



## Geneviève Brisac

France

### « The most important five minutes » or « Free diving »

**Geneviève Brisac** is a writer. Through the publishing house Editions de l'Olivier, she has published *Week-end de chasse à la mère* (Prix Femina, 1996) *Voir les jardins de Babylone* (1999), *Pour qui vous prenez-vous ?* (2001), *Petite* (2001) and *Les Sœurs Délicata*, (2004). She has also devoted several essays to anglophone literature, such as *Loin du paradis, Flannery O'Connor* (L'Olivier, 2002) and *La Marche du cavalier* (L'Olivier, 2002). Geneviève Brisac has equally written for young people, and devoted a work to Virginia Woolf in collaboration with Agnès Desarthe: *V. W. ou le mélange des genres* (L'Olivier, 2004).

#### « Short Stories : le choix des histoires courtes »

**Frédéric Boyer (FR),  
Geneviève Brisac (FR),  
Kirsty Gunn (Écosse),  
Thomas McGuane (USA),  
David Means (USA)**

Mardi 28 novembre à 19H30  
à l'Institution des Chartreux  
(58 rue Pierre Dupont - 69001)

#### English version

Translated from the French by  
Mireille Vignol

« In days gone by man imitated the patience of nature. No longer are all these stubbornly persistent productions - enlightened, polished or sculpted stones - created. Time passed or else time didn't matter, as Walter Benjamin said. Man succeeded in abridging the narrative and we witness the invention of the short story, the one we write while the washing machine cylinder is turning, or while the children are playing in the square. Valéry remarked once that a weakening of the idea of eternity coincides with a distaste for lengthy tasks. The novel is battling against time, titan against titan; the short story is written in apnoea. Doubt blends with the mystical. It's about capturing life. »

**Geneviève Brisac**

“Observe perpetually” was the advice Henry James gave Virginia Woolf, who then added “Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable.” She further advocated writing down the second life unfolding behind the official one, mixing laughter and cries, inventing new forms of writing; lighter, more durable. As a faithful disciple of Woolf, I decided one day to follow her recommendations. “Observe”, I kept telling myself, “the second life”, “invent new forms”: isn't that the goal – acknowledged or not – of any writer?

I must point out that I had just come out of a terrible depression and understood the meaning of observing one's own despondency.

I had been working on a Big Novel for several years. I say these words deliberately and seriously. Well, almost. Everybody was mentioning the Big Novel. “You'll have to get around to it”, I was told by truly well meaning people. “Stop writing short stories, the French don't read them. Forget about the feminine, intimist, navel gazing little novel, show us what you are capable of, dare – as Woolf also wrote of Jane Austen – to face the world, go out of the home, out of the confined world of women and family, drop the kids and enter the army of Letters, commit yourself, think of Joyce, Faulkner, the great novel is polyphonic and political.” Et cetera. As it turned out, I did have an idea that I decided



to put into practice. My novel was within grasps; I titled it *The Commitment*. It was full of characters and complex plots and subplots, with a backdrop of controversy over globalisation in literature, marketing, plate tectonics between the North and the South and the adaptation of the literary scene for the screen. The whole lot was joined together through the archives of a great dead writer. But something was wrong. I was bored. I was putting in the hours – well, more or less, you know what writers are like, always prone to procrastination – but I was bored. I put my knowledge of contemporary literature to good use. Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, Günter Grass, Vikram Seth, Philip Roth, Jeffrey Eugenides, V.S. Naipaul, Ian MacEwan, Jens Christian Grondahl, Russel Banks and even Zadie Smith, not to mention my favourites: Jay MacInerney, the dark and shattering J.M. Coetzee and Richard Ford himself... they all paraded around a swimming pool in Tuscany, where I had set the plot in which they confronted a librarian and her ghost. The whole thing remained lifeless – Pinocchio was still but a wooden puppet. So I did what I assume any relatively honest writer must do in such circumstances: I dropped the project, focused on my ordinary fears and was knocked down by the depression I mentioned earlier on. Then I wrote an essay about women in literature, about their way to be out of kilter, their elliptical sense, their sense of humour, the way they breathe so differently, as Woolf also noted, their rhythm. Our own very demanding duty to simply be who we are, which is so difficult to achieve.

I reread Grace Paley, for her talent in making pure fiction sound like a spontaneous yarn. She seems to be recounting a story, while in fact, she is making it up. Her visits to her old father, her meetings with an ex-husband in the street – hi, honey! – sound like Isaac Babel's short stories, with the presence of life, thoughts, rebellion, poetry and laughter, all undividable. I reread Alice Munro, who with her generous and powerful imagination portrays better than anyone the determining moments in life, when everything turns upside down for fathers and daughters, for tired couples, for children. It may be a revelation during a car trip, a long period of waiting in a motel room, one disappointment too many or a deadly sentence. I thought about a comment by Isaac Babel: "Tolstoy had it in him to describe what happened to him minute by minute, he remembered it all, whereas I, evidently, only have it in me to describe the most interesting five minutes I've experienced in twenty-four hours. Hence the short-story form..." He then explained the process of polishing up the rough story, word by word, sentence by sentence, until the right sound gushes out, and he concluded with the famous: "No iron spike can pierce a human heart as icily as a full stop in the right place."

I reread Ludmila Ulitskaia, her poor parents, her love stories in the cat suburb of Moscow. I reread her stories to try and understand how she could give such life to a little girl in love, to the texture of an old blanket under the stairs, to the embarrassing presence of a bitter cousin, to the memory of a missing button on an overcoat, to the smell of a pearl barley soup. I realised one day that all these women who nourished me with their stories and were bringing me back to the light, were telling short stories, some shorter than others, but still: short stories. And I couldn't figure out why. I decided to make



a list of my reasons. "It's what you don't understand about what you know that makes you write", said Grace Paley. I took notes: catch life in its most ridiculous details and its tragic funniness, seize the most important moment, find one's own breath, avoid boredom, but more than anything polish up the sentence. I searched through my bookshelves, so terribly messy, that trying to find a book is like opening the Bible at random to search for a sign and I found a Walter Benjamin text commenting on Paul Valéry's writing.

"This patient process of Nature was once imitated by men. Miniatures, ivory carvings, elaborated to the point of greatest perfection, [...] —all these products of sustained, sacrificing effort are vanishing, and the time is past in which time did not matter. Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated... [...] We have witnessed the evolution of the short story."

Yes, I thought with a thumping heart, here's the story you write while the washing machine spins, or while the children are playing in the park. The story you write between two trips to school, a doctor's appointment and the deadline of a job to bring food on the table. The story conceived in the bus. The story women write because their brain, like their life, drifts in parallel, handles several thoughts at once, and because she carries several worries and several beings in her heart. I remember the diagram explaining the phenomenon from physics class; it had to do with resistance. A web of mixed and harrowing feelings surrounding us, our mothers, our girlfriends, our brothers and lovers, our children. It surrounds, nourishes and exhausts us. What happens to them every day, my God, every single day: thousands of tragedies. Men have learnt, over centuries and centuries, to split and separate, to mind their own business first, but we are caught unaware so we have to let this mayhem, this complicated stream of thoughts, compassion and rage, come into our books... and as it happens, it actually defines modernity. This big bloody mess, this opaque and contradictory complexity makes the assertive style of the great novel untimely, perhaps even deceitful. I think the short story is written in the same way in which a film is shot, with close-ups, because the world is increasingly incomprehensible and simultaneous to us. Honesty is the paramount quality. Writing short stories – well, some shorter than others – does justice to the apprehensive impotence which overwhelms me when I think about my daughters. Should we date the feeling? I remember my enthusiasm as I was copying out theses on Feuerbach, a long time ago: the question was no longer to interpret the world, but to change it thoroughly. We were so confident, I thought. I still do wish to change the world, but I've since learnt that God likes to play jokes. And may offer epiphanies. And also that a full stop in the right place can act as a lever and shake the foundations of the world.

Paul Valéry observed once that the weakening of the notion of eternity – alongside with a feeling of understanding – coincides with the resentment for long tasks. The novel fights against time – titan versus titan – while the short story is written as a free dive. No breathing apparatus. Between two slamming doors. It nevertheless requires obstinacy, rigour, and an intermingling of mystic and doubt. It's about catching up with life, which demands cunning, tact and



humility.

I kept reading. Katherine Mansfield with her fragile landscapes, Jean Rhys, the queen of fleeting and embarrassing feelings and Salinger the comforter. My sorrow was imperceptibly vanishing; I resumed work.

"I heard you're writing a book of 365 stories" said Tova curiously. I felt embarrassed and alarmed at the huge number. "I'm writing one story a week, I answered timidly. So it will be more like 52. To show, to exhibit what's swarming underneath, the obscure world of thought, fantasies and stories like seaweed, or like fish revealed by an oblique ray of light. All the things I don't know how to live myself, all the things I don't know I'm living."

I felt stronger. Blame it on the seaweed.

"Stories are always oblique, you understand." I myself did not understand a word I was saying.

I had written absolutely nothing all week. Well, it had been a fortnight, really. You wouldn't believe how time flies when one is not writing. One lifetime, one second.

"That's still a lot, she said dreamily. One per week. Do you manage ok?"

Tova is a writer. She knows it's impossible. Writing comes and goes. Bang. The boat gets stranded on the beach. Dry.

"Sometimes I write two", I answered, blushing. "What matters is to have fifty two of them at the end. For the book."

I had just understood what I was doing. It was a fresco resembling Carpaccio's, in the church San Giorgio degli Schiavoni... a novel, like those of Ingo Schulze, made of bits and pieces – a mosaic.

G. B.