have deliberately left out much of their lives because the story is from the point of view of the absent David, written in response to a question that demands a list of all previous relationships.

This brief discussion of autobiography supports the same ideas as the previous chapters, but in a different way. There is no clear and simple explanation of how and to what extent an author's life finds its way into the short story, but there can be no doubt that from the evidence examined, it certainly can and often does. And it does so in a personal way with the author often deliberately choosing which details to include. There is an element of autobiography in all fiction, but in the case of the short story its impact is greater because O'Connor's lonely character has no life before and no life after the few pages of his life that is written. However, the author does have a full and real life outside the text and may lend emotions and experiences from that life to his or her character.

6. What is Remembered: Memory and the short story

There is a further aspect of the relationship between the author and the story and that is the complex ways in which a writer remembers. Alongside the author's intentions and his or her unique signature there are aspects that affect what is said and whether it is accurate or true (which are two different things). In this chapter I will draw on current thinking about memory, in particular the book *Pieces of Light* (2013) by psychologist and fiction writer Charles Fernyhough.

A new approach to memory

Fernyhough argues that creating new artistic and intellectual works depends on critically reshaping what has gone before (Fernyhough, 2013: 5). That is true both of this thesis and of the accompanying creative work. He goes on to explain that rather than simply playing back a video recording of a stored item from an archive like a piece of data in a digital memory, a person recreates his or her experiences each time he/she recalls them. People's memories are affected by their beliefs and expectations about how the world works and each person distorts the story to fit their own knowledge structure, emphasising parts to fit our own understanding (Fernyhough, 2013: 13). Citing a pioneer in this field, Schacter, he says:

We now know that we do not record our experiences the way a camera records them... We extract key elements from our experiences and store them. We then recreate or reconstruct our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience.

(Fernyhough, 2013: 8)

This directly links to the earlier discussion of the role of the author. There is a process of reconstruction when we write. The author is editing, choosing, selecting.

He discusses the concept of autobiographical memory at length (Fernyhough, 2013:75), and the idea that each of us builds a world which we are at the centre of. He says that memory fits with the demands of the present as much as it remains faithful to what happened. That is certainly seen in my stories when time and again present motives are imposed on (unreliable) memories of events long ago. The author is making decisions about how to tell a story.

Fernyhough also discusses the way people learn to tell stories, a theme that is also explored by Susan Lohafer. She connects memory with story-telling.

Some researchers, assuming that autobiographical memories are the earliest materials of story, say the ‘event memory’ begins early, but narratology comes later after exposure to adult talk about past and future scenarios.

(Lohafer, 2003: 148)

Fernyhough’s chapter ‘Negotiating the Past’ reminded me of Margaret Atwood’s *Negotiating with the Dead*, her published lectures on writing. In a paragraph that lists writers’ motivations she begins, ‘To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past *because* it has been forgotten. To satisfy my desire for revenge...’ (Atwood, 2003: xix). I am trying to do all of the same in my fiction. Atwood talks about her childhood and how none of her relatives were people she could actually see which, she suggests, influenced her writing life –

‘the inability to distinguish between the real and the imagined, or rather the attitude that what we consider real is also imagined: every life lived is also an inner life, a life created’ (Atwood, 2003: 7). This supports the idea that the writer is creating a world rather than simply recording it or reflecting it. Again the writer has a deliberate conscious role of selection. As Fernyhough suggests, I, like any writer, am inventing new versions, and to each new version I am adding my own present emotion.

J G Ballard describes how he draws on images from his memory. Ballard’s recurring trope of empty swimming pools is certainly based on memory: ‘Curiously the house we moved into had a drained swimming pool in its garden. It must have been the first drained pool I had seen, and it struck me as strange and significant in a way I have never fully grasped’ (Ballard, 2008: 113). The story ‘Motivation’ includes a memory of a swimming pool. In this story the protagonist, David, has been going through fertility treatment with his wife and is thinking about adoption. He is trying to repress his feelings. In a breathless internal moment David recalls dead babies, hospitals and car parks, implying information about the characters which is not included in the text. He also recalls a school swimming pool and that a boy drowned there. This detail suggests that this incident is going to come up in other stories, but is not necessary for the story itself and was written without any purpose of linking the stories. It might have been edited out because it fits the story less obviously than the other thoughts in the paragraph. I did not make a conscious decision to include it in the first draft. This is an example of a more distant and indirect force at work. David associates his intense emotion with a feeling of drowning. That in itself is not unusual or original. The words about a boy drowning relate to a real-life event which

I had forgotten about for forty years until writing about school for this collection. At the very moment my mother was on the phone interviewing the headmaster of what would soon become my school, a boy died in the school swimming pool and the call was cut short. This connects to my feelings decades later, not those of the character in the story, and its presence comes from a subconscious connection between anxiety and school that cannot be inferred from the text.

Ballard grew up in China and talked of how that influenced the landscapes of his short stories. He said, 'The memories of Shanghai that I had tried to repress had been knocking on the floorboards under my feet, and had slipped quietly into my fiction' (Ballard 2008: 251). That is the case in my own story. Something repressed slipped in.

Another trope used in 'The Delta at Sunset' amongst other stories is snakes. In his autobiography *Miracles of Life* Ballard talked of how there were no deserts within 1,000 miles of Shanghai, 'the only sand I ever saw was in the snake house at Shanghai Zoo' (Ballard, 2008: 251). The recurring images of snakes seem to be a symbol of his view of the world. The snake is a symbol I have used in 'Our Lady's Toes' to directly signify evil and cruelty. At the end of the war Ballard saw, 'a cruel and lurid world' (Ballard, 2008: 29). He writes of Shanghai before the war as a magical place. 'I think a large part of my fiction has been an attempt to evoke it by means other than memory' (Ballard, 2008: 7). Again this alludes to an external force acting upon the story through the author, something less obvious than pure memory but based on memory.

This influence of memory can be seen in another way in the stories of Raymond Carver. There is much evidence in Carol Sklenicka's comprehensive biography that his stories are based on real events. The photographs in *Carver Country*, a book introduced by Carver's second wife Tess Gallagher, are tangible evidence that the stories come from real places and real events.¹⁴ On the back cover is an excerpt from an unpublished letter to the photographer Bob Adelman which describes the places he plans to visit and photograph with Adelman. It includes the phrases, 'I clearly remember,' and 'if I can recall' (Adelman and Gallagher, 1990). However Carver's memory is unreliable, largely due to his alcoholism, so he is remembering versions of events that took place when he was present but cannot actually recall. 'I have a poor memory... there are large periods of time I simply can't account for or bring back' (Carver, 2009: 30). In this instance the book was edited and published by Gallagher after Carver's death. She was not there at the time the stories were written, so it is a book that both shows memories and shows two people's decisions about how to describe a memory, neither of which is reliable.

Micaela Maftai, a writer of creative non-fiction, explores these themes in *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading & Writing Identity*. She argues that there is no actual fact of what happens in any concrete way, that the protagonist in the autobiography is not the same person as the author, and that events and the person change through time with each re-writing from memory (Maftai, 2013: 9). She concurs with Fernyhough: 'The line between truth and fiction is not clear, or maybe there is no line, or maybe

¹⁴ This book has many photographs of actual places and people on whom Carver stories are based including the motel and gazebo referred to in 'Gazebo'; the rehab centre where Carver stayed that is described in 'Where I'm Calling From;,' the house from 'Chef's House;,' and Jerry Carriveau, the blind man whose visit with Carver and Tess Gallagher in 1989 inspired 'Cathedral.'

sometimes you can see the line and sometimes you cannot' (Maftai, 2013: 42). Her view reinforces the distinction between the author and the character in the autobiography. William Boyd also discusses the way the line between the real world and the story is blurred in autobiographical short stories:

The biographical story also includes stories that introduce real people into fiction or write fictive episodes of real lives. This can be seen as an attempt by fiction, in a world deluged by the advertising media, the documentary, journalism, and 24-hour rolling news, to colonise some of that territory, to invade the world of the real and, as a cannibal will devour the brain of his enemy to make him stronger, to make fiction all the more powerful by blurring the line between hard facts and the invented. It owes little to the Chekhovian example and is potentially the most interesting new direction the short story has recently taken.

(Boyd, 2010)

Ethan Coen, a published short story writer as well as a script-writer, addresses the border between fact and fiction in the introduction to the script of the film *Fargo*. I read the script because it is one of my favourite films, and, as discussed earlier, I am using my own peculiar and individual connections to the world which, in turn, affects how I write. The film begins with text over black that says 'This is a true story...' The author admits that it 'pretends to be true' (Coen, 1996: x). Coen tells an anecdote in the introduction in which his grandmother fought off a woman who was trying to rob her and the family myth that developed through repetitive telling. He shows how elements of the story test credulity and argues that incredible stories turn out to be true and that true stories may not be believed. He says 'The world, however wide, has folds and wrinkles that bring distant places together in strange ways' (Coen, 1996: ix). The strange ways that distant memories are recalled and described

and the constant blurring of the line between fact and fiction applies to *Approval*. In the same way as Coen I make a definite statement that the story ‘Three Women and a Roundabout’ is a true story. It is based on an improbable real life co-incidence, by the reason for the statement is to point out that it is about the connection between fact and fiction.

Memory and *Approval*

The real diary referred to in ‘Green Gables’ is not an objective history. It is loaded with emotions and opinions and, like the fictional version, most of life is omitted. In the case of ‘Green Gables’ I am able to show evidence of the relationship between the two. The story mentions a diary – David keeps notes on a camping holiday across France. His soon to be estranged wife, Pippa, reads the diary and says ‘It’s very well written,’ showing her emotional indifference to him. There was such a diary in real life, so I can compare how I wrote about the experience at the time and the version I fabricated later. Even the medium is a reflection of my life at that time. One of my responsibilities was ordering and distributing promotional ephemera to clients so I always had a bundle of old diaries in my company car left over from previous years. Here are the two versions of a scene in the holiday that has just ended when the couple return to Green Gables, one fictional written many years later, and one recorded at the time:

So, it’s not just me that’ll remember Honfleur for the rest of my life. I’ve images etched in my mind of a merry-go-round and the fishing boats and the plats de fruit de mer we shared, best seafood I’ve ever had, and the delicate white wine, Guillac, and the full-moon and a thousand stars. And I remember Pippa refusing to kiss me.

‘Let’s not spoil this,’ she said when I moved towards her.

(Approval: 57)

Honfleur. Beautiful. It's one of my favourite places (never seen it before). We had a good walk round the harbour, a crepe each with wine and water and found a very good campsite. I like it here. Loads of great restaurants. We picked one (no I can't remember the name) and decided to have Plats de Fruits De Mer which was about 4 Kgs each of slugs, snails and other ghastly shelled things. Still I'm glad we did it and we did get nice prawns and main courses and cheese and pudding (+wine). I rather went on, starting with a couple of jokey comments and building up to an almighty fucking frenzy. I swore I would not try and confront everything. We are on holiday relaxing: Full stop. But no, I wouldn't let it lie. I got the feeling she is preparing to dump me from the flavour of her comments.

(1995 Diary unedited)

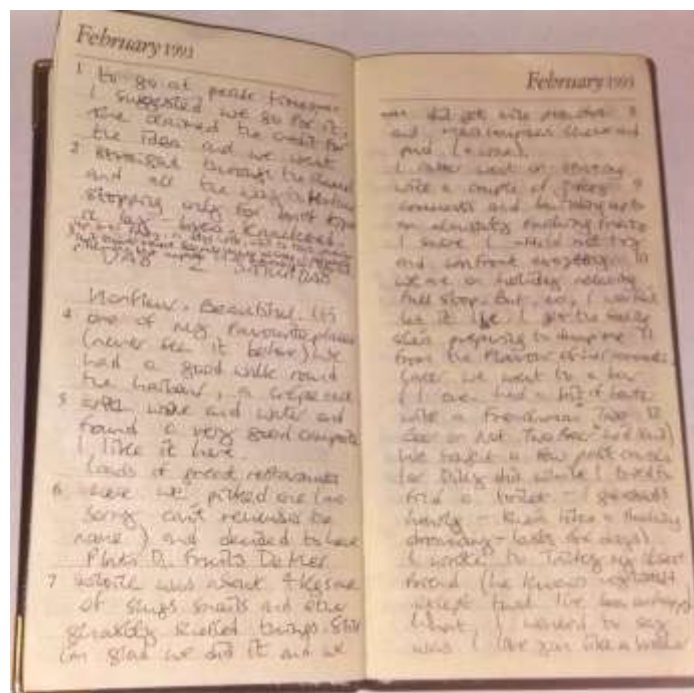


Figure 2: The actual diary referred to in the story 'Green Gables'.

Here I am able to make two observations. Firstly that the story is idealised, 'slugs and ghastly shelled things' becomes 'best seafood I'd ever had,' and the scene is

romanticised with a full moon and a thousand stars. I am either writing a new version of history or creating a version of a memory. The story is about me now as much as it is about events of twenty years ago. Secondly in the fictional version of a 'real' event David is accepted, he is loved, a full member of the family, not just through marriage. That acceptance is the way I want to remember that time. I was accepted, I was loved, and I had family. It is a story that tries to fulfil the absence of those things in my life. The affair that will lead to the end of the marriage is implied and only briefly mentioned, partly because the story is about this exact moment rather than the events that preceded it, but more significantly, because the emotions of the author at the time of writing related to a need to reconcile events from the distant past. I am on a quest for approval. Inserting some approval into the latest version of my history is related to that. 'Green Gables' is set twenty years ago, and the space created by time adds to the story. What has happened in the gap since is part of the story. It is not implied but absent. Later in the same diary the events of the evening are described as follows:

We drank some white wine and talked happily about events. I had a huge bath which did my feet a world of good and, after lovely fish pie, to bed and sleep.

(Diary, 1995)

The penultimate scene of the story shows an emotional moment between David and his mother-in-law. It implies that he is loved. It was imagined twenty years later because I was forced to revisit my personal history in the context of the adoption approval process, and at that time I had conflicted emotions about my own mother.

7. The Subliminal Man: The implicit and absence

Omission

Hemingway's 'theory of omission' is well known. Hemingway believed that an author, '...may omit things he knows and the reader will have a feeling of those things' (May, 2002: 63). In *A Moveable Feast* he describes his memory of writing a story in 1923:

It was a very simple story called 'Out of Season' and I had omitted the real end of it which was that the old man hanged himself. This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew what you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood.

(Smith, 1998: 3)

Hemingway makes omission fundamental to the story. He resists explanation.

William Trevor also indicates that what is left out creates meaning:

Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more. It is concerned with the total exclusion of meaninglessness. Life, on the other hand, is meaningless most of the time.

(Stout, 1989)

This goes all the way back to the need for omission because of scale. Zoe Lambert makes the connection:

That's to do with its length and the way the meaning works which is quite often through imagery, and the what is suggested, what is hinted at and reading between the words, what's implied is fundamental.

(Lambert, 2015)

Toby Litt identifies the gaps and omissions as the difference between the novel and the short story. So, length is vital because that which is left out has an effect.

For me the main difference between the novel and the short story is within the texture of the prose, and the short story sentence operates with bigger gaps before and after it. The reader has to be a better reader but also make bigger jumps. Novels are more likely to fill in gaps and to create an effect that the reader is given everything that they need to know whereas the short story has to work by vast omissions.

(Litt, 2015)

Carys Davies talked about how what is left out is linked to distances between people. The title story of her collection *The Redemption of Galen Pike* is an excellent example of the use of space. There are long silences and very little dialogue. The author explains:

I often write, especially in this collection, about the distances between people, the content and form are very much married, so because it's so much about what people aren't saying, those spaces are enormously important.

...so there's a lot of silence and I suppose you could say it's what's making the story short, but it's also what's giving the story its amazing charge because of the things they are not saying to its each other.

(Davies, 2015)

The discussion on this topic is pertinent as it gives insight into the way Davies approaches her work, which directly informed my writing process:

CD: You can't just leave things vague and hope the reader will extrapolate something. So take the example of the one that's set in Wales where the woman has been jilted, we discover that the husband left a woman at the altar...and they have children and everything.

JR: ...and she suddenly appears years later.

CD: Yes, a bit like of spinning wheel, fairy tale note. I wanted that story to end at the point with him at the point where his life could go this way or it could go this way, but it took me ages to get to the point where that was clear.

JR: I've tried to do that in a story about a couple who are trying to adopt a child and I want to find that clarity of ambiguity. I'm trying to find a way to leave the outcomes equally possible (but clear).

(Davies, 2015)

The implicit in *Approval*

It was the conversation with Carys Davies that led to a change in the end of 'Sealed with a Kiss'. I needed to leave some ambiguity about what had happened, but I also had to be clear about key decisions. I leave that story with an open end, but one in which the outcome is clear – that the couple will be defeated by the process. At one point I had left the story without that clarity. Now it ends with a letter stating that they effectively have to go through the process again. They fall silent because they both know that this is the end. In several of the stories I focus on what people are not saying. No-one speaks about the impending death of the mother character in 'Looks like Rain'. No-one speaks about the affair in 'Green Gables'. In 'Sealed with a Kiss', by carefully not including sufficient information for the reader to know for certain whether David responded to the sexual advance of Leah twenty years earlier, I allow some space for the reader to judge, but I do have clarity about the outcome. He did not take advantage of that situation. However there is sufficient ambiguity that the reader can make an interpretation. In earlier versions of 'Vitam, Impendere Vero' I had left the possibility that David had not been abused but had imagined or even wished it. This lacked clarity. I have allowed some ambiguity in the final version because of the way he has failed to deal with his own abuse, and the judgement that

readers may make about how he deals with a situation when the power roles are reversed. For this to work I must be clear that he was abused and did not take advantage of the teenaged girl.

Distinguishing between implicit and absent

Many of the quotes above are about what is left out of the story. I believe there is a distinction between the implicit – that which is left out of the text, which belongs to the character – and that which is absent – things that are altogether not there and belong to the author. A brief examination of definitions may clarify:

Marcella Bertuccelli Papi, a scholar in linguistics and discourse analysis, defined three types of implicit – *inexplicit*, *implicated* and *subplicit*, and stated that there are grey areas between them, so they should be seen as a continuum (Bertuccelli Papi, 2000). The *inexplicit* concerns what *is missing* in order to have a full representation of a state of affairs or a situation. The *implicated* includes both the representation that putatively corresponds to the speaker's meaning and what should be supplied as an implicit premise in an inferential reasoning leading to the representation itself; the distinctive character of an implicated implicit meaning is that it is formally unrelated to the explicit source from which it derives: if someone says 'I have some work to do tonight' meaning 'I cannot take the boys to the cinema', the latter should be considered implicated as much as the implicit premise that had he been free, he would have taken the boys to the cinema. The *subplicit* involves all those shades of the unsaid that depend not so much on the content or the wording of the message as on perception of the attitude with which the message is produced. If a wife and mother of the child tells her husband 'Your son is playing with his friend again', she

conveys not only the explicit information carried by her words, but also the subimplicit meanings ‘I disapprove of it’, and possibly also ‘I dislike you’ as a result of the strategy of detachment reflected in the choice of the referential expression (Bertuccelli Papi, 2000). All of these sub-categories relate to the text; what is missing from the text, what the speaker (the character) is and is not saying, and the attitude of what is being said. They all relate to interpretations of the text. I am looking for explanations of something a step removed – the intentions and feelings of the author.

Elif Batuman, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, brings together several aspects of the word absence in the context of the short story:

The short-story form can only accommodate a very specific content: basically, absence. Missing persons, missed opportunities, very brief encounters, occurring in the margins of ‘Life Itself’: when the content is minimalist, then it makes sense to follow the short-fiction dictates: condense, delete, omit.

(Batuman, 2006)

Here there is a connection to life itself, a bridge between that which is excluded from the text and the real world.

At a reading at Edge Hill University in 2016 Kirsty Gunn said that absence was particularly relevant in the short story because of its elliptical form.¹⁵ She likened the story to a theatre play in that a great deal takes place off stage. She said, ‘the charge of the short story comes from the sheer weight of all the stuff that can’t be in

¹⁵ 9 March 2016

the short story.’ I take this to mean that which is left out of the text but still pertaining to the characters.

My own interpretation of absence, as distinct from the various degrees of implicit, is something outside of the story but not in any way implied in it. In other words, there are elements of real life and the world of the author that do not form part of the life of the character but influence the story from outside the text. There are events, feelings and meanings that cannot be inferred from the text and do not directly belong to the character.

Absence in Approval

As a particular technique for managing absence I have experimented with deliberately summarising the events before and after the timeframe of the story in ‘Three Women and a Roundabout’, a method employed by Michel Faber in ‘Vanilla White like Eminem’. Faber introduces Don, who is about to have the happiest moment of his life. He ends the story by summarising everything else that will befall Don for the rest of his life. I like the way the author deliberately draws attention to the fact that it is a story being told, that it is artifice, and uses the approach of Hemingway as described by O’Connor – that nothing of importance takes place before or after this story. I borrowed this method because I wanted to focus on the narrator / author who can only be David / myself. I hint at the lives the three women will have, the absent information, but could only include the parts that David would know. The women are each lonely which I emphasise by writing as a cold, summarising, ubiquitous narrator. The protagonist is absent from the text, but the narrator is very clearly present, judging what information to give and how to present

the women. I wanted to show that David cannot properly understand or empathise with these women. The previous version of this story, 'John Peel Day' was a discussion between David and Dougie of the same co-incidence. It allowed less ambiguity about David's feelings (because he was speaking) and consequently less sympathy for the three women. There is still ambiguity, but it there is also greater clarity.

Absence is a central theme of the whole collection. Babies are absent throughout. They are not merely missing from the particular scene, they do not exist. Lack of names including discussion of babies' names in 'Motivation' draws attention to this absence. There is an echo of this in 'The Baby Book' when there is a blank space for the child's name on the cover of the baby book (because adoptive parents do not choose the child's name). Danny, David's stepson, is mentioned in most of the stories, but he is never present except at the moment when he is taken away in 'Her Shoes'. Here there are dual forces at work again. Danny is an absent character, but more vitally there is something outside the text relating to the author. I was not conscious of how much I missed my real stepson (who is now twenty) until I saw that I kept mentioning the stepson, Danny, whenever I was writing this group of stories.

Danny's un-named mother 'She' (named as Alice elsewhere) is absent in 'Her Shoes', though the story is very much about her. She controls David's life to such an extent that he is unable to escape or to properly express himself even when he is alone. 'The Baby Book' uses a simple object, an empty photo album, to describe in detail the absence of all the experiences of parenthood. They do not have pictures of

trips to the seaside or school photos; these events are absent. I have employed MacGuffins in ‘David’s Thing’ and ‘Vitam Impendere Vero II’.¹⁶ In both cases there is a mysterious gift. I carefully leave out what the objects are. In the former, it is a symbol of the father – son relationship David would miss in his adolescent years. The box in the headmaster’s office must remain a secret as events that take place in the story must. By not answering these questions I have left out something vital which helps to create the energy of the story. With Davies’ clarity in mind I (that is ‘I’ the author) do know what they are. They are both cameras, making a link between the absent father and abuse. The camera is a device that records memories (though not in the way that Fernyhough describes memory). Photographs are also a form of evidence, and the abusive teacher, Austin, will eventually be tried. Austin says that he was asked to act *in loco parentis* by David’s mother (*Approval*: 110) and presents him with the gift. David is never given the gift of ‘David’s Thing’ in the shed, a Polaroid camera, because he has already received one from school as a reward. The father-son relationship does not function properly because Dad is away often. If the Dad character had not been away then the abuse or at least its consequences may have been different.

Absence of love, absence of communication, and absence of expression of David’s emotions are central themes throughout *Approval*. By not allowing his emotions to be properly expressed I hope to have created tension that plays out in his outbursts in ‘My Knee’ and ‘Sealed with a Kiss’.

¹⁶ A MacGuffin is a plot device in a film or book, often an object sought by the protagonist.

The implicit in the short story cycle

One issue with form that has arisen while writing *Approval* is that in a collection, and more acutely in a cycle, the stories form part of the context within which the other stories are read and fill in some of the gaps. What is omitted may appear in another story. The stories in *Approval* were mostly written before the concept of the book was conceived, so I can argue that they each have some independence and can operate as stories alone or in anthologies. Zoe Lambert contends ‘that not reading a short story in relation to other stories in a collection is delimiting and reductive’ (Lambert, 2010: 204). It was not my intention to examine the cycle in my research, nor had I set out to write one. Its construction had more to do with the need for some device that held the stories together. However, the development of the cycle has allowed the sum to become greater than the parts and enhanced the stories by causing a clearer focus on character; David must have consistent characteristics and the secondary characters, Dougie and Cici especially, must be identifiable. The penultimate story ‘Sealed With a Kiss’ is the longest in *Approval* and draws together all the themes of the collection; David’s repressed anger, the impact of sex abuse, the invasiveness of the approval process, and connections between time and memory. I deliberately echo the phrase ‘everything in my power’ to draw attention to the reversal of David’s position from victim to one of power with Leah (*Approval*: 132). It is the precise phrase that Austin, his abuser, uses in ‘Vitam Impendere Vero II, Our Lady’s Toes’ (*Approval*: 75) and repeats when David confronts him decades later in ‘Vitam Impendere Vero III, After the Trial’ (*Approval*: 105). I also use the same phrase to describe the actions of B, the serial abuser of boys in ‘B’ ‘he did everything in his power’ (*Approval*: 96). In a similar way I was able to use images of a knot in the table from ‘Vitam Impendere Vero I, The Last Sister’ and the smell of

furniture polish from 'Vitam Impendere Vero II, Our Lady's Toes'. I would contend that the story stands alone, but that it, and the whole collection, benefit from being grouped in a cycle. I would argue that the collection would still work if one story were removed or the order changed and that each could be read in one sitting.

Paul March-Russell's essay, *The Short Story Cycle*, discusses the taxonomy of the short story cycle shows how Ingram and Mann subdivided the category (March-Russell, 2009: 103). He describes how Luscher and Kennedy have argued that the cycle 'should be regarded as a sequence in which themes and motifs progressively develop, so that while the stories can be read both individually and as part of a whole, the act of reading becomes the accumulated perception of successive orderings and repeated patterns' (March-Russell, 2009: 104). His reservation about this approach is that it restricts open-endedness. The stories in *Approval* have this characteristic of accumulation. The ultimate failure (or, more accurately, the persistent continuation) of the approval process in 'Sealed With a Kiss' has some sense of an ending, which in the last story 'The Baby Book' is finally resolved. There are links between stories such as that mentioned above in which 'Motivation' and 'The Baby Book' are connected by baby names. There is also a mention of an unassembled cot in both of these stories. These details do not detract from either story, but a function of the cycle is that there is a cumulative perception. The camera that links two stories is another linking device, albeit one that is never stated. I know that it is there, and the reader may have a sense of it. I have chosen to leave that out.

On balance I would still argue that the stories are still stand-alone short stories and that their grouping enhances them. Each story still has absences and omissions. That

some answers are provided in other stories does not negate this but adds another layer of meaning. Browsing back through my bibliography I can assert that many cycles have the capacity to be read as individual stories and are enhanced by the unity of impression given by linking them. Joyce's *Dubliners* can be read as individual stories, but the cumulative effect of the themes of isolation, the stages of the development of a man's life and the author's views of Dublin and the Church are more powerful when the stories are added together. Hemingway's first collection of short stories *In Our Time* has recurring themes of loss and isolation. The semi-autobiographical character, Nick Adams appears throughout. The cumulative effect of the stories, read as a cycle adds to the impact of the individual stories.

Toby Litt's *Life-Like* is deliberately structured as a cycle with one of the characters from each story linking to the next. Litt admits that one or two of the stories may be less powerful because they were written for specific places in the cycle (Litt, 2015) as opposed to being 'performed' as he describes with others. This could also be said of *Approval* and is part of its development. Most of the stories were written before the conception of the cycle, and 'Sealed with a Kiss' was written as a story which led to the collection. 'Motivation' was completed with the collection in mind and 'The Baby Book' was written specifically to end the cycle. It could be argued that these are weaker because they have less independence. However, I would argue that the overall effect is greater than the sum of the parts.

I believe this is also the case with many of the cycles I have read. Anneliese Mackintosh's *Any Other Mouth*, is about the same character throughout. The cumulative effect of learning about that character, Gretchen, at different stages of her

life surely adds to the impact of the individual stories, but each is a moment, a fragment. There are many more examples: Sean O'Brien's *The Silence Room*, Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, Denis Johnson's *Jesus Son*, Atwood's *Moral Disorder*, and several recent submissions for the Edge Hill Prize by Tyler Keevil, Kirsty Gunn, Chrissie Gittins, and Ewan Morrison. In each case the overall impact is heightened by the links between the stories and the development of the central character.

I would argue that little is lost and something significant is gained by stories existing within a cycle. The linking pages in *Approval* become an additional overarching story and build a sense of the frustration of the adoption process. The characters, especially David, can be better developed, but he is still a lonely, detached individual and there is something left out of each of his stories, each of which is still only a fragment of his life.

I am retrospectively giving consideration to this aspect of form, as I had no intention of writing a cycle. The very fact that this group of stories naturally evolved into a cycle is evidence of characteristics already discussed; that short stories defy classification, that form cannot be defined, and that there is something mischievous and maverick about the short story which refuses to have its form defined.

8. A Report to an Academy: Conclusion – The Only Voice

I set out to define the essence of the short story and even to attempt to build a model of it. My research has shown that any absolute definition is inadvisable if not impossible. The insight of four authors who took time to explore questions with me, and extensive reading, has informed the development of *Approval*, and my research as a practitioner has informed my understanding of the short story form. I cannot make statements or announce any theories that have been proven to be true, but I can assert that certain characteristics are relevant to the discussion and may inform understanding. In every chapter the author is seen to be a direct force acting on the short story whether that be deliberately or subconsciously.

A summary of ideas about the author

The world at large has an indirect affect on the story but only through the selection and filter of the author who decides which few details to borrow from the real world. This is an individual process influenced by a personal point of view. The influences can range from a sore knee to a major news event. Each writer responds to his or her own immediate surroundings and contexts in a unique way. The short time taken to write a short story (a single sitting) intensifies the relationship between the author's context at the time of writing and the text.

The author's particular and unmistakable signature is evident in many examples of short fiction. Each has his or her own voice and personal intentions that come from a source within. The palette an author uses is a personal one that may include horror movies or songs. The author is not a mere neutral filter of words. There are myriad

interpretations of the author and his or her role, but the author exists and exerts influence regardless of the reader's interpretation of the text.

Whether there is a direct or indirect relationship to real events the author's life influences the story. Those events might simultaneously be true, in that they accurately reflect the author's view, and fictional because they did not actually happen. Even when an author deliberately avoids using real life it can still exert an influence on the story. The four authors interviewed all cited examples of how this works uniquely for them. The life of the author may fill in some of the gaps in the life of the lonely short story character.

New thinking about memory indicates that the writer reshapes what has happened. Memories are not fixed records; they are reconstructions based on knowledge and feelings after the event. Even in autobiography the character and author are not the same person.

The writer may know things that are excluded from the story and these omissions are thought by many to be vital to the meaning of the story. The implicit – that which is part of the story but not included – is different from that which is absent. There are events, feelings and meanings that cannot be inferred from the text and do not directly belong to the character, but come from the author. This is unique to the short story.

The greatest essential of the short story

The final interview question was, ‘What is the greatest essential of a short story?’ Frank O’Connor answered this exact question in his *Paris Review* interview: ‘You have to have a theme, a story to tell. Here’s a man at the other side of the table and I’m talking to him; I’m going to tell him something that will interest him’ (Whittier, 1957). Of course O’Connor’s main contribution is that there is an essential loneliness inherent in the form.

Each of the writers I interviewed had a central idea or concept which looked at the essence of short stories from their point of view. Each leans towards the writer. The variance of these answers indicates that any universal conclusion is unlikely to ever be agreed, nor is it appropriate. I am certainly able to conclude that the theme of ‘Only Voice’ is evident in these responses. The writer’s personality, attitudes and experiences and their personal signature defines their poetics on writing short stories, not some universal rule that applies to all. They each resist universal systems. These statements show the individual and diverse responses to the closing question of the interviews about what each writer feels defines the short story. Toby Litt comes back to earlier comments about the story being mischievous:

I’d say truancy. It plays truant to the world or to respectability or to where it should be and I know there are novels that do that to but a novel is more dutiful. It has to be more obliging to the reader. A short story can be many things but it can be wilder and less where it’s a sensible idea for it to be.

(Litt, 2015)

Litt is focussed on the elusiveness of the story. Truancy is a description I have not encountered before. It is, literally, a form of absence. It also goes to the story being irresponsible, maverick, disobedient. It cannot be controlled and has a life of its own.

Zoe Lambert also eludes to something that cannot quite be grasped:

I think the problem is that if you try and define what the essence of a short story is, the problem is that it's indefinable. What you will struggle with is that there is something ineffable about short story, something you can't quite grasp, and that is how I'd define it.

(Lambert, 2015)

At the start of this research I was looking for the very definitions that Lambert identifies as impossible to find. The absence of a unified definition directly informs my conclusion. The essence of the short story has much more to do with the author.

Definitions are absent. Carys Davies focuses on an aspect of craft:

For me clarity is a really important thing in every aspect of the story. It's clarity of place, clarity of time as well. My stories are not in real time but they are sort of, a visit, a journey... You can only have ambiguity which, if you want to leave things ambiguous or a cliff-hanger at the end, you have to have to have absolute clarity about that ambiguity.

(Davies, 2015)

Again, there is an absence of a definite conclusion and the need for ambiguity.

Things left unresolved are important. Adam Marek also says there is no fixed answer:

Well I don't think there should be a definitive answer or solution to the short story...

Conflict is the most important thing in a story. Without conflict there is no story. It has to be entertaining and deliver

an experience to your reader. It has to hit some kind of emotional level with the reader. If you fail to move them emotionally or titillate them intellectually nothing in the reader has changed, so it has to have those things.

(Marek, 2015)

Truancy, indefinable, clarity, conflict: each of these is a valid way of identifying the single most important aspect of a short story because it belongs to the individual author. Given the diversity of these responses, it is not possible to derive a universal hypothesis, and such an idea is opposed by each of these writers. I can conclude that, in these examples, whatever essence there may be is connected to the author and comes from him or her. It is specific not general. Theories do not inform writers; discussion, reading and practice do.

The Only Voice

O'Connor's *Lonely Voice* remains as a central idea in short story studies. The short story is about a lonely protagonist, cut off from the world, often as the only developed character in the story, and with no life beyond the text other than some implied former existence and a vague notion that he or she will have an unknown future. But they are not alone, and there is energy or light shining on their lonely and incomplete world. It comes from the author, who is very much alive and connected to the story. It is the author who filters the real world in a unique way to create the partial world where the lonely protagonist briefly exists. The author brings his or her own thumbprint, his or her unique and unmistakable view of the world. And it is the author's memories and reflections of him or herself that bring emotional charge to the story. That process is unique to each author as can be seen from the diversity of

approaches described by four authors and the very specific and personal way that *Approval* came about. The gaps, omissions and implied events in the story are filled by a force from outside the text. It is absent from the story, but nevertheless imparts a defining energy. That energy must come from the author, the only contact the story has with the world beyond the text when it is conceived. Therefore each story is bound in an irrevocable way to its author. The Lonely Voice of the protagonist is met by The Only Voice of his or her author.

A final word should go to a short story author. I listened to *Free Thinking* on BBC Radio 3 in March 2017, when this thesis was almost complete, itself an indication that analysis in this field is an ongoing discussion. The panel – Jenn Ashworth, Paul McVeigh, Kirsty Logan and George Saunders – were discussing the short story (beginning with its length). Saunders was asked about emulating Hemingway, whom he said he admires. He talked of ‘trying to climb the mountain of Hemingway’ and said, ‘You realise, I’ve lived enough. I know certain things. The things I know are not going to be presented in someone else’s voice’ (BBC, 2017). The things he knows must be represented in *his* voice.

However we learn our craft, and whoever and whatever the forces that influence us as writers, this remains true. We cannot accurately define the complex mechanisms by which an author interprets the world, filters and rewrites memories and experiences, and creates a unique way of telling a story. However, it can be concluded that this process is unique to the creator of the text, and that this occurs in a very direct way in the short story. Each author writes in his or her individual way, a way that only that one person could have written. It is the author’s Only Voice.

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Appendix 3 Questionnaire, Information Sheet, Signed Consent Forms

1 Research Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: *The Only Voice: The Modern Short Story in Context*

This research is part of an English PhD thesis being undertaken at Edge Hill University. Data from this research will be used for that purpose and any resultant publication of the entire thesis or parts of it (in articles for example.)

The thesis attempts to map the relationship between the short story, reader, writer and the contexts within which the story is written and read. It includes a hypothesis that there may be an essential force. The thesis is made up of original creative work (a collection of short stories), a literature review and these interviews.

You have been approached as a participant in this research as you are a published writer of short stories and / or an academic with specialist knowledge in this field. Your participation is voluntary and unpaid. You will be asked to participate in an interview based on these questions but may respond by phone or in writing if time commitments or other circumstances make an interview impractical. You will be sent a draft of any part of the thesis that includes your comments and you will be allowed to reword, clarify or delete any comment within 14 days.

The questions are in three parts to be discussed in one meeting of up to one hour:

Part one has a series of questions that require a numerical response in which you state the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement. This data will be published numerically (e.g. 7 out of 10 writers agreed with...)

Part two has a few open questions on the same theme which allows you to express any opinion. Where your comments are quoted the date of the questionnaire / interview will be referenced.

Part three is completely open and allows you to express any other opinion on the subject.

2 Consent Form

Tick all boxes ✓

I have read and understood the participant information sheet and consent form.

I have had the opportunity to see the questions in advance but understand that further discussion may take place during the interview.

I understand that I will be able to see a transcript of the interview and that I may withdraw within 14 days of the date when the transcript is sent.

I understand that numerical data will not be attributed and that no part of my interview will be published without citation.

Name of Participant _____

Signature _____

Date _____

For all communications about this interview please contact John Rutter on 01772 251532 / 07584 424187 or by email on john.rutter@go.edgehill.ac.uk

The Director of Studies for this project is Dr. Rodge Glass: glassr@edgehill.ac.uk

The following are scans of the completed, signed consent forms:

2 Consent Form	Tick all boxes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
I have read and understood the participant information sheet and consent form.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
I have had the opportunity to see the questions in advance but understand that further discussion may take place during the interview.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I will be able to see a transcript of the interview and that I may withdraw within 14 days of the date when the transcript is sent.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
I understand that numerical data will not be attributed and that no part of my interview will be published without citation.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Name of Participant	<u>Zoe Lambert</u>	
Signature	<u>Zoe Lambert</u>	
Date	<u>7/9/2015</u>	

For all communications about this interview please contact John Rutter on 01772 251532 / 07584 424187 or by email on john.rutter@go.edgehill.ac.uk

The Director of Studies for this project is Dr. Rodge Glass: glassr@edgehill.ac.uk

2 Consent Form

Tick all boxes



I have read and understood the participant information sheet and consent form.



I have had the opportunity to see the questions in advance but understand that further discussion may take place during the interview.



I understand that I will be able to see a transcript of the interview and that I may withdraw within 14 days of the date when the transcript is sent.



I understand that numerical data will not be attributed and that no part of my interview will be published without citation.



Name of Participant CARYS JAVIER

Signature Carys Javier

Date 7.9.15

For all communications about this interview please contact John Rutter on 01772 251532 / 07584 424187 or by email on john.rutter@go.edgehill.ac.uk

The Director of Studies for this project is Dr. Rodge Glass: glassr@edgehill.ac.uk

2 Consent Form

Tick all boxes



I have read and understood the participant information sheet and consent form.

I have had the opportunity to see the questions in advance but understand that further discussion may take place during the interview.

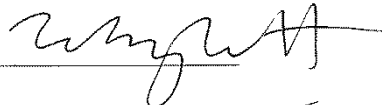
I understand that I will be able to see a transcript of the interview and that I may withdraw within 14 days of the date when the transcript is sent.

I understand that numerical data will not be attributed and that no part of my interview will be published without citation.

Name of Participant

7037 LIT

Signature



Date

15.10.2015

For all communications about this interview please contact John Rutter on 01772 251532 / 07584 424187 or by email on john.rutter@go.edgehill.ac.uk

The Director of Studies for this project is Dr. Rodge Glass: glassr@edgehill.ac.uk

2 Consent Form

Tick all boxes



I have read and understood the participant information sheet and consent form.

I have had the opportunity to see the questions in advance but understand that further discussion may take place during the interview.

I understand that I will be able to see a transcript of the interview and that I may withdraw within 14 days of the date when the transcript is sent.

I understand that numerical data will not be attributed and that no part of my interview will be published without citation.

Name of Participant

ADAM MAREK.

Signature

Adam Marek

Date

14/10/15.

For all communications about this interview please contact John Rutter on 01772 251532 / 07584 424187 or by email on john.rutter@go.edgehill.ac.uk

The Director of Studies for this project is Dr. Rodge Glass: glassr@edgehill.ac.uk

3 Questionnaire

Tick One box for each question ✓

Part One – Numerical Questions: To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?		Strongly disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree
1	There is very little written about the short story compared to the novel				
2	There is no clear unifying theory or hypothesis that addresses all short stories since O'Connor				
3	It would be useful to have a map of the short story showing its relationships to contexts				
4	A short story is usually about a single event, a turning point, an epiphany				
5	The external context when written is more important in a short story than in a novel				
6	The world at large can only enter or influence the story through the reader or writer				
7	A short story has a different meaning if read many years after it was written				
8	A short story has a limited shelf-life because of the link to external information / contexts				
9	A short story is independent of history, geography and culture				
10	It is necessary for the reader to be aware of the context of a short story to appreciate it				
11	Looking at short stories from a transnational perspective is likely to enlighten about the form				
12	A short story depends largely on the reader's interpretation for its meaning				
13	Individual ways of approaching the same subject mean that stories reflect their author's voice				
14	The implicit – that which is left out – is fundamental to understanding the short story				
15	Writers are always writing at least partially autobiographically, even if subconsciously				
16	Short stories are a more personal / autobiographical form than novels				

17	It would be useful to hypothesise about the existence of some force as yet undefined.				
Notes: on closed questions:					
Part Two – Open questions:					
Think about the following aspects of short stories from your perspective as a writer					
18	Can you cite examples of how your own life appears in or influences your short stories and explain how and why?				
19	Who would you say are the most important short story writers of the last 100 years. Why?				
20	If you had to choose one collection of short stories by a single writer from the last 100 years, what would it be?				
Part Three – Informal Discussion:					
Having considered all of the above and discussed the hypothesis that this thesis covers, (that there is an essential force) do you have any further comments or challenges?					

And finally (the ‘Columbo’ question):

What would you say is the most important thing about the short story?

(This question was NOT sent to interviewees in advance.)

Appendix 4 List of Interviewees and Credentials

Zoe Lambert

Zoe Lambert's short story collection *The War Tour*, published by Comma Press, received critical acclaim and was short-listed for the Edge Hill prize in 2012. She has also published stories in various anthologies. She is an active campaigner for the rights of asylum seekers and has taught at MMU where she completed her PhD, The University of Bolton, Edge Hill University and, currently, at Lancaster University.

Carys Davies

Carys Davies's stories have been widely published in magazines and anthologies and have won many prizes including the RSL VS Pritchett Prize and a Northern Writers Award. *The Redemption of Galen Pike* was runner up for the Edge Hill Prize 2015 and won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award 2015, the largest award in the world for a short story collection. Her two collections are published by Salt.

Toby Litt

Toby Litt grew up in Bedfordshire and studied at UEA. He is Senior Lecturer at Birkbeck University. He is the author of *Adventures in Capitalism*, *Beatniks*, *Corpsing*, *Dead Kid Songs*, *Exhibitionism*, *Finding Myself*, *Ghost Story*, *Hospital* and *I Play the Drums in a Band Called Okay*. His short stories have been widely published and his collection *Dear Life* was short-listed for the Edge Hill Prize 2014.

Adam Marek

Adam Marek is an award-winning short story writer. He was short-listed for the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award and the Edge Hill Prize, 2013. His collections *Instruction Manual for Swallowing* and *The Stone Thrower* are published by Comma Press, and he has appeared in numerous anthologies including *The Best British Short Stories* 2011 and 2013 published by Salt.

Appendix 5 Transcripts of interviews

Interview Notes John Rutter / Zoe Lambert 7 September 2015 (54 minutes)

JR: So let's begin with the questionnaire and see where we end up.

ZL: So first of all, question number one, there is very little written about the short story compared to the novel, I would strongly agree. The novel in the UK definitely is the dominant form, we have a history of the novel, it's very strong in English literature. So yes, academic studies primary focus on the novel and notoriously ignore short stories, but there is a developing short story field and in the last 30 years or so in which Charles E May has been the forefront.

JR: So do you think there are a unifying theories or hypothesis?

ZL: Yes, there are attempts at it. You won't hear them at conferences because people will be more modest and focus on smaller elements in their talks but if you go to CEM's theory of the short story as being mythical, that is unifying, and if you go back to existing theories a lot of them are exploring how the shortness does and does not unify the short story so I wonder whether there are unifying theories. I would slightly disagree with question number two (There is no clear unifying theory or hypothesis that addresses all short stories since O'Connor) because the problem is that short story studies is eternally caught up in the use of definition and never gets beyond it, to do with it being a minor form. You never hear the novel going around trying to define itself all the time.

JR: Yes so for example the essays in Venessa Gebbie's book often begin with 'what is a short story.'

ZL: Yes, so this is why I completely disagree that there are many theories because the short story is eternally caught up with defining itself because it's not the dominant form and it has to continually justify its existence.

JR: So if I want to understand the short story there are collections of essays and those that you have mentioned are a good starting point but has anyone really said 'a short story is made of these things' or has these elements?

ZL: I'm absolutely convinced they have and you need to look into that a bit more.

JR: Would you agree that much of what has been written is historic, they tend to begin with Chapter 1 Poe, Chapter 2 Chekhov and we never seem to get up to discussing what's happening now?

ZL: I think there is but maybe not as much, but I'd disagree, there is stuff out there.

JR: Okay, so what about the idea if I said I'm going to map a series of forces, a diagram, like the way scientists use the Standard Model and show the reader, the writer, the text and so on, is that something that would be useful?

ZL: It might be useful for teaching first years for example.(5:00)

JR: So for example I turned up here (at Lancaster University) with no background in English literature and no idea about theory. There isn't a kind of map like there is for scientists. Would that be a valid approach?

ZL: I don't think so. Maybe for basics, as I've said for first years. There are short histories that are useful, so you could do a family tree.

JR: Yes, I've seen that done for composers. I'm thinking broader than the who.

ZL: I can't really answer whether it would be useful or not until I've seen it.

JR: There is a sketch with a series of circles for reader, writer, text and so on.

ZL: The problem is this isn't physics. There would be your truths, the hypotheses that have been argued. This is a different. The reason why there is no clear unifying theory is that it is always up for debate, there's not one answer to the universal. I don't think you're going to get one theory that everyone agrees to and obeys like the bible, they're just going to keep on arguing about it.

JR: Yes, and they are aesthetic arguments anyway.

ZL: Yes, it's not maths so the problem is that some of the questions might be trying to grapple with literature as if it's maths or physics.

JR: Yes, the idea that I'm borrowing is the way scientists identify a gap in their knowledge and give names to things. Is that something that could be transferred?

ZL: I think as a visual learning tool something like that might be useful, but I'm not sure beyond that.

JR: So it's of limited use. It's interesting to get that challenge as I have at conferences. That's not necessarily the best way of looking at these questions.

ZL: And until you've done it you can't really test whether it's valid because I'd visualise it in a very different way and at the moment it's too vague. It's not clear enough what it is. You need an example at least.

JR: Okay so let's look at some of these questions. Question 4, the idea that the short story is about a single event?

ZL: On the whole, yes, but I'm not sure every single short story fits into that. Most short stories focus on a moment of time but lots do. Some fantastic ones do, for example one of my favourite Lorrie Moore stories is called *How to talk to your mother (notes)*. That has a glimpse of every year of her life for forty years. It doesn't have a unifying event at all. It is a glimpse of her whole life in little tiny snapshots. Lots of stories that do that. Alice Munro, a lot of her stories are very dense, almost novels, and if you back to Chekhov a lot of his stories were long as well.

JR: Yes, *The Dead* in Dubliners is very long.

ZL: That is one event. Some of my stories in *The War Tour* don't focus on one event either. For example *When the Truck Came* covers from when he's captured till he's released.

JR: Yes, that is episodic.

ZL: But on the whole, yes.

JR: Okay so what about these contexts. If we start to look at the world when it's written and when it's read affect a short story more than a novel?

ZL: I don't think you can make a big claim like that. I'd probably say I strongly disagree. I don't think it's very different. I'm writing a novel at the moment and the external context is extremely important to it. And context is important to all writing. It's full of real events from the writer's life, mashed up with your imagination. It's hard to pull apart.

JR: So here I'm thinking about events in the real world; there is a war on or the war has just finished as a context within which the story the story is written or is read.

ZL: I can see where you're coming from. Short stories tend to only hint at things and a lot is left out.

JR: So can it be argued that the implicit is more important because the author is saying 'I'm not going to explain what's going on the world,' whereas a novel might be more easily read in a different time and a different context without any knowledge of that time.

ZL: There is that but I think what is left out is very important in a short story but the novel itself has a link to the world outside. Maybe less is left out but it is still inherently linked to world, if not more so. So if you go back to Frank O'Connor, he says that novels are like social animals whereas the characters of short stories are more isolated, they can be on the periphery of society. The main character in traditional novels is someone imbued in society in the context of the world. So I can see where you are coming from, but you need to be very clear what you mean by context and the definitions of terms.

JR: Yes.

ZL: So my short stories are very much related to events in the world but a lot of short stories don't do that.

JR: Adam Marek's stories have events that aren't real but link to real life.

ZL: If anything often short stories are more intensely poetic and lyrical and not engaged with politics and the social world. And they can often be entirely imagined, they have that mythical sense beyond the real world so they aren't dependent on the real world at all. But as writers we are all dependent on our contexts. You can't divorce any writer from that, they all write from a certain position in culture and history so lots of stories are the opposite of that. So it's not an either /or thing.

JR: Nor does it need to be.

ZL: You'll have to argue that quite carefully.

JR: Hm. So if I am looking at those relationships – the reader, the writer, the war that's taking place, would it be true to say that that whatever is going on in the world can only influence the story through the reader or the writer?

ZL: Well, yes, but then the thing is you can have different discourses within the text but there is meaning within the text otherwise it's just scribbles on a page. Where are you going with that?

JR: Well I'm trying to avoid conclusions just yet.

ZL: Things like narratology have been doing that. So have you looked at this...Narrative fiction and contemporary poetics...So look, it's doing what you're saying in diagrams. So there is also the implied author and the implied reader. So you might want to read this. (19:57) (discussion of book and names)

ZL: So narratology is all about how meaning is made and if you back to Roland Barthes. So it is between the reader and the writer but meaning is not just a direct communication between them, it's within a culture as well.

JR: So the starting point is the meaning, culture and context of the writer, then of the reader...

ZL: It gets more complex than that because language is signs so you are drawing on all of that.

JR: So let me ask you two related questions between the story and when it is written. Does it have a different meaning if read many years later? (question 8) and number 9, a story is independent of history.

ZL: Okay sure. So the story has a different meaning if read many years after it as written? Absolutely, especially if you look at work that explores race relations for example. A story may have certain meanings but we'll read it differently now.

JR: And things that are absolutely unacceptable to say now would be perfectly socially acceptable a generation or two ago.

ZL: And certain language as well, and certain images. And there are types of characters. So feminism and disability studies and literary studies on race have all looked back.

JR: Yes, so if you look back at Katherine Mansfield now and what she was saying. There was an entirely different use of language.

ZL: And you can look back at the images and the stereotypes and characterisation. So of course we will write things differently because we are writing from a different cultural position.

JR: Leading on from that do you think a short story ends up with a shelf life and loses some meaning if it's read long afterwards?

ZL: Well of course the good stories don't do they?

JR: We are still reading Dubliners.

ZL: A strong story carries on creating new meanings. So I would say some stories will have a limited shelf life because they don't speak beyond their immediate concerns. So a lot of feminists will argue that we didn't just read men in the past because they were the only great writers, there's a lot to do with privilege and power. So a lot of literary critics would be wary of just saying the best stuff lasts when only the best stuff by white men lasts.

JR: There's something interesting about if a story is about its immediate concerns that connects it to its time and place in the way the great short stories aren't.

ZL: Yes, they speak to universal themes, but I would also be wary about just saying that because a lot of critical studies have explored how and why certain stories have been remembered and others have been lost. There's a lot of work been done on lost women writers for example. So absolutely some short stories have a shelf-life, but others are remembered because our culture privileges certain voices so it's not always to do with the true value of the story itself it's just that we see some people's experience as universal - white men's as being particular to their time. So we'll say 'that's a great story, it speaks to everyone because it has a young man in it or it's about a young boy growing up,' but stories that are about a non-American or set in a smaller community are not universal, so what we call universal is culturally privileged (26:23) and specific so I'd be really careful about making that claim.

JR: Yes, these are questions to discover what people feel rather than claims or conclusions. It's certainly more complex than I ever imagined. I think you make an interesting point about privilege. If you hear anything about black American writers it does seem that they are referenced as if representing a minority, their own

specialist viewpoint, whereas Raymond Carver seems to be accepted as representing a wider population and again very male.

ZL: Yes, he's very specific to a certain position and class and time.

JR: So does the reader need to know the context – and here I mean what's going on in the world when the story is written?

ZL: Well how did you feel reading my book? The stories are all about different events in history and in different places. Could you read those without having to Google everything? Obviously one might not know all the details.

JR: That's a good example because I'm ignorant about history and European geography but it didn't matter at all. I didn't even know who Lisa Meitner was so obviously they can work. Maybe I found it easier to find a point of contact with someone eating Frosties or getting on a bus in Salford because it has immediate cultural relevance. Whereas in some of the stories I have no idea who is on what side of which war, but then I suppose that's your point.

ZL: And I don't even tell you sometimes! I try to give little hints.

JR: On the whole I can still get the meaning of the story. If a young man is taken away on a truck I don't need to know what side is what or which war. Most of the characters end up in and around Manchester and I don't suppose it matters exactly how they became refugees. Maybe the woman coming and sitting on the bus next to me grabs me more because it feels real whereas in *Notes* I don't know how much of that is true.

ZL: I think it depends how much a short story relates to any context anyway – how much it matters. Obviously good short stories can be from anywhere. I enjoy stories from different cultures and sometimes I don't know the meaning say of the places or details but with a strong story you are carried along. Your awareness of the context might help you to appreciate it even more but a good story will stand on its own legs.

JR: I know nothing about nineteenth century Russian society and politics but I have no difficulty enjoying the stories.

ZL: It creates its own world, its own universe for readers to enter. All the reader needs is the where, the what, the when and the who in relation to the story. You need to know who's speaking and where they are.

JR: But they don't have to be real places.

ZL: No, within an imagined space you need to create the where the what and the who for the reader to create the story which may or may not relate to any external context. That's the work of the writer done.

JR: Number eleven on here is about transnationalism and is asking about the relationship between where the writer is from and where the story is set. Is there something that can be learnt from that?

ZL: Absolutely. In literary studies the American short story tends to dominate and a lot of my favourite writers are American so I try to make sure and the history of the short story has a lot of wonderful American examples.

JR: I've constantly referenced Carver, Hemingway and Salinger in my research.

ZL: I definitely agree that transnational perspectives definitely enlighten about the form. Short stories are an international form. So if you only read mid-twentieth century writers you will just write stories that are about a single event or turning point or epiphany. (32:30)

JR: And of course we are influenced by who we read as well as who we are which we'll come onto in a minute. I wonder whether Gabriel Garcia Marquez would have the most interesting things to say about the form.

ZL: Yes it's good for us all to read outside our own narrow circle.

JR: And from your point of view being from one country and visiting others, how does that inform the writing.

ZL: Well I kind of position the reader in the opening story as someone who's listening so it's definitely written for a British readership because it criticise most our system over treatment of refugees as well as our colonial past so it's very much about Britain's relationship to the world – that it doesn't want to listen to people's stories which we have become acutely aware of in the last few days (ed. Note – this refers to widespread news at the time of the interview about refugees in Europe

including bodies found in the back of a truck and hundreds of people drowning in the Mediterranean) with the current (refugee) crisis.

JR: It's astonishing that it takes something of that magnitude, people dying on television before we take notice. (34.17)

ZL: It takes a photo – the reality of that. It has changed people. People I would never have imagined to be political are now filling their cars with stuff and driving to Calais. It's wonderful. (Discussion here about Refugee Action, teaching refugees and the refugee crisis and phone interruption – not included in transcript) (35 mins.)

JR: So, reader's interpretation. What do you think about that (Question 12.) You already said about readers creating a world.

ZL: Yes, absolutely I think short stories don't spell things out as much as novels and they make the reader work hard and they engage with the reader which is why they are a difficult and they are more difficult to read – the reader has to work quite hard.

JR: I remember that coming up on the Comma course with Ra (this is referencing a course attended by JR and taught by ZL two years ago with Ra Page of Comma Press.) There is a line showing how the ending of the story takes place after the end of the story.

ZL: Yes, so I think it does engage the reader rather than depend, it is in dialogue with the reader and there are multiple meaning as well.

JR: It's a different story for every reader.

ZL: All literature works that way but short stories do ask the reader to work harder, especially from Joyce. You get to the end and think 'what's that about.'

JR: Yes, like why didn't Eveline get on the boat? So that answers the question about the implicit. Let me ask about the voice of the writer. If I asked ten different writers to write about someone on a bus in Manchester how much does the writer influence that?

ZL: I don't think that is about short stories in particular. That's just about creativity. It's not about voice. It's about the individual imaginations of the writers.

JR: That's important then. You don't feel there is a unique characteristic of short stories that has got more to do with the author or his or her voice compared to other

types of creative writing. I suppose I'm searching for what is it that makes a short story different, how might we define it. Does the uniqueness of the writer's voice inform here?

ZL: I think that's probably true of all forms.

JR: So for you it's more do with the writers' unique creativity rather than the form?

ZL: I think you could have ten different poems just as much as ten stories.

JR: Okay. The implicit. We've already started to talk about that. It seems to be one of the subjects that has been talked about, the what's left out.

ZL: Yes, I think definitely. That's to do with its length and the way the meaning works which is quite often through imagery, and the what is suggested, what is hinted at and reading between the words, what's implied is fundamental.

JR: What about autobiography. Let me quote from something you said in your interview with Tom Vowler on this subject. There is something personal about it. You said that *The War Tour* was far away from your own experience but that things were more complicated than that. 'The book is also very personal, there's a lot of me in it, just not where you might expect.' This thing about there is a personal aspect to it, an autobiographical relationship to the story which might be direct or indirect or conscious or subconscious.

ZL: Well writing always is. What do you mean here by autobiographical? Because we are connected to our writing on many levels and in different ways; so there might be autobiographical material about a direct event or relationship that you've experienced, but fiction is a big mish-mash of all these things that are very hard to disentangle, sometimes you'll have something but people will ask, 'Is that you then? Did you go on holiday with your boyfriend?' And actually I went on holiday with a friend not a man, and we never had those arguments.

JR: Did you go to Auschwitz?

ZL: We did go on the tour but we didn't have those arguments and my friend was upset when she read the stories. She thought that was her but I'm 'No, I've messed around with stuff so much. That's not you, it's an imagined man, you don't even talk

like that.' But because there were some very vivid descriptions of the place it seems real.

JR: And the details can be real of course.

ZL: Yes and for both of us it was such a big experience that it stayed with you, but the real got morphed into something else and the someone can think you are writing about them and you have to explain that you made something up for your own purposes to debate the ethics of writing about someone else's misery.

JR: And of course you're not writing about an actual refugee.

ZL: It's become something else.

JR: But you are saying that there are a number of ways in which *you* are in the stories.

ZL: Yeh yeh yeh...

JR: Because some of your experiences are there and your politics and your beliefs and some things you might not be conscious of.

ZL: Absolutely so take the story 33 Bullets I just read it the other night in Lancaster and I was talking about that because the character is an academic.

JR: He's the guy in the detention centre trying to fill his forms in.

ZL: And he's trying to write about a Kurdish poet and he's failing to write and it was written when I was writing my PhD and it was a literary PhD and I was failing to write. It's very much about the failing of academic endeavour.

JR: But you just happen to be writing about an asylum seeker at the same time as having a personal experience.

ZL: So the character is very other and different to me with a connection through a job, through trying to do literary things put a lot of my own feelings into the character and that's how sometimes the autobiographical is not just a straight line and is often seen simplistically when actually it is very complex. All writing is intensely, inherently autobiographical and as a culture we're obsessed with that.

JR: But is a short story more so?

ZL: No, I don't think so. I don't think that I'd argue that short stories are more autobiographical than poems for example which are the most autobiographical. Most

'I's in poetry are distinctly related to their own 'I.' even it is inferred or implied. So I'd disagree that it is more so.

JR: So the last part then. If I were to hypothesise that there is some essence or force, the spirit of, some undefined characteristic of the story. People have talked about emitting a light beyond, these sort of things.

ZL: Fireflies.

JR: Yes. There are a number of people that have alluded to there being something. What's your feeling about that?

ZL: Yes, I think definitely. This goes with Charles E May's thing about the story being mythical. They are writing about existence beyond the material, about something sacred... JR: Something spiritual.

ZL: It's a while since I've read that but go back to that. But that is really interesting.

JR: And I suppose what I'm looking for, whether or not we attempt to map what we already know is something about that essence and its connections between reader, writer and text.

ZL: But make sure you read that all again carefully and avoid saying something that has already been written.

JR: The difficulty is that the conclusions I'm making seem to be very general.

ZL: I'm sure you can build on that and it could be really good.

JR: So you've given plenty of examples. Let me ask you one question that's not on the questionnaire, I nickname this the Columbo question. What is the one thing for you that is absolutely essential about the short story?

ZL: (Pause) Don't know. I think the problem is that if you try and define what the essence of a short story is the problem is that it's indefinable. What you will struggle with is that there is something ineffable about short story, something you can't quite grasp and that is how I'd define it.

JR: And that seems to be what I'm finding. It does stay outside of your grasp. So there's an interesting research question there. It's just saying something that makes a conclusion. So that's been really interesting. We've gone in all sorts of directions from these starting points and you've made some real challenges. (Discussion of who else is participating in the research not transcribed) (52 mins.)

JR: I think we have covered many of these questions. They are a starting point and the way these conversations develop is also a clue to the conclusions.

ZL: I think through discussion these you'll start to pinpoint which ones are the most interesting.

JR: Yes, and I think that might be to do with the way that the writer has a relationship to the story and the absences and what's left out.¹⁷ Which comes back to your thing about going back to empty houses, inverting the whole idea of what home means. (Recorder off, thank-you etc.)

¹⁷ This refers to pre-interview conversation about ZL's current work.

Interview Notes John Rutter / Carys Davies 7 September 2015 (72 minutes recorded)

JR: So a starting point is to look at what's been written and what theories there already are about short stories.

CD: I am aware of the Frank O'Connor thing, but as a writer I deliberately don't spend much time reading theories because I really do feel that every time I sit down to write I am having to try and reinvent re-invent the wheel. That's one thing I feel very strongly, almost every time I sit down I feel I don't know how to do it.

JR: I know that feeling...

CD: ...and if I knew how to do it I'd do it every time and experience has told me that's it's just a huge long process of trial and error so I'm not sure how much theory would help me. Having said that I've just bought the Comma Press book, Morphologies...

JR...which is a great read.

CD: I liked the sound of it because I know some of the writers and I like them, like David Constantine and Sarah Maitland, so I know they are intelligent sensitive people.

JR: Yes, so each is an essay by a contemporary writer about their favourite writer.

CD: So I'm looking forward to reading them.

JR: And they don't become abstract and theoretical.

CD: No. I think every story has its very own form so it's always felt to me it's not very useful to try and have some sort of theory about what form in an abstract way you might have because you have to write it to write it, so I'm not very big on theory.

JR: There isn't a huge library of theories. The books tend to be collections of essays by individual writers and conference papers do tend to be a paper about Angela Carter by an expert on Angela Carter.

DC: Do you know the Salt book about The Art of the Short Story?

JR: Yes, the one by Vanessa Gebbie.

DC: I did an essay for that. Her approach is very much asking you, or at least this is how she approached me, she said 'I want a really personal essay on how you do it' I think some of the essays were a bit more theoretical and academic and some were more personal.

JR: Even they tend to be personal analysis rather than heavily reference academic theories.

DC: Yes, things like Paul Magrs, looking at bits that I relate to. That's as theoretical as I've got. That was instructive for me as it made me reflect on how my stories come into being.

JR: And we don't know if that's a scientific thing at all?

DC: No, apart from knowing that it's very slowly coming about through trial and error.

JR: I don't know if that's encouraging or not. There's a great quote from Ray Bradbury about writing a story every week because it's impossible to write 52 consecutive bad short stories.

CD: Definitely. I was at the London Short Story Festival and Kevin Barry was saying that without the failures you wouldn't write the good ones, they all sort of mysteriously inform each other and something you try out in order to write one story will come home to roost in another story down the road but you couldn't have planned it that way.

JR: I think that's true (tells story of 79 Green Gables.) So if I was to suggest I want to map all the forces that act on the story, the reader, the writer, what's going on in the world, would that be interesting? Would you find that a valid thought?

CD: Hm. My stories, some are contemporary, some are historical, some are in between...

JR: And some not in real places.

CD: Yes. And people say to me 'I can't really tell what time, what era your story are of.' So I wouldn't say I'm a writer who's thinking about the real world but at the same time there's a particularly kind of, if you like, not real setting for a story in the book called Precious...

JR: My favourite...

CD: Oh okay.

JR: You said you like people to pick favourites. I've no idea why, just the story of the bald man becoming a celebrity was the one that stuck in my mind.

CD: Well I'm glad you like that. But that one, I would never have sat down and thought I was going to write a story about the rise of religious fundamentalism, hijacking the idea of Gods.

JR: There's something fairy-tale about it, it has a medieval feel.

CD: I literally wasn't trying to do anything like that. I started with an image. The image was a crying baby being soothed by tapping this bald head of this man, that's where the story started, so that turned into the notion that it had some power of making people happy and later on the emperor's new clothes moment where Precious says...it really was just word by word, sentence by sentence, seeing where the story went, discovering what it was about. So that's an interesting story because it's an unreal story, slightly mythical, it's one of the few stories that's about real things...

JR: It is a political comment...

CD: Yes.

JR: Society has agreed upon these things, we've deified this man for reasons he doesn't even appear to understand.

CD: And he's horrified. So I like the genesis of that story, because it shows how short stories aren't polemics. Goodness knows what awful thing I would have written if I'd tried to write something about religious fundamentalism.

JR: I've written about religion – a direct attack on conservative Catholicism – and I tried to write about how repressed the characters are and I tried several versions. The only point where it worked is when Jesus turned up unexpectedly and it became something completely different, more surreal.

CD: Yes.

JR: Now I wish I'd started with the image of Jesus standing in the doorway of an ensuite bathroom because that's the story. You started the opposite way, with the image.

CD: That's so often, that you find the image later on, but it's that thing that just because something's real, you know its credibility, believability that matters. You can have all sorts of crazy goings on but if it feels true then it works.

JR: Adam Marek does that – he has crazy things going on in otherwise domestic circumstances.

CD: Yes

JR: And Ballard of course.

CD: It's the same the thing with often being more brief about a world. Giving just a few details makes it much more real than if you went into a tremendous amount of detail. Sometimes the detail makes it feel less real.

JR: So do you deliberately make the stories very short?

CD: I don't sort of think, 'this is a short story I don't have much space to say anything,' because I often write, especially in this collection, about the distances between people, the content and form are very much married so because it's so much about what people aren't saying those spaces are enormously important. So, if you take the title story with the woman visiting the man in the jail cell...

JR: ...and he says about twenty words in the whole story.

CD: Yes, so there's a lot of silence and I suppose you could say it's what's making the story short, but it's also what's giving the story it's amazing charge because of the things they are not saying to its each other.

JR: Which makes it very tense.

CD: Yes.

JR: So was that another where you had an image?

CD: That story came from an initial image. It took was about ten years. It started with the idea, it was actually a man visiting the other man in the cell. I really wasn't very sure what was happening. I knew he'd done a terrible thing and I knew that I

wanted him to have an effect on the man who was visiting. And I just kept going back to it. Then one day he stopped being a man and he became a woman and I got her as far as coming into the cell and Pike says to her...and I had a physical image of her that she was very austere but I didn't know anything else about her other than that... and he says to her 'are you a preacher' and I remember writing, 'no I am your friend' and suddenly there's this Quaker connotation. I am actually a Quaker so suddenly the whole story just came to life and suddenly because she was a woman it gave a whole other layer to the relationship.

JR: And there is the thing of just sharing silence in a room.

CD: Exactly. So suddenly it was one of those mysterious and magical moments where all of these things that had been yeasting away for ten years they suddenly all come together and yet again the thing about silences and the brevity of the story and the spaces between the conversations, it all just fit.

JR: That leads on to the personal nature of stories, the idea of 'the only voice', and how much that is your perspective or my perspective as a writer. What you put into the stories and whether that is conscious or subconscious. How do you feel about that? The personal part of the story.

CD: Well I always describe myself as NOT an autobiographical writer. I like to travel a really long way away from my own life. I don't consider my own life interesting at all. I haven't had a life of any particular interest or tragedy.

JR: You haven't fought in a war...

CD: No, I'm not an immigrant; I don't have a particular story. I lived in America for eleven years and I suppose living somewhere as an outsider makes a difference and in some ways I'm an outsider here in the North, I sort of landed here. All my family is Welsh and I have a curious relationship with that because I don't feel particularly Welsh, but my entire family history is Welsh. That's definitely part of my writing. There's a story in this collection called *On Commercial Hill* which again I wasn't conscious at the time but the narrator who is called Will, the name of maternal grandfather who I never met. He was the sort of missing person. I never knew him, he was a miner, he dies young. I can see now that the story was a way of inventing this person but that feels like quite an unusually close story.

JR: Even then you are writing about the absence of someone you don't know.

CD: Exactly and the whole story is made up.

JR: You're not Anneliese Mackintosh by any means.

CD: No, absolutely not.

JR: You're at the other end of the spectrum.

CD: The physical space is just a few details from childhood memories and my grandmother's house but it's made up story.

JR: So there are two things that come out of that, one is about transnationalism and displacement – writers who came from one place and wrote about it from afar. I've looked at Hemingway, the archetypal American who was almost never in America and Joyce who left Ireland and wrote about Dublin for the rest of his life and William Trevor who describes himself as Irish but has lived in Cornwall for seventy years. There's something about the writer's relationship to place and that maybe it isn't the place at all it's more to do with time.

CD: I think for me I always have some sort of distance between where I am and what I'm writing about. Quite a lot of my stories are historical. I didn't write a story about living in America until five years after I'd stopped living there. It has to settle and the Welsh one is even further back.

JR: There is something interesting about that distance.

CD: Yes. For me it frees up the imagination. I couldn't write about what I know. I couldn't write about – well not consciously – about people I know. There's another story in there called the *The Travellers* which is very much based on the fact that my husband and I argue bitterly when we drive anywhere. We argue horribly.

JR: With my wife it's airports and luggage allowances.

CD: That story ends up in Siberia and it feels contemporary but then not contemporary.

JR: It could easily be a Chekhov setting...

CD: Yes.

JR: So there is something about a couple arguing to the point he'll leave her outside to die.

CD: It's about the absolute intransigence when you are both just sitting there. I've said this to other people. You think, 'how can I even be married to you, I hate you so much.'

JR: I've said 'I'm not getting on a plane with you and your enormous luggage, you can go by yourself to China and stay there!'

CD: So that story of all my stories is probably the one where I felt I was having some fun. But even that story I knew she'd left and gone to Siberia. I didn't know what the story was about. (23.55) For me it was a mystery what was on the sledge but when he says 'my wife and I argue' I knew what the story was about.

JR: So you've made a relationship between a domestic contemporary thing and the story.

CD: Yes and it does have a happy ending, I think of it as a sweet story.

JR: There's something you've touched on a couple of times about the grandfather and empty places. There's a theme of absences. I'm very interested in that. Are you consciously or deliberately writing about that which is not there? Is this isolation a planned thing?

CD: I think it's just the way it works. I think stripping everything down in these places does add a clarity to the drama. I'm drawn to those.

JR: So do you think that's different for a short story say compared to a novel?

CD: No. Let me think...I'm thinking about someone like Ron Rash, the novels and the short stories are very similar or say Daniel Woodrell, the settings, the characters, the sort of difficulties they have are really all quite similar. I think no. For me clarity is a really important thing in every aspect of the story. It's clarity of place, clarity of time as well. My stories are not in real time but they are sort of, a visit, a journey.

JR: They do seem to be about a single event.

CD: Yes, they're not Alice Munro, I don't know what the longest one is, quite often they are over a short time. The last one they are on the beach it's almost a few moments.

JR: The whole time frame is almost in real time.

CD: It's a few days to the funeral but the story happens over a short time. So its clarity of place and clarity of time and when I can sort out the time, that's absolutely crucial for me. It's clarity of character as well. You can only have ambiguity which, if you want to leave things ambiguous or a cliff-hanger at the end you have to have to have absolute clarity about that ambiguity if you see what I mean.

JR: Expand on that...

CD: So you can't just leave things vague and hope the reader will extrapolate something. So take the example of the one that's set in Wales where the woman has been jilted, we discover that the husband left a woman at the altar...and they have children and everything.

JR: ...and she suddenly she appears years later.

CD: Yes, a bit like of spinning wheel, fairy tale note. I wanted that story to end at the point with him at the point where his life could go this way or it could go this way, but it took me ages to get to the point where that was clear.

JR: I've tried to do that in a story about a couple who are trying to adopt a child and I want to find that clarity of ambiguity. I'm trying to find a way to leave the outcomes equally possible (but clear.)

CD: Yes, a brilliant ending for me, have you read Claire Keegan's long short story *Foster*?

JR: No.

CD: Oh, it's one of my absolute favourite short stories. It's about 80 pages long but she doesn't like it to be called anything other than a short story. It's about a little girl who goes to spend the summer with foster parents. Basically she goes from an unhappy home to a happy home. And in the happy home they have lost a child. When the time comes for her to go back and in the final scene she is running and she calls to 'Daddy' and you don't know whether she is going to go the arms of the surrogate or the father. Also has she learned enough about love and happiness so that even if she goes back to the horrible family she will be able to escape. She leaves you at exactly the right moment. The ambiguities are clear if you like.

JR: So it's about absolute clarity of ambiguity.

CD: Yes, I read the one about the jilted lover at the London Short Festival and a woman came up to me at the end and said 'I really enjoyed the short story, I can't wait to find out how it ends.' It's quite hard if you hear a story compared to on the page, if you see the ending on the page you know that's the end.

JR: Ra Page at Comma Press said something about the story carrying on beyond the end. It still comes down to how do you leave it without resorting to 'happy ever after.'

CD: Yes, it's the very hardest thing. There are so many short stories that are going so well that might end with an image. Carol Shield said something about metaphors and fleas, about that tendency to end with a metaphor which is supposed to bring everything to a head can be so contrived.

JR: I think it's very tricky.

CD: For me that's the big difference between a novel and a short story. I think a novel can afford to end a little bit weakly and it can be neatly wrapped up without ruining the novel. Short stories are very unforgiving aren't they? Novels are much more forgiving as a form. Do you even remember the ends of many novels?

JR: No, they are over when you put them down.

CD: I didn't even read the last forty pages of War and Peace because they didn't interest me, but I love the novel, I'd say it's one of my absolute favourites.

JR: You couldn't do that with a short story.

CD: You couldn't miss the last paragraph, the last line even of a short story.

JR: Let me ask you a bit more about the external contexts then.

CD: Hm.

JR: There's the thing about single event, and you've said something interesting about narrow timescale. The world at large. Let me be clear about what I mean by contexts. There's a war taking place when the story was written or there's a lot in the media about sex abuse at the moment that affects the way a story is read. What's your take on how that affects the story? Whether it affects you as a writer.

CD: It is strange how fiction seems to pre-figure reality. I remember in my first collection there's a story called Gingerbread Boy and it's about a boy being taken and just after the book came out Madeleine McCann disappeared so it became a more interesting and I suppose moving story because they were relating in their minds. I was thinking about it the other day because after all these years they've started producing those age-progression photographs and that's what this story was about. It was about a boy who'd gone and it plays with that idea of the age-progression photograph, he misses the people who took him whom he's come to love but he has no photograph and ends up trying to draw a picture from memory of them. So that is a story, which I didn't write it in response to any particular child disappearing it was when I was in the States and they had a lot of that age progression stuff to try and trace missing children so that's was the spur to write that story but then I couldn't really separate it from the from the Madeleine McCann story. Is that what you were thinking about?

JR: It is more often the other way round. I published a story this year about the speculation about who the next celebrity to be exposed was and two friends sit in the pub listing all the celebrities beginning with B. What I've found quite interesting is that since I wrote it other names have been announced and I'm listening on the radio for any that begin with B. The question is more about what is going on in the world at large, for example, I've just had a conversation with Zoe Lambert who's written extensively about refugees so there's a relationship to what's going on in the world though she wrote that collection five years ago. Does that happen with you as a writer?

CD: Well oddly enough my publisher wrote to me yesterday, they want a fundraising book for refugees (40.16) and I looked through my collection and I do have one story about a Haitian immigrant at the time of 9:11 and it's about the trickle-down effect of a catastrophe on an immigrant.

JR: Because so much of what we see in films and American fiction is about white middle-class males.

CD: Exactly. So that all happens all off stage, it swings round to the consequences on this woman. Again as I said at the beginning I never set out to write about global

refugees or the immigration crisis but that is now going to appear in a new anthology where people will almost be instructed to reflect on this event.

JR: But your stories seem to have this other-worldness that might be anywhere or anywhen. You don't seem to be writing for a social comment.

CD: No. Things like the title story *The Redemption of Galen Pike* there is that sort of political thread about people voting for low taxes. There's a bit of consciousness I suppose but no, my stories, maybe in one way or another they're love stories, they're about affairs of the heart and the soul.

JR: And loneliness?

CD: So maybe the characters aren't particularly plugged into the day to day.

JR: So are you writing about the things that happen in one life in the hope that the reader can extrapolate from that something about the world at large?

CD: Again it's that thing about making them feel real. I often find stories, if they're bristling with lots of contemporary references they just feel a little bit unreal to me even if they're full of real references to music or television programmes it all feels a bit stuck on to me.

JR: The other aspect of that of course is that stories can then date.

CD: That doesn't necessarily matter. But if the whole point of you mentioning a particular song is because the reader is going to understand it then those little things will cease to have any power so they won't have a point.

JR: I've tried to do that unsuccessfully. That can be entirely avoided by creating world that is not real. So for example when your man is walking across the bay I think of Morecambe Bay but I don't need to know that, it could be any bay.

CD: In that story there are specific places.

JR: But if you didn't know the real geography it wouldn't really matter.

CD: No. And equally the story *Miracle at Hawk's Bay* is completely made up. The details of how the tide comes in are based on how the tide comes in at Morecambe Bay. And there's another story called *Creed* which is based on a valley that I go walking in the Lakes but it doesn't need to be.

JR: You seem to have used some quite unusual and odd names. Where do you get the names from? In one or two places I was unsure whether a character was male or female. Are you deliberately creating ambiguity?

CD: There's one name where I call a woman Lenny. (47.30)

JR: Who I thought at first was a man...

CD: I did think about that quite hard but I do get attached to the names because that's who they are. I remember Carol Birch telling me when she'd written Jamrach's Menagerie, she had this Chinese character called Kai and over the summer Wayne Rooney had called his character Kai so she changed the name. So with Lenny maybe I should have changed the name but I know there are stories I read where I'm confused.

JR: For probably a page I didn't know she was the mother and I went with it.

CD: I really do think really hard am I deliberately or unnaturally withholding information from the reader. I don't like tricks. I don't like tricky surprises. I try and work from the perspective of the characters as they are seeing events unfold so I do think about those things. I wasn't trying to play tricks.

JR: So she had come to life (50.27)

CD: Names are important, in fact until I get the names right I can't get on with the story.

JR: So at the end is she imagining that she ran off with the girl that ruined the wedding or, it seems, she actually did.

CD: I think she did.

JR: Which is implausible and absurd but somehow I kind of believe it.

CD: I do know mothers who find their grown-up children a bit...especially at something like a wedding which is all so ridiculous. I was talking to a friend of mine the other day about her grown up daughter and she has come to the conclusion that her daughter is a bit dull. Parents do come to these realisations. So I do believe that you love your children unconditionally forever, but at the same time parents do look at each other and think.

JR: It's an honest thing to write about. I've written about the inverse of that. There's a rule that parents must be adored and respected unconditionally and there just comes a point in middle age where the children just agree we can no longer accept this degree of bizarre behaviour and these rules. So the notion that someone turns up and ruins just one family event would I be mortified or would it be a relief? Maybe that's why I'm prepared to believe that someone would throw a pie at a wedding.

CD: It's like that great film where there's a horrible abusive father and the son just stands up a family occasion and just tells everybody about his father. It's so excruciating but at the same time a relief.

JR: We seem to have wandered far away from the questions. So there are things about when the story is written, the world at large. So there's a statement here; a short story is independent of history geography and culture. How do you feel about that?

CD: Yes, I'd say so because even the historical things like the manufacturing of lino or the visit of Victoria, they're true things but I'm only kind of including them for detail.

JR: And they aren't too specific in time.

CD: And the stories are about something else.

JR: I love the way Queen Victoria (in *Jubilee*) seems to be unable to compute when he starts to tell her his story and she wants him to carry on.

CD: My husband is a history teacher and we argue about historical fiction. He strongly believes that you can't take historical characters and give them thoughts and words but my view is you can do anything in a short story as long as you achieve some sort of emotional truth and make a new story, then you can do what you like as long as you can take the reader with you (57.16) and make them believe.

JR: Yes, it's amazing the things we are prepared to believe, like having a community where there are only women and a body washes up on the shore.

CD: And the less said the better, then you don't have to explain all the other things.

JR: JG Ballard said something about that, it's best to have just one strange thing.

CD: Yes, and to go back to your question about short stories and novels, that is why you can do those sorts of things because you don't have to fill in all those other things that are going to start undermining it. You capture some kind of powerful truth with these few details and if then start to fill in more details you lose that. Sometimes it feels a bit like a balloon and you start writing more and all the air goes out of it.

JR: Yes, my Nightjar story about giant babies and very small old people seems to be alright as long as I keep them inside the house and don't address questions like how would childbirth work.

CD: That's what I love about short stories, is that you do away with all the explanations and as soon as you try and explain how something can be so you start to spoil everything, that goes back to this clarity thing, if you can work things out so that you don't need all that scaffolding and explanation. I always at a certain point in a story I go through to make sure there are no distractions in the reader's mind. It has to be credible and often that doesn't need an explanation.

JR: Some real-life stories are too incredible to write but you can write a world in which society has appointed a bald man as a kind of deity.

CD: My son told me about a classmate who would respond to challenges of people saying 'I'm not buying this' with, 'That actually happened to me' as if that was a kind of defence. We are digressing again.

JR: That's fine. If we go back to the original research questions they were; how might I understand short stories and what is the very essence of the story, and these are aesthetic questions so the questions exist to give some parameters, but we have touched on a lot to do with reader and writer. If I said is there some kind of essence or defining force in the short story, is there a sense or spirit? How would you define what the very essence of a story?

CD: You mean in the effect you want it to have?

JR: Yes and where its energy comes from.

CD: For most stories it feels for me that there is something buried that is kind of bursting out. Emotionally that's how it feels to me, that's what happens. I've been reading a hyper-realist book (Karlgaard?) and he referred to a 'brief drama of the

soul.' For me that sums up beautifully what a short story feels like to me, it's not a small thing.

JR: That's almost a religious thing.

CD: And if it's not a religious thing it's to do with the real essence of who these people are whether they are trapped and trying to escape. It feels like bursting out.

JR: Eudora Welty said something about the trail of light that a comet leaves behind. There are a few quotes about light and explosions as if expanding beyond itself.

CD: Yes, sometimes it bursts out beyond the ending and sometimes it bursts out within the scope of the story. If you take for example Queen Victoria it kind of bursts out but then fritters away and comes back. There are those circular stories. One of my favourite short stories is by Eudora Welty, *Death of a Travelling Salesman* where there is a moment of illumination when he realises that the man and woman who's house he is in are married and they're going to have a child, something he will never have and then he dies. There's a kind of bursting out. Maybe that is a formal constraint of the short story. That's why they are so great you've got this tension between that formality.

JR: I've heard that about poetry that by having a formal limit that constrains the number of syllables and constrains the rational thought so you can focus on the emotional feeling.

CD: I heard an interview with Colm Toibin and he was talking about the short story. He likened it to music. You are writing the story and then as you come to the end you are just raising the music in the same way as the light is getting brighter in his metaphor it's not just the volume, it's more stirring.

JR: I like that thought.

CD: I do like big things to happen in a short story and I'm not a quiet writer.

JR: I have a tendency to kill off protagonists. We've wandered far away from the subject we've been talking about, but we have talked about the reader, the writer, the implicit, autobiography or not. There is some wonderful material there. I've no idea how to relate it to everything else.

CD: Well if you knew how it was going to turn out that wouldn't be research would

it?

JR: I think it will add up to something profoundly different to where I started.

CD: Which is how it should be.

JR: And of course that's what a story does.

CD: Exactly.

JR: Last thing...

CD: Yes.

JR: If you were to pick one writer one story. You're on a desert island.

CD: A collection or a story?

JR: You can have one of each.

CD: I think it would be the story *Death of a Travelling Salesman* (by Eudora Welty) and she'd definitely be up there. If I could have a collection it would be Flannery O'Connor's Collected stories.

JR: Then I'd have William Trevor because his Collected Stories is 1,500 pages.

CD: Well if it was an individual collection I think I'd have *A Means of Escape* by Penelope Fitzgerald.

JR: This is becoming quite expensive research because almost daily someone recommends a new writer to me. And I think I already have an answer to my Columbo question which is to ask what is the one defining element or force. For you that is something about clarity.

CD: Yes, I think it is all about clarity.

JR: So thank you very much for spending so long. (1:12:42) (Recorder of thank-you's etc.)

Interview Notes John Rutter / Toby Litt 14 October 2015 (1:38:54 recorded)

JR: So the first part is about what's already been said, hypotheses and theories and what your feeling is about that. So if said there's not much in the way of theories since Frank O'Connor, what's your view on that?

TL: Well I've read Frank O'Connor and I haven't looked at a whole load of stuff that has come afterwards. I think I would agree that in comparison to the novel or in comparison to Shakespeare or Kafka there's been relatively little written but that's because there's such a mass of material about the novel. I don't think the short story right now is hard done by. I know if you issue a collection of short stories you're more likely to get a review in a mainstream newspaper and again that's because there is such a large number of novels coming out and maybe critical editors feel in some way they are worth supporting, or they are a neat thing to do or they are a variation. But I'd agree that there isn't a consensus about a theory of the short story in the way of a theory, partly because there is a divide between those who are doing the theory and doing the actual writing of short stories and partly because short stories are a more irresponsible form than the novel so it's harder to put certain rules around them. So to make that a bit clearer, if you write a novel you have to do whatever it takes to get someone through say 100,000 words. If you write a short story you don't have that responsibility so that probably means you can put in front of the reader from page one something that is more extreme because the reader doesn't have to stay with you for so long.

JR: And the world doesn't have to be as realistic because you don't need to sustain it – the Ballard thing. If you have a world where one very strange thing is happening it might be difficult to sustain it for 300 pages, but for 20 pages we don't need to know as much.

TL: Yeh, there's an issue often with the writing I see from students, especially if they are writing science fiction, the premise is the story and you don't believe the world exists beyond the bounds of the situation that you are reading about and it couldn't be maintained. I think if you're setting up a world with extreme distortions or linguistic distortions you need to convince the reader that it's not just a riff that the logic of it only exists in that a story. If you go to a Donald Barthelme story like

The Indian Uprising you believe that story has greater extension than what you read. I believe he has done enough world-building for me to imagine beyond that but I think that the sense that I have of the short story because you don't have to create a structure that the reader has to invest so much of their life reading it, you can present them with something that might reject if they knew it was more extended. The virtue of the story can be that its extension for the reader 2 or 3 weeks after they've read it can be as great as the novel if not more so. I'd argue that if someone reads a James Patterson novel or a Chekhov short story it's more likely that 2 or 3 weeks later they'll be able to remember more of the Chekhov, more small details, more sort of architectonics, all those sort of things. Some genre fiction is designed to evaporate. In short stories even if very little happens they can stick around, they can be more efficient at getting into the memory, so even if they are small they can expand. They are a crystallised form, an intense experience and that is what they distil it down to, it's not necessary to remember all the plot. There was that bit with a vase or a dog (7.23) So it's odd.

JR: So does that connect to the idea of the short story being about a single event or a very short period?

TL: I don't think it has to do that but I don't even think it has to be homogenous or drive to one end. That's a classical view of art essentially. I think with a short story you can do something else. We've all been trained reading the *Wasteland* as disparate fragments and then slowly seeing it as a whole, and a lot of 20th Century literature was about putting it together and making it a classical poem. And a lot of the time I think writing doesn't risk exploding as much as it should. For me the main difference between the novel and the short story is within the texture of the prose and the short story sentence operates with bigger gaps before and after it. The reader has to be a better reader but also make bigger jumps. Novels are more likely to fill in gaps and to create an effect that the reader is given everything that they need to know whereas the short story has to work by vast omissions. And I think that works on the level of paragraphs and syntax. When students have difficulties because they are habituated to the novel you have to say to them you need to trust the reader more and trust the reader more. You only have to say something once and the reader isn't going to miss it. (10:01) You only need to hint that it exists and assume the reader has got it. With a novel that can be too high risk.

JR: Two hundred pages later they need to remember the significant detail on page seven.

TL: I'm reading *Life: A User's Manual* at the moment (Perec) and I'm realising just how engaged I need to be it. It seems to be demanding that I'm engaged but I don't know if I miss a detail on page four I'll miss the point of the novel.

JR: Whereas you read a short story in one go, you don't need to remember the detail from a hundred pages ago that you read on the train last Tuesday.

TL: Absolutely not, and I think in a way we have a fake time relationship with novels as if we can stitch it up. Some novels or novellas can be read in one go but mostly you'll fake a relationship with the whole of it.

JR: So you are saying that a short doesn't have to be about a single character or a single event.?

TL: No, I don't, I don't think we can even assume that people will read even a ten page story in one go and ignore a phone or a beep. Most writers would hope they'll get that kind of devotion but you're not likely to get it.

JR: Yes and we often read on a device.

TL: The space of a paper page is not interrupted as easily, something outside has to disrupt it. One of things I think a short story can do is that it is communicating from the writer's subconscious to the reader's subconscious.

JR: That neatly leads into the next questions about readers and writers. I'll read the question, hopefully it's not leading... It would be useful to have a map of the short story showing its relationships to contexts. Here I mean reader, writer, the world at large. And the question allows the response to be strongly disagree, slightly disagree and so on.

TL: Right.

JR: So maybe something akin to what scientists have in The Standard Model. Most of the rest of the questions relate to one aspect or another regardless of whether one attempts to map them.

TL: Right. (14:02) It reminds me of syntactical mapping showing parts of sentences, connecting clauses. But that is analytical, but it's not very useful to a writer.

JR: I'm not even aware of that approach and I can construct entire sentences, a few of them are even quite good.

TL: Exactly, not that I'm dismissing that because I think that that kind of study...someone from Spain has just asked if they use *Corpsing* for a linguistic study (Litt's 2000 novel) and I'd be interested to know what could be said about that. If you trying to produce novels by different narrators it's hard to stop doing sentences in the way you write.

JR: I suppose all the characters will have some idiosyncratic way of constructing sentences.

TL: I would try but you'd need to attempt elude detection of one of those algorithms that attempts to pick out what has been written by Shakespeare.

JR: That has more to do with the mechanics. I'm thinking more about the text related to writer and reader – as the only two things connected to it then a series of other forces or aspects. This addresses the research question 'How do I know everything there is to know about short stories.' As a tool for this thesis I've made a sketch. The question is whether that approach is valid at all in understanding the short story.

TL: I think if I were to take a scientific view it's such a complicated system that you might as well think about it in a magical way.

JR: Because that's not how we write. So you can't really draw a map of the way Ballard's mind works when he's creating a world but you could argue there are elements of autobiography.

TL: But in terms of either his mind or his brain that's both speculative and belated. It's made up in that you aren't witness to it. I have thought it would be interesting to have my brain scanned while I'm writing. I assume it would look a bit like a thunderstorm with flashes of synaptic with flashes of lightning and that it's accessing bits that aren't used for riding a bike. In terms of a map I've tried to explain this as a teacher. What we teach is Newtonian physics, in other words there are laws of narrative say to do with point of view and this is how this works, these are things you should wisely use and the problems if you don't. But for me the writing is quantum physics and all of the physical laws that are asserted and all the things you can generally say are broken where you can have the same object in two places in

two places at once or can travel back in time or things that are essentially both a particle and a wave. (21:14). That seems to me the physics of what's going on is weirder but you can teach quantum physics, you can begin with Newtonian physics and then show that there is something else behind that.

JR: Which is more mysterious.

TL: It's further away from common sense. I tend to say these are the ways you do this but if you're really going to do it you have to realise what goes beyond that. It's not just about rule breaking, it's about existing within a different physics, but humans got by for a long time without Newtonian physics.

JR: And most of us have little knowledge of quantum physics apart from a couple of thought experiments like Schrodinger's cat.

TL: That was my analogy for the difference between what's going on in stories or in the understanding of them. So, my answer to your diagram is it would have to be a quantum diagram if it were to approximate to what's going on because I don't think it could be flat and static. All the elements would need to be broken down, there's not only the reader but reader broken down into the physiological reader. How do you account for the hairs standing up on the back of your neck for instance?

JR: And of course the reader is a function of their own cognitive, prejudices, interpretations and memories which may not be true memories and so on. So all of those need to be considered. (24:11) The other scientific analogy that I've played with is a hypothesis that there is something akin to dark energy in the short story. I talked about this at the short story conference in Vienna last year. So, the story goes, big bang, universe expands at a predictable speed and then suddenly speeds up. So two scientists have a chat and agree there must be some other stuff. How much stuff? 95 per cent of everything? Well, we'd better give it a name. And one student has invented a piece of software that finds Haiku in texts and had found this in the New Scientist issue about dark energy. 'We don't know what it/Is so we have to give it/A name a symbol; and the second one; After that it gets/A lot more speculative/But here's the best guess.'

TL: (laughs)

JR: So I wondered whether that is more the kind of thinking. Because it is speculative. Most of everything is made of stuff that we can't see or weigh or measure, can we have a few billion to build a machine to try and find it? And there's an image in the arts of someone sitting in a corner of the library poring over a few lines of text. So I'm wondering about the value of a grand unifying theory. What if I did that kind of thing and speculate that there is a force or essence. Is that something that you'd be interested in?

TL: Hm, I'd start by siding with the scientists. I know enough about Newtonian physics to use it as an analogy and I have read about dark matter I think in something like New Scientist, but it was made up of pop science of about 50 different scientists giving different views in a simple way. I think I would apply that in the sense that I edit a collection of short stories in many ways but one way would be to begin with Chekhov and Maupassant, those writers who are the classics of the short story in a very literal sense. The form had distilled to a recognisable point, it had a market, a recognition of what they were doing and begin there. Or you go back and look at the Epic of Gilgamesh or part of the book of Job and start chopping a bit out of the Satyricon and saying this is a short story because it's a tale within a tale and we can take that as a short story. In a sense both are valid one is based on the idea that this form has always been around, when someone tells a story to someone else it has the duration of that other person's attention span – however long they are able to spend. That means you have a limit and the chances are if you were to write it down it would be within the bounds of a short story, whereas the novel is an art form and its much longer, it's not the same as the Iliad or Dante's Inferno because those have mnemonic devices built in, they are in verse form and easier to memorise than Dead Souls or something. So if you look at it like Dark Matter you can say we didn't know about it. It was always there we just didn't know about it so let's give it a name and suddenly we can find it everywhere. Or it's so all pervasive that it's not worth saying, but as soon as you isolate it you can say this is the first time we've had dark matter in our hands.

JR: We've distilled it.

TL: Yes, and we can call it this. That's different to it being in existence because it's codified you can experiment with it. (31:00)

JR: And to understand that you would focus on the text rather than everything that's going on around it?

TL: Well I don't think you can separate them because there are so many social elements. Probably you need a bourgeois readership, are the people coming in from the fields going to want to sit down and read a literary magazine which has a seven page story?

JR: There's a quite a lot there about general ideas of science and modelling and I'm not going to be able to pin that down but there are lots of questions related to that about what I've called contexts, when the story was written, what's in the media. I think I can assert that only the reader and writer directly act on the story but there are all sorts of relationships here. So what do you think about that as a writer?

TL: I think you need to unpick what you mean by both reader and writer. Let's take reader. The reader is both individual and has a psychology and a subconscious and history and memories and physical things and a seat that may or may not be comfortable and a child in another room or a child who's died. All of those things, and they exist on multiple levels of being human and being social. They are engaging in a practice that they haven't invented. A lot of what they are doing is predetermined or comes within a form that dominates them.

JR: They are conditioned.

TL: That's putting it too much on an individual, they are part of a much wider society and history which involves certain cultural practices, one of which is the act of reading short stories. The thing is for me that the writer is trying to intervene in a turbulent way rather than just flowing along with the direction that cultural practice is already in. The writers that I value most are those seem to have done something that's as close to being not ahistorical but unexpected in their context. There's a kind of weirdness to their very existence whether it's William Blake or Franz Kafka or even Shakespeare and Milton in some ways. They are anomalous. They are doing something that given all the starting points they would seem to be completely unpredictable. And that gets almost to a mystical view or the Great Man view of history. I think that the individual, what you are looking at anomalies, rather than those who saw what the existing physics was and thought that they would behave according to it.

JR: George Bernard Shaw's unreasonable man. (38:05)

TL: It's like the Lucretius thing, what caused matter. If all atoms are all falling in parallel lines through infinity so he has to say there's the swerve. Suddenly one of the atoms swerves and hits another and that creates everything. As soon as one hits another there's causality but to say that everything is going along in one direction and then suddenly it isn't is not very defensible, it's a bit like saying God created the world. But what I read for in an uncanny feeling that something has gone beyond the constraints of what is possible, which is very different to reading to find out what happened between Martha and Bob.

JR: Or whether the butler did it. So when you are writing, and let's concentrate on short stories, are you conscious of deliberately forming a relationship with the reader?

TL: Honestly for different short stories, different things. I don't have a cohesive way of writing stories because I think the best ones will happen accidentally.

JR: Yes, I find that. I've written over a hundred short stories and a few of them are alright but I can't explain why this one works and that one doesn't. Maybe that comes back to your mystical thing. You can't say 'I'm going to use my model of constructing a story and I'll use my rule book.'

TL: You can't create the right circumstances which is why the romantics came up with the idea of inspiration and although that may not be a very popular or credible way of describing things but what it does include is an element of luck and the idea that there are moments as in sport where people perform better than they have before. There is a story I wrote called *The Bug*, short for *Call it The Bug Because I don't Have Time to Think of Better Title*.

JR: I know it, it's in the Comma anthology *Biopunk*, you use lots of brackets for the things you don't have time to write. I love that one. I wrote a review in which I talked about the personal nature of those stories. (41.44)

TL: Well that one was written in circumstances very close to those I describe. My mother was very close to dying and it was a performed story in the sense that I had to write it at that moment. The timescale was three hours. Now partly I write when in those situations which is unusual in that if I'm in a hospital waiting room in a situation where you might dwell on a situation I might do it writing. I won't necessarily publish or even re-read those things. I'll write in situations that are quite

extreme and I think that's more interesting than a neutral space where everything is ready and laid out. So the things that I've written that I think are the best are the things I've produced in the most extreme emotional circumstances.

JR: So here there is a direct relationship between the way the world is behaving towards you and your very specific circumstances at the time of writing and the creation of the story. And if I have all day I can't write, but when I was working in a coal-fired power station as a consultant, immersed in a steampunk novel and listening to alarms going off and I'm immersed in that. I can write better when I get home late at night about my mother's illness than if there's nothing going on in the day. Maybe there is something about that intensity of life.

TL: The thing is it's possible to do writing in those circumstances where if you clear time so that one day is much like another that's more what a novelist does to maintain some kind of regularity.

JR: Yes, it's that idea of writing 500 words a day.

TL: You couldn't find people that work on short stories that. I think in some ways it is a bit like bands that do their best stuff when they don't have a wonderful studio and a large amount of time. They do the best stuff when the circumstances aren't ideal.

JR: I can think of circumstances where I've performed in professional circumstances when I've come up with the best answer when there was no time and bad circumstances.

TL: That's the thing I think that doing particular things changes you. I'm writing about sport and long-distance swimming for example changes you physiologically. It changes how your brain works, but there are commonalities when you are talking about performance. You can earn a lot more money from performing in sport but the same things would hold true of anything. Some people, when it comes to the final pot in a 147 break would panic and others that at that moment would do it better. It's similar to completing a work of art and not fucking it up.

JR: I like your idea of putting yourself under pressure.

TL: It's when you take the person who is capable of following a plan and put them in a situation where there is no plan and they have to improvise. Then that is the point

at which you are likely to get the most interesting things happen because they can't use pre-existing solutions.

JR: So think about that in the your most recent collection *Dear Life*. Did you write them in different ways? I know some are older stories.

TL: There were written roughly the order in which they appear in the book. There were some where I had to fill in gaps because I had this ramifying structure where every time there were two characters in one story each would go and have another story with another character.

JR: Yes towards the end I was wondering whether there was a novelistic thing of needing to remember how everyone was related to each other and I decided to let it go and allow a more subliminal thing to happen. So I decided to treat them as individual stories.

TL: That's how I expect it to be read. I think some of the stories in that were more that I was I writing within my known capacities.

JR: Like 'I need a story to fill this gap.'

TL: I was trying to push the stories. The further I go into the book the more fragmented it becomes.

JR: Towards the end you have one story with just sketches.

TL: And of course that's because all that character has is sketches.

JR: There is a feel that you are being experimental as it goes on from fairly domestic situations towards ever more strange ways of telling the stories.

TL: Yes, but in terms of the *John and John* story, that's probably the one in that where I got closest to what I've been describing in terms of having... I think I could not have written that story by planning it. I could only perform it and the idea was that what I was doing was a mental farce where different thought streams, thinking about meditation, thinking about porn, thinking about flights, thinking about the woman downstairs. They come in the way characters come in in a farce. His brain has become farcical. I don't know how retrospectively I've been clearing that up, but I had to do it in one and I needed to get it right in one.

JR: So was that a case of letting your mind wander?

TL: Well no, I was having to do more than one thing at once. I had to have his brain

running and also be in control of the story. I've had an idea for a long time that I haven't read a good account of reading and I tried to write an essay about it which was called reading. To pick apart what goes in at that moment. You are aware of the ache in your knee at the same time as you are aware of the characters and you're getting visuals of them and the light in the room and you are also aware that the writer has just used the word corpuscular and you are also aware that you've got half an hour before you catch the train, all those things at once. People have written novels and even philosophy about people's presentness but I hadn't really read it for reading so that story was another go at that even though it's not about reading. It's very difficult because it happens so fast to recall the sequence of distractions say within a 15 minute meditation, because you become very aware of how quickly things come and go.

JR: There's that thing with David Foster Wallace where if you actually extrapolate every thought in the moment, the amount that you think is astonishing, overwhelming if you notice it all. There's a scene in Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* where a man stands in a lift for a chapter. There is that sense of expanding the moment in *John and John*, probably only a few minutes have gone by. So that is more you responding to the environment.

TL: In terms of the writing I remember that I sat down and wrote it in two hours or so, but I couldn't have plotted it according to the Newtonian version of writing that story. I had to trust that the quantum things all happen. The vast majority of things just fizzle out. (1:03:12)

JR: I'm conscious that now I've started to be able to edit that I can kill a story by over editing it. Is that something you are conscious that if you write more spontaneously?

TL: On a practical level I think that but again I've written a lecture about this. I draw a comparison with playing jazz. The only people that can do that are superb musicians who can transpose mentality. All of that stuff needs to be under your fingers. It's a similar thing you need to be expert to let the thing flow. Hubert Dreyfus wrote about Heidegger, this is what explains why Heidegger is a better way of talking about what actually goes on with being and time with say how a tennis player can hit a shot than a philosophy that has to slow down time not just in order to

analyse what's going on, but it's almost as if the number of things that the brain would have to do to achieve that would be too many in the infinitesimally small amount of time they have to do it.

JR: Yes, so your four jazz musicians deciding to switch to a minor key and planning and communicating that would be impossible.

TL: But they will know, it won't even be a problem.

JR: So you need to know every scale in every key to be able to riff.

TL: They would talk about it as expression of something that came out in the room. And I've been reading about sport, there's that quote from Gary Player 'the more I practice the luckier I become,' that's exactly the same idea. Truly excellent ball players are in control of flukes. They are so intimate with the minute movements and where it all falls down is when you become conscious of what you are doing.

JR: All of which goes quite a long way from where we started, but this is the most interesting part of the research. So let's think again about the relationship between what's going on in the world, the media – wars, immigration. Today's headline was about migrants travelling in a limousine to The North at a cost to the tax payer of £3,000. This stuff is going on while I'm reading and while I'm writing.

TL: I assume that our way of understanding the world is not only historically limited but it's almost certainly wrong. We spend a lot of time looking back at people and laughing at how deluded they were thinking that a volcano exploding was an angry god or that four humours dictated their mood or that light moved through the ether. We have a delusion. And what is news? What comes to us through the media? It's not just distorted it's a common view or an assimilable series of events somewhere you're not most of the time. To me I want to take it in but give it as little attention as I can so I can figure out what's likely to be less deluded about what's going on. So the things do to with asylum are very much about point of view and if I was to script it what happened with the body on the beach it was impossible to de-individualise that image. [This refers to a news story in recent days about a refugee washing up which became the iconic image of the plight of thousands trying to cross the Mediterranean into Europe] Suddenly people put themselves in the position of the parent of that child, someone who was prepared to cross the sea to safety. But all those things are heroic but it's harder to turn away the border heroes that people that

are going to cause problems or cost money so it's the way that story is told. In terms of what effect it has I think to write off a news agenda is, in a way, to accept the rules of the game we don't really want to play. A practical example was there was a train accident years ago where it was such an inferno that the bodies were unrecognisable. Simultaneously about 5,000 writers in London decided to write a story about someone who was meant to be on that train but decided to get off. It wasn't worth writing unless you were to fuck with it in a significant way.

JR: So it only works if you are opposing the prevailing view?

TL: Well the prevailing view is the prevailing view because lots of people are doing it. All you'll do is join in with that. If you attempt to at least try another way. I'm sure lots of journalists would say that's what they are trying to do. But it has to fit within a form that is prescribed because people can't finish a news story and go, 'What? What was that I just read?' With a short story they can go 'What was that' It was a story by Donald Barthelme in the New Yorker in 1966. They might think 'This is a different thing' and then it has an effect. For me I can't see the point of not trying to do impossible things or at least trying to push against what is do-able.

JR: Let me ask you the extent to which you think that is a personal thing. As a writer this is your personal philosophy. So what about autobiography and this idea of the writer's only voice, differentiating you from the next writer. Is there something to be said about that being your unique view of the world?

TL: Again it's a very complicated thing. I can see things in my own autobiography in the way I grew up and the people around me. (1:16:00) I had a feeling that I had nothing to say or was coming from a place that was not sayable – whatever came out of Bedfordshire that anyone wanted to read? A lot of people might say that about themselves. I've been writing about this recently. What made me different was the extremity of how much I feared that I wasn't different from other people and the lengths to which I'd go to use writing to not be the same which would be in a sense agreeing on a common view of reality.

JR: So from perceiving yourself to be ordinary you forced yourself to be different?

TL: I felt that I was. Simultaneously I felt that I was extraordinary. Most five year old boys think that they are exceptional and heroic and the closest thing to them was Superman or the Hulk

JR: And that is reinforced by the information they receive from the world.

TL: There's a sense that we are all central absolutely central and we are the starring role in our universe.

JR: Yesterday I was teaching *The Character of Rain* by Amelie Nothomb and in that she describes in the first person the way that Japanese culture treats children up to three as gods and she talks in the first person about being a two-year-old god.

TL: So it's that I couldn't see in what was around me the stuff I needed. I thought I was in the wrong place and I much preferred the fictional worlds that I started to get into, Star Wars and so on.

JR: Are you guilty of borrowing things?

TL: Of course!

JR: I can empathise with that. I've had the most unremarkable life. I left university, put a suit on and drove around in an Audi for 25 years. Nothing really happened to me. The delight when I found that my chemistry teacher from school had been convicted on various counts of abuse. My first thought was 'I'm going to acquire that!' I may have had some vague awareness that the corporal punishment was going a bit far but it wasn't significant in my feelings. Now I could say, 'Right, I'll have some of that' and that allows me to say why I was so very miserable and why I'm angry at my parents now. I'm justified by acquiring this thing that happened in my time to other people. And again it's a very personal choice. So did you ever think you could borrow things like that 'I could have been that guy' or does that go back to your thing about the train crash?

TL: Well, yes all the time but in a very basic way I envy everyone else for being them and not being me. How do they have their being in the way they do and I often would like to swap places but that's because of the delusion that they are self-consistent because you see them from the outside.

JR: I have the exact same feeling. Every time I come into one of these university rooms [the meeting is in Litt's office at Birkbeck] and I look at the libraries and I look from the outside at the lives of these writers and I don't just think that's where I want to be, I think that's *who* I want to be. But I don't know all the stuff that isn't apparent on the surface, the turmoil and tragedy of their lives.

TL: And I think I realise that's a shared experience that everyone's sneakily thinks that everyone else has it easier than them. What I'm doing is scrabbling around trying to find some desperate way of getting through to be a person and everyone else is a person. I started to examine that and it turns out that you do have a subject, that the lack of subject or the difficulties of subjectivity are equally valid. Obviously an adventure story about a man that wears a suit and drives around in an Audi for 25 years is not great. But the subjectivity of that can be as valid as any other.

JR: Yes, he has a perspective. There is an odd world. I know every junction of the M6 because I've spend a lifetime there but there is something linear and each junction has a memory and I've written about that. And then you can be more surreal and have a man pushing a piano up the M6 or only existing on the M6, all sorts of things. So what is incredibly dull to me might be a strange fiction to someone who lives in London and uses public transport. It's an alien world to them. So that autobiographical thing goes to the theme of only voice. It seems that me you, he, she are each a writer in a unique and different way and that informs the story. I'm not sure how to encapsulate that except that when I've tried to say there might be an essence, whether I look at place, time memory, reception theory I can never get away from the writer because if there's a war or a story about immigration it can only make its way into the story through the filter of the writer.

TL: Except most short stories haven't achieved that singularity...

JR: Careful – another scientific analogy...

TL: I mean in terms of the writer has got to the point that a sentence by them is identifiable and the way they address the world is distinctive. And if you generalise about good writers that's not true of writer per se. Why are people doing writing courses? They are trying to get to a point of writing where no-one writes quite like them.

JR: But by studying the great writers there is a homogenisation, the MA writer. I know writers who mimic Carver.

TL: What you get is a mass of competence. It's the limits of competence that have to be dealt with. If people aren't prepared to risk going beyond competence to actually write something the chances are that they write something embarrassingly awful and

lead to loss of status, but they are more likely to write something that achieves escape velocity rather than what they know can be done.

JR: I had feedback at Lancaster. I'd written a satirical story about a dystopian world in which we need to put salt in the water to survive and the salt seller demands sexual favours because he has such power. I was torn to shreds, one guy made a five-minute speech. It was described as 'irredeemable'. Then you get someone like Anneliese Mackintosh who was on the short list for the Edge Hill prize with you. She's clearly decided to reveal all and has overcome that fear. There's an element of that in *John and John*, that confession of the thoughts you might have.

TL: Or actually had. But I've let that go. I'm not sure if I've answered that already but if you generalise from writers who are at the stage you call good writers that doesn't apply to all writing and there are lots of stories written that are forming a mass from which they are not going to escape

JR: Like an MA factory.

TL: And people far away from that, but what I was saying about what I was trying to do was an element of desperation not to be in that mass. It's about what prompts writers to do what's necessary to get away from that. So it's like the sports thing of doing so much of it you get away from that, the 10,000 hours thing.

JR: I edited a Chinese student's essay on that, the thesis was about factors that affect sports performance and in skilled sports like badminton it is known that the 10,000 hour thing is true but there is simply a thing where a huge number of people reach competence and a tiny number excel. The example is Jahangir Khan who didn't lose a game for several years and a friend of mine, who's a serious squash player, said that technically there was very little between him and many other top players. I like your thought of performing the story, like improvised jazz, it's about breaking out from the knowledge.

TL: That's the context within which I explain that. I'm not saying I'm inspired by the muse or that God has descended but there is a Dionysian view of what will make art happen. It's a thought process I can analyse but what I've been thinking about sport and writing.

JR: We've wandered in all directions but this is a dynamic process that might itself help to understand how writers think. Let me ask you the Columbo question. What's the one thing that defines the short story, that you feel about the short story?

TL: I'd say truancy. It plays truant to the world or to respectability or to where it should be and I know there are novels that do that to but a novel is more dutiful it has to be more obliging to the reader. A short story can be many things but it can be wilder and less where it's a sensible idea for it to be.

JR: And if I can begin to make one conclusion from this research and I'm coming to the end of it, I can say there is something unique about each writer. I think I can conclude that how I experience writing, how I do writing is something personal to the writer.

TL: Yes.

JR: Which almost negates all the other things about structure.

TL: I think I try and write some things in a way I am incapable of writing because I'm me. So I'd want to write in a way Victoria Abbott or someone else. I other myself to make the language more interesting than if it came out of me.

JR: I'm not at that stage. There's a grumpy middle-aged man that narrates a number of my stories.

TL: But I think it's that escape from your being in the way you anticipated it be. It's more interesting to me if I've written something if I don't know where it's come from.

JR: I'm trying to do that now with a story that gives a voice to that chemistry teacher and I really have a sense that I'm not in control of what he's going to say and it will either be worthless or the best thing I've ever written because it is more risky. I'm not in control. He ends up saying things that astound me. So maybe I should do more of that othering.

TL: Lots of writers don't write that way, but it seems to me the only way of writing something great.

JR: Well I've really enjoyed that. I've no idea what I'll do with it but there's certainly some interesting material. (Recorder off.)

Interview Notes John Rutter / Adam Marek 14 October 2015 (1:19:40 recorded)

Note: This was in a small café and the recording device detected everyone else's conversations and sounds of coffee machines and so on, so there are a few gaps especially towards the end. AM read a transcript and made small edits and corrections.

(Intros and chat before turning on the recorder.)

JR: So there's a series of questions and I was going to be quite orderly about it but really these are just prompts for general discussion of the theme of the only voice and the relationships between the world at large, reader, writer and text. So the thesis is about all the things outside the story itself. And I'll transcribe the whole thing and give you time to add or comment. Can I start with a question about the next collection?

AM: Well I've been working on a novel for about 3 years but I'm writing short stories in between as well so I've got a third of a collection together and they will be themed. Whenever I've written, if I've been commissioned to write a story I've made sure they're connected to that theme. So it will be a themed collection like *The Stone Thrower* was.

JR: Yes there was a strong feeling about all the horrors of parenting.

AM: Yes, so my experiences of parenthood all come out in those. It's a rich seam of inspiration. So I start with my own experiences and build fantastical worlds around them. (Marek 2015)

Yes, so my experiences of parenthood all come out in those. It's a rich theme of inspiration. So I start with my own experiences and build fantastical worlds around them.

JR: So that idea of fantastical worlds, where does that come from. I remember at the London Short Story festival you said Murakami is an influence.

AM: I grew up addicted to science fiction films. I was exactly the right age when *Star Wars* came out and I love all those fifties B movies with rubber aliens and flying saucers on strings and I love the lo-fi ...

JR: Which is something you used in *Testicular Cancer versus the Behemoth*...

AM: Yeh, and all my family were massive horror fans so I grew up surrounded by that and in my family when they talked about books they always talked about the horror books they were reading.

JR: I remember all those black and white Peter Cushing Hammer Horror films that look quaint and old-fashioned now and I remember finding them genuinely scary.

AM: So they were all big fans of James Herbert and Stephen King and Dean Koontz and I started reading those from a very early age. Having absorbed so much science fiction and horror, whenever I sit down and write it always ends up being through that lens. Whenever I'm writing about mundane ordinary things like family life and relationships, something monstrous or fantastical always walks on the stage representing the conflict of their situations.

JR: So there's something about your own environment causing the way you write. What about real events and real emotions? Particularly in the Stone Thrower I get the sense of the horrors of parenting, school, other parents.

(noise...)

AM: I think when you are a parent you feel extremely vulnerable. When you're a child and all through your teenage years you develop a thick skin to defend yourself against the world but later as a parent there's a part of you that feels armourless.

JR: There is the story about that, the armour being taken off the child... (*Without a Shell*)

AM: Exactly. I worry about them and what the world will be like for them. There's suddenly this feeling of incredible vulnerability. My first son had all kinds of medical complications when he was born and he has learning difficulties so he's a very vulnerable kid. There have been a lot of painful moments and I'm thinking how am I going to help him to get through.

JR: And I part of that anticipating the things that might go wrong?

AM: There was genuine horrible shit going on but at the same time...

JR: But that's exaggerated by being able to imagine what else might go wrong.

AM: Yes that's a down side of being a writer is we are always running on overdrive, you always imagine how things can go wrong. As a writer you're not looking at

people when everything is all rosy and lovely, you're thinking what can go wrong here and it's really hard not to do that with your own life.

(noise) missing sentences (9:45)

JR: So the first part of this asks about theories and what has been said. Is there a unifying theory? So both in terms of what's been written and as you now do both as a writer, what do you see as being different between the short story and the novel. What's your opinion about theories.

AM: In terms of?

JR: In terms of what's been said.

AM: We talk a lot about short stories, we don't necessarily give a second thought to how that fits with other literary forms.

JR: Is there something more self-effacing about short story writers?

AM: I think short story writers are like the outsiders, the gang in the corner of the classroom wondering why we're not as popular as everyone else but the silly thing is (...noise...discussion of festivals) (12:00)

We don't need everyone to love short stories we need an audience and that does exist, it's a thriving industry.

JR: So what about theoretical differences then?

(noise) (13:05)

AM: I think as soon as you start to generalise about what a short story is you can find 100 examples that don't do that but I think on the whole short stories take a moment in a character's life, a moment of change and as close to the end of that moment of change as possible to get the maximum intensity in the shortest space possible, whereas with a novel it's about development. It's about change over a longer period of time or over a small period of time but through a series of changes and you can draw a graph like Kurt Vonnegut.

JR: Yes, I've seen those videos - very dry.

AM: I think the short story just takes one of those points in the graph. It's about being all compression and getting the maximum amount of narrative in the shortest

time possible, but I think the ones that work really well...Angela Carter said about the short story not being minimalist but being rococo. It's just takes it tiny moment but it's about the detail.

(noise)

JR: There are various books and collections of essays about the short story, what's your view about that?

AM: I don't know, I don't read any of them, not at an academic level. I've never studied writing formally. I didn't study English at university, I didn't even do A level English. I just love reading.

JR: Other people have said something quite similar...

(noise)

AM: It's the same way as learning to drive. You can't learn to drive by watching films about someone driving you have to sit in the driving seat and actually do it. When you are looking at something critically you are looking at it from the outside. But you can't write from the outside you have to be in it. The best gift a writer could have would be to be able to see their story as if they'd never seen it before. But it's impossible because you are always inside it

JR: I'm a much better editor of other people's work.

AM: I don't know whether I read lots of theory I'd have lots of extra tools in my toolbox. I doubt it. Fiction is my interest and I follow my own curiosity. If I was to spend a lot of time looking at other people's theories that could be quite damaging to the creative process. I wrote for nearly ten years until I had my first story published. I learnt by practice.

JR: I had a story published by Unthank and owing to the file name was 79 Green Gables and I can always tell the story that it was the seventy ninth story I wrote and there are several drafts of each.

(noise)...Poe 'Write a million words'

AM: Yes and there's the ten thousand hour thing.

JR: That's the second time today that's come up.

(noise)

AM: That must mean something.

JR: I'll have to write it. Story number 136 Ten Thousand Hours.

(noise, digression about the film The Hours)

JR: So theories, you're not keen. So if I suggested we do something like the scientific approach of having a Standard Model. To what extent would you agree or disagree with that idea?

AM: You mean like a structure of what makes the short story?

JR: So it might have the story itself, the reader, the writer and so on. Is that a valid idea?

AM: It would be an interesting exercise. I'm sure you could draw lots of stories that follow the same principles but there would never a unified theory that you could apply to all of them, if you could find some physics that applies to all stories you'd be a very wealthy, happy man.

JR: The other aspect of that is if I suggested something like dark energy in the short story.

(noise) We don't have that approach in short stories.

AM: There's a reason writers are driven to write. Some might write for material things like to please other people or make money but there's a drive in everyone to do that a natural desire to make things manifest. (noise) We're always driven to write something about what it means to be human beings. Maybe at a genetic level we have a need to be on this mission.

JR: Could it be argued that there is some essence to the short story or is that nonsense.

AM: Well it depends whether you're talking about the story itself or the creative urge itself. I guess we have all grown up with storytelling whether that's parents gossiping about the neighbours or going to the cinema, we communicate through story and we have basic structures that are hard wired and to break that. If we try to break out of that and write something completely different, firstly it's very difficult

and also it might be unpopular because they don't have the reassurance, they need to appreciate the story on some level to enjoy it.

JR: Which is always difficult with speculative fiction because people might not get what's going on.

AM: So the way the story is told is still with basic storytelling rules. Stories move through time, they describe events. I see the story like there's a camera on my head.

JR: Yes, so there's the story where you address the reader 'Come with me and watch the boy who's stolen the fish being chased'. (*Dead Fish*) That's very cinematic.

AM: The writer's job is to transmit that film as faithfully as possible and the words are the code. The more ability and skill you have the more faithful that is in the head of the reader.

JR: That's very relevant to this relationship between the reader and writer. (noise)

AM: And I don't think it's more difficult with speculative stories than with more ordinary prosaic stories, you're still coding events and time happening to characters. The trick with writing fantastical stories is to suspend their disbelief. For me the first story I read that did that really well was *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka.

JR: And in the first paragraph we are happy to believe that he has turned into an enormous bug. (31:10)

AM: Because he's ...to the other details in the room. He injects a surreal element in the story by not giving it the same level of attention as he does the other elements of the scene. He describes a photo and the floorboards.

JR: Yes, so how does that work with Carver? (noise) Is he still doing the same thing?

AM: He's still got to make you believe in the characters. Carver's characters are still real but they never feel like caricatures, he's never patronising. Maybe that's why he is still so loved, they are real people, you can see their struggle. It's down to the details he chooses to describe their actions and their behaviours that make them so real.

JR: I read an enormous biography by Carol Sklenicka where she more or less catalogues how the stories relate to his real life. (noise) And I've got a photo album

edited by Tess Gallagher called Craver Country where you can see the actual gazebo, the hotel, the blind man in Cathedral and the street where this happened.

AM: What's that called?

JR: I'll email the name of it. So he makes a relationship with real events. There's one where he and Cheever have got horribly pissed and are driving to get more booze in the morning with one of them hanging out of the moving car and the real story is exactly the same.

AM: Amazing

JR: But he still has to transmit the truth of that event through the detail, whether that's an ashtray or next door's lawn mower.

AM: The trick is to use telling details. We only actually notice a very small part of everything we take in like when we buy a new car.

(noise, talk about buying cars?)

JR: ...Yes, we filter out.

AM: So the writer's job is, you've got this film in your head and you could write a whole novel of details but you have to consciously filter out what is relevant.

JR: So the only other direct contact with the story is the reader. You must know Salinger's short stories?

AM: I've read For Esme With Love and Squalor

JR: There's a story A Perfect Day for Bananafish.

AM: I love that story.

JR: I put it on a list for a workshop as recommended stories. The context of that story was that Salinger saw a newly liberated concentration camp when he was in the army. I didn't know that when I first read it when I was 21, there was no internet, so I didn't find this out until I read it again at Lancaster University four years ago.

AM: Yes

JR: So I know that the innocent conversation with the child (noise) and his wife representing post-war American optimism and when I discussed it with readers that had read it for the first time this year I was told 'It must be about child abuse.' The

current context prevails over the historical one or even the clues in the story. So there is something about the reader. So I'm asking whether the story is independent of history or bound to its time.

AM: Well I don't think there should be a definitive answer or solution to the short story. A lot of short stories don't have a neatly tied up ending and it's common to have an open ending that frustrates some readers and that's why they aren't for everyone that's why you need to be open to their ambiguity and not to have all the answers. So with the Bananafish story I didn't know about the camp.

JR: I only knew because I was doing the research.

AM: I still love that story and I don't think Salinger wrote it expecting people to get what it was about, it's very well concealed.

JR: And it stuck in my mind for 25 years and re-read it because it struck me but I most certainly didn't know the background. So I didn't know and you didn't but we both loved it anyway. And that goes to my argument that there is something that the writer puts in that comes from himself. Also when I read *The Stone Thrower* I wasn't researching you and I didn't know any biographical background but I got a powerful sense of something emotional coming from the writer that isn't quite explained by the text. I had no idea of your circumstances. So I might guess that there is a theme of fear for children but I didn't know the specific information about your older son. I still get a sense of the emotion of it.

AM: The way short stories work best is when they don't have to approach their subject matter directly, when they approach it obliquely. I'd never write a story that went straight into it. I have it glance off it or circle around it. There's a sense that there is something, but you don't want to say explicitly what it is.

(noise)

JR: Yes, when I've been obvious about the point it's led to rubbish short stories.

AM: Indirectness and obliqueness is the key. (noise)

JR: Do you think there is a shelf life for a short story.

AM: I think even if they are very time specific they become even more relevant as they become older they are a window into another time like a historical artefact.

Depends what you are writing about but if you are writing about social situations then 20 or 30 years later the reader might not get the context. It might be impossible for someone to read 50 years later.

JR: When you read *Dubliners* you probably need the notes because there are so many places and colloquialisms but the stories still resonate. When I read Ballard there are references to Hubble that have to belong to that time and an assumption that we'd all know what Belsen means when nowadays many people won't. My Dad went there when he was on national service and everyone in the sixties would know what it meant like 9/11 now.

AM: I don't think you could ever write that you'd ever avoid it's time.

JR: Yes, even if you write imaginary future worlds that relies on the knowledge at the time of writing. There's an E.M. Forster story *The Machine Stops* about 100 years ago that has everyone living in boxes communicating via screens like Skype. At the time the television and computer hadn't been invented. Some sci-fi has to be read like historic artefacts.

AM: I love the covers of the old sci-fi magazines like *Amazing Stories* and (...?) In the twenties and thirties people were talking about travelling to the moon and I love that version of the future, it's so much more charming than the actual sterile waste that space is.

JR: There is something magical about that old sci-fi.

AM: There's a need for it to be accurate. (noise....) The anthologies that Comma have done link to real science (noise)

JR: So I suppose science fiction needs a rationale to it whereas your stories have one weird element but could take place in Bedfordshire.

AM: Yes, I'm interested in the aesthetics of fantasy and science fiction and applying those to everyday situations (noise.) I still get the same feeling now when I think about robots and zombies and (...?) that I felt when I was a kid and I want to get that same tingle of excitement when I write about real human experience.

JR: And sometimes the two things just neatly fit together. (noise...) How do you know that B movie *Godzilla* and the man coming out of the cancer clinic fit together?

(noise...Last Christmas...Nightjar...noise)

AM:...The thing that makes the story is conflict in one of the three layers. You still need to know what the characters conflict is...

(noise)

JR: (noise...) So the most mundane thing is set against one unusual thing.

AM: (noise)

JR: Is there an advantage that you only have one scene in a way you can't in a novel...(noise)

AM: Yes in a novel you are obliged to tell a lot more about your situation. In a short story you can get away with a lot of practical considerations by shoving them under the rug. (noise...discussion of baby story Last Christmas) (59:00)

JR: So you don't need to explain why there are electronic wasps.

AM: No, the main character wonders the same thing.

JR: But you don't bother answering that.

AM: He doesn't know the reader doesn't know, I don't know, it doesn't matter.
(noise)

JR: ...so we are allowed to believe one strange thing. 1:01:10

AM: yes I think if you stick to changing one thing.

JR: And Ballard said almost the same thing. All of which is partly related to the questions. (noise) Is it necessary for the reader to be aware of the context? I think we've answered that with the Bananafish example. Let me ask you about the conflict between the writer's intention and the reader's interpretation.

AM: You have to have an intention but once you've released into the world you have to allow the reader some room to interpret it themselves. If you don't you'll be writing an article.

JR: So you can't just make a statement about how awful that whole parental competition thing is. You have to write a story about Tamagotchi.

AM: Give it a context. You never tell the reader, you just show the circumstances and let the reader see it.

JR: I'm still guilty of pointing it out.

AM: And it can be very irritating for the reader if you spell it out. It's your job to show the events and let the reader interpret it and they won't all interpret it in the same way. It's satisfying to carry on wondering about the story afterwards. They can play in your mind. (noise) ..in some short stories that sense of incompleteness is just enough that it feels like a pleasurable irritation. (noise) JR:

AM: If you're used to reading novels it can be very disappointing not to have a clean ending but that's what makes short story lovers short story lovers.

JR: So in this relationship do you think the reader is more or less important than the writer? (1:07:25)

AM: It's a partnership. You haven't got the space to tell everything. You give the reader the dots and it's their job to join them together.

JR: I suppose you could argue that the story doesn't exist until someone has read it.

AM: Like the tree falling in a wood. Does it make a noise if no-one hears it?

JR: So there is the thing about the implicit. You've said a lot about leaving things out. Let's come back onto the autobiographical aspect and see if that links to the idea that 'only I could have written it.'

AM: In all of my stories there's an element of emotional experience in there. You can't actually say that's an actual experience, everything's mutated but it's built around real experience. I think that's what gives the story tangibility and plausibility. I think it would be very hard to write a story when you haven't experienced any of it in any way. We can only build the story from our own experience. We have millions of pieces of experience in our brains and we cut little pieces of them out to make a sort of collage that is the story and make it look as seamless as possible. But we can only use things we have experienced in our lifetime.

JR: That's an issue that concerns me teaching undergraduates. Some of them may have suffered tragedy but they have comparatively little to draw on.

AM: But in that example, yes maybe not much has happened to them but they are the most qualified to write about being their age.

JR: Maybe the undergraduate can write more accurately. I'd never written anything at all until I was in my forties and when I opened the treasure chest there's lots of material in there so maybe there's an advantage to that. The challenge is finding a way to add in that element that's not real, your idea about indirectness otherwise it can be a bit of an essay.

AM: Yes, you have to not have any ego about your writing and you can't use your fiction as a soap box to talk about your position about the wrongs of the world or to get something off your chest.

(noise)

JR: So if I said to you what's then one thing that defines the short story or the essence of the short story. What's the most important thing? (noise)

AM: Conflict is the most important thing in a story. Without conflict there is no story. It has to be entertaining and deliver an experience to your reader. It has to hit some kind of emotional level with the reader. If you fail to move them emotionally or titillate them intellectually nothing in the reader has changed so it has to have those things.

JR: But it has to revolve around conflict.

AM: All stories are about the character wants something and something gets in the way and it's all about watching that friction. What changes in their life through time as they try to overcome that conflict or are crushed by it. (noise) (1:17:00)

JR: Okay, I kind of agree. I've no idea what I'm going to say at the end but at least I've gathered some interesting opinions.

AM: Sounds like you've got an interesting piece of work.

JR: Definitely. Everyone has different thoughts but there are some patterns emerging so it's a bit like your composting idea, that Carver's influence takes a long time to break down (this refers to AM speaking at LSSF saying that the literary influences were all combined together like a compost heap but sometimes there's a writer like

Carver of Haruki Murikami that is like a pumpkin and takes a long time to be absorbed into the rest). Do you have any recent or new favourites?

AM: George Saunders.

JR: I've just been reading Tenth of December and I wasn't as overwhelmed as I expected, maybe because he'd been built up so much, and I'd read David Foster Wallace so maybe it was less astonishing for that.

AM: I've spoken to a couple of people that have loved a couple of stories but not others. I read Pastoralia a few weeks ago and that's just an amazing collection so I really love him.

JR: I'll add it to my list.

AM: He's got a very particular style, that's definitely his own...Saunderan Saunderish?

JR: Well there is such a thing as Marekian, I'm sure I've read that!

AM: Well feel free to spread that around.

JR: I think we should stop on that note.

Recorder off. Thanks etc.