

## New Australian Stories 2



*New Australian Stories 2*

Ed: Aviva Tuffield

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With this second, large offering of short stories (36 examples of the art), Scribe is indicating a commitment as a publisher to add to the regular anthologies now available to Australian readers. Among the many writers I had not previously come across, there are also a number of familiar names.

My only criticism of this collection (and I will get it out early) is that not all the stories are 'new', having appeared previously in other publications. Such is the case with Paddy O'Reilly's *HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY*, which appropriately opens the anthology (it was previously published in the journal *Southerly*). It is the shortest piece in the book, structured like a cake recipe; it is very tongue-in-cheek.

The next shortest piece, *INDIGESTION* by Peta Murray, is about real food and the over-eating of it. Though well under

1000 words, it tells a complete story and introduces us to a believably flawed character.

At the other extreme (of length) is *EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE* by Fiona McFarlane – almost 6000 words. Such length allows for more in-depth exploration of events, character and motivation. Fiona McFarlane does this wonderfully and, as a bonus, leaves the reader wondering how s/he would have handled the situation being portrayed. The story might even have some readers feeling righteously angry – a moral dilemma has been presented and one possible solution offered.

Some of the writers are well known, such as Tony Birch (*AFTER RACHEL*), Cate Kennedy (*STATIC*) and Marion Halligan (*IT'S THE CHEROOT*). Tony Birch is a master at creating a sense of place, so that the characters seem more real as they move through 'the set'. He also gives the reader access to small details which enliven the story, such as the pool of water left on the kitchen bench by a container of frozen soup. Cate Kennedy masterfully creates a story to make the reader squirm with uncomfortable recognition as she recreates the quintessential family Christmas gathering. Marion Halligan's story is a whodunit set in a tiny, insular community on a river, with more twists to it than a snake (the story, that is).

What this collection demonstrates admirably, is the diversity that is possible in this far-from-homogeneous form. Difference in writing styles, in the use of grammar, in punctuation; some contain unfolding narrative while others are like a huge canvas that the reader takes in at once and then explores in more detail; some are serious and others painfully funny.

Georgia Blain (*FLYOVER*) tells a sober story of people looking for connections – with others and with themselves – and growing up in the process. A G McNeil's *RECKLESS, SUSCEPTIBLE* is another serious exploration of relationship.

In any short story collection you are bound to find writers writing about writing – for example *WRITING [IN] THE NEW MILLENNIUM* by Debra Adelaide – and writing about words – *FOUR-LETTER WORDS* by Ryan O'Neill – and, of course, there is the opening 'recipe'. Titles can also be misleading: *FOUR-LETTER WORDS* is about much more.

There are stories which explore relationships with fathers: an overbearing, sadistic one in *THEORIES OF RELATIVITY* by Chris Womersley; an absent one in *HOW MY FATHER DIES IN THE END* by Patrick Cullen; a father encouraging a 'weak' son to stand up for himself in *PAPAS' LAST COMMAND* by Jane

McGown; on holiday with an adult daughter while his wife is on life-support in hospital in *HARRY* by Emma Schwarcz; a son discovering his father's desperation and hollowness in *BLUE WATCHES* by Brooke Dunnell. Each of these (except *HARRY*) takes the almost always fraught father-son relationship and examines an aspect of it. *FOUR-LETTER WORDS* is also in this category.

Two stories specifically involving mothers (*THE GOOD MOTHER* by Kate Ryan, *LOUIS* by Claire Aman) explore issues from the mother's perspective and what it takes to be a good mother, or to feel failure.

There is a story of strange relationships with non-existent animals (*THE CATS OF UNSPEAKABLE KINDNESS* by Sonja Dechian) and with the owners of missing animals (*REWARD OFFERED* by Jon Bauer). In *MOTH*, by Jennifer Mills, insects feature as metaphor in a story of a young girl's jealousy of her baby brother; this story is brilliantly conceived and executed.

Sibling relationship and loss also feature in the heartrending story *INSEPARABLE*, by Melissa Beit. Another story that had me stop and reflect was *BIRDSONG* by Myfanwy Jones, which paints a picture of a man who lost part of himself in a devastating bushfire.

A number of stories deal with young women trying to make sense of life: a 'prematurely' pregnant one in *THE WAY WE WED* by Anne Jenner and a fifteen-year-old who is thwarted in her pursuit of a boy in *LIKE A VIRGIN*, by Tegan Bennett Daylight.

Infidelity, real or imagined, and triangles in relationships also feature in *NO ONE SPECIAL* by Peggy Frew, *FALLEN WOMAN* by Jane Sullivan, *OUTBACK* by Ruby J Murray and *TALES OF ACTION AND ADVENTURE* by Mark O'Flynn. Some hint at betrayal and in some the betrayal is real.

Two stories (*FIDGET'S FAREWELL* by Scott McDermott and *LEAVING THE FOUNTAINHEAD* by Zane Lovitt) are dark tales of revenge and retribution and are written in styles reminiscent of private eye novels. The first has a clear moral, the second doesn't.

*THE SIXTH CYCLE* by Jacinta Halloran (a Melbourne GP) explores a relationship that grows out of a shared health challenge and the relationship with Self that develops at the same time.

The remaining stories explore relationships in different ways. *PARTING GLANCES* by Susan Midalia is, on the surface, a travel tale but is really about a woman's searching for meaning in her connection with those 'back home', especially her favourite nephew. *THE PLACE BETWEEN* by Julie Gittus is about the possibility of a new relationship. *BLACKBIRDS SINGING* by Karen Hitchcock explores a woman's desperation in seeking acceptance and recognition. The collection closes, fittingly, with *THE TREES* by Lesley Jørgensen – a bitter-sweet tale about the end of life and about love.

This collection brings together many examples of fine writing and storytelling. There are invitations to laugh and many to reflect on our own lives, our motivations and our interactions with others. It offers many hours of enjoyable reading.