

reclaiming *the story*

Once it was essential to British fiction; then it vanished; now it is back. Very briefly, **Alexander Linklater** explores the turbulent life and times of the short story

A COUPLE OF YEARS ago, *Prospect* began publishing short stories regularly. It was hardly a revolutionary move. It may in fact have been a conservative one. It was, in one sense, a harking back to the principles of the Enlightenment and Victorian periodicals which originally gave rise both to the essay and to the literary short story—two of the foundational forms of modern prose. *Prospect* was launched a decade ago as a magazine of the essay; it represented no great leap for us to become a magazine of the story too.

Yet in another sense, by running with the short story, we are kicking against a herd mentality among magazines and publishers. At some time during the last 20 years, the short story came to be viewed in Britain as culturally redundant and economically unviable. One minute literary people were reading VS Pritchett or Angela Carter, children were growing up on *Jackanory*, and Roald Dahl's *Tales of the Unexpected* were a household favourite; the next minute, the whole idea of a "story" had become somehow embarrassing. What went wrong? Two things, at the same time:

First, British literary journals ceased to matter. Gone are the days when a fine, small magazine such as Ian Hamilton's *New Review* could foster an author such as Ian McEwan who made his name through his stories. Brave attempts are being made by recent publications such as *Zembla* or *Wasifiri*, but the only creative writing magazine of genuine importance left in Britain is *Granta* which, arguably, is not even a literary magazine, being broader than that in its range of narrative journalism and general non-fiction. Of this type—the high-end generalist magazine—*Granta* is joined only by *Prospect* in running short stories in every issue.

Secondly, and crucially, the bottom fell out for short stories in the popular—and particularly women's—magazine market. Back in the 1980s *Cosmopolitan* could give 12 pages in an issue to fiction, and almost every lifestyle magazine on the stands ran stories. Then, in the 1990s, they were wiped clean off the pages of the women's glossies. Today, some editors will tell you that their readers remain as passionate about fiction as ever, that the curious phenomenon of the book club keeps booming, and that their customers might well read stories if offered them. But the mass market won't now bring back short fiction unless there is advertising to go with it, and

publishers couldn't afford those rates even if they wanted to promote story collections—which they don't. They say that only a novel will make a writer's name in Britain.

It is different in America. Overleaf, we publish a Raymond Carver essay from the 1980s in which he makes a case for precision over diffusion, and for the story over the novel. It is an argument for the story as a universal form that is still taken seriously in the US. America can sustain niche industries, of course, because of its size. But there is nothing especially "niche" about the nearly one million copies of the *New Yorker* that get sold every week with a work of short fiction in every issue. There was nothing niche about the recent publication of the 833 pages of John Updike's stories (and they were just the "early" ones). And there is nothing niche about the way

US publishers will discover new stars in their short story writers.

Still, there is no shame in the idea of the story as a specialist taste. In an introduction to a new collection of the best stories from his own niche literary magazine, *McSweeney's Quarterly*, Dave Eggers has some fun at the expense of Europe, and its bland literary mainstream-ism: "This is an endless source of fascination for us here in the United States: the seemingly unmitigated

indifference the rest of the world feels for short fiction. Even in France, where they like their novels short, they do not like their stories that way. How to get England and then Europe generally to love the short story, and thus foster many literary journals and new writers? Should we use some sort of threat of force? This is the main idea we export in the US, and we are thinking it will work in this instance as well as all others. Here it is: you must love the short story, and you must start your own many literary quarterlies, lest we bomb you and your people, and invade your shores, and send mercenaries to fight your insurgents. To our friends we will call it a crusade. To the rest of the world we will call it liberation."

The light mockery is nicely placed. It is not an invitation for our writers to ape theirs, only a reminder that stories need places to be read. In Radio 4, we have the world's largest broadcaster of stories. But broadcast slots alone will not develop the story as a form. The prize we launch today is meant to achieve three things: to focus attention on the form, to acknowledge the storytellers we have, and to help make it happen for those we don't yet have.



National Short Story Prize

This month we announce the launch of a major new annual award designed to honour Britain's finest story writers and to re-establish the importance of the short story as a central literary form

The National Short Story Prize will be the largest award in the world for a single story

- The winning author will receive **£15,000**
- A runner-up will receive **£3,000**
- Three others will each receive **£500**
- The shortlist of five stories will be broadcast on **BBC Radio 4** in advance of the winner being announced in May 2006*
- Two winning stories will be published and distributed free by *Prospect*



The prize is open to authors with a previous record of publication who are either UK nationals or residents. Entries may be stories published during 2005—or previously unpublished. Stories may be submitted by publishers, magazines, writers' agents or writers themselves. See bbc.co.uk/radio4 for details and an entry form, or send a stamped addressed envelope to: The National Short Story Prize, Room 316, BBC Henry Wood House, 3 & 6 Langham Place, London W1A 1AA.

*Subject to BBC editorial guidelines

The panel of judges will include novelist and short story author William Boyd, broadcaster and writer Francine Stock, Radio 4 executive producer Di Spiers, author and Nesta fellow Lavinia Greenlaw, and *Prospect* deputy editor Alexander Linklater.

The National Short Story Prize 2005 is a collaboration between *Prospect*, BBC Radio 4 and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta). It is administered by Booktrust and the Scottish Book Trust.



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