

Small Fissures in Reality: The ‘Artifice’ Short Story

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Abstract

My thesis has two components: 1) a collection of eighteen original short stories entitled *Mayflies*, and 2) a critical work, which proposes a definition of the ‘Artifice’ story structure, examines the techniques used by its authors, and reflects on my own Practice as Research.

Artifice stories feature one impossible element introduced into an otherwise normative context, whereupon one or more characters adapt to a new fictive universe. The structure was originally proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Todorov does not give a name to the Artifice story; I instead take the term from Ra Page’s introduction to the short story anthology *Parenthesis*: ‘Some stories have such a high content of artifice or unreality [that] they offer themselves as an immediate sub-species [...] — the ‘Artifice story’ — the archetype of which would have to be Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’” (Page, 2006: iv). Page himself borrows the term from Jorge Luis Borges’ use of ‘Artifices’ as the title for Part Two of his collected stories: *Fictions* (Borges, [1965] 1998: 93-152).

My collection of stories forms an original contribution to knowledge as a) original creative works, which intrinsically contribute to the short story corpus; b) experiments in the Artifice story structure, and c) occasionally, to demonstrate what *does not* qualify as an Artifice story, testing to destruction my proposed definitions. Accordingly, the collection meets the National Association of Writers in Education’s benchmarks for Practice as Research, ‘that the creative writer will undertake this research through the act of creating; that they will invest knowledge and

understanding into this practice, and that they will develop their knowledge and understanding through their practice' (NAWE, 2008).

While the Artifice structure recurs in the work of many prominent short fiction writers of the past hundred years (Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo, Ted Chiang, Hassan Blasim, et al), it has so far evaded definition and investigation as a distinct form. The critical section of my thesis constitutes an original contribution to knowledge by defining the Artifice structure, by analysing archetypal Artifice stories and their narrative mechanisms, and by considering the form's sub-species and genre hinterlands.

The thesis, as a whole, will address the following questions:

What are Artifice short stories?

What *aren't* Artifice short stories?

What are the different kinds of Artifice short stories?

How do Artifice stories work, and how do I go about writing them?

Keywords

Todorov, artifice, fantastic, short story, magic realism, Irrealism, poetics, metaphor, allegory

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Mayflies

Green Boots' Cave

1.

As night falls on May 14th 2006, David Sharp reaches Green Boots' Cave, a shallow overhang of rock on the north-east face of Everest, 450 metres below the summit. It's known as Green Boots' Cave because the body of Indian mountaineer Tsewang Paljor lies very prominently here, face-down in the snow: his legs, in lime-green climbing boots, splayed at the entrance among discarded oxygen bottles.

This is David's third attempt. He's twice before turned back within a few hundred metres of the summit — conceding to the weather, and to depleted oxygen. This time he's climbing alone, with no Sherpa assistance, no radio, and only two small bottles of oxygen for emergency use. The night is closing in and he must decide what to do.

Perhaps he halts now at Green Boots' Cave, in the hope of getting through the night on what oxygen he has, and making a summit bid in the morning. Or maybe he pushes on and gains the summit, then descends to the cave to shelter as the temperature drops. Let's say he does, because we cannot know, and why deny him this? Let's say he makes it and then climbs back down to huddle beside Green Boots. It's here, sitting with his hands clasped around his knees, his hood up over his head, that David freezes to death.

This is where you come in. As he freezes, David begins to dream, and he dreams that he is you. It's not like the dreams people have when asleep — those lurid, anxious, magic-lantern shows of things just out of reach. This is a vivid and complex dream of your whole life, in real-time, from your birth, right up until where you are now — whatever circumstances led to you read this story. Consider the following:

The tiny worlds you made, playing on the floor as an infant. The first time you realised you were clever. When it felt as though the world was revealing its secrets to you. When the chasm between who you hoped to be and who you are began to open.