

TESTIMONIO. Nuala Ní CHONCHÚIR



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BIOGRAPHY

Nuala Ní Chonchúir was born in Dublin and lives in East Galway. She holds a BA in Irish from Trinity College Dublin and a Master's in Translation Studies (Irish/English) from Dublin City University. She has published three novels and three poetry collections. Her third novel, *Miss Emily*, about the poet Emily Dickinson and her Irish maid, was shortlisted for the Bord Gáis Energy Eason Book Club Novel of the Year 2015 and longlisted for the 2017 International DUBLIN Literary Award. Nuala has published four short story collections and one flash fiction collection, *Of Dublin and Other Fictions*. Her fifth short story collection *Joyride to Jupiter* was published by New Island in June 2017. Her fourth novel, *Becoming Belle*, will be published in 2018 and she is also working on her fourth poetry collection.

NUALA O'CONNOR

Flash fiction, like the short story, requires new thinking on behalf of the reader, particularly if that reader normally gets her prose hit from novels. The reader of flash needs to know not to expect the comfort blanket of the long prose form – multiple characters, chapter after chapter of main-, side- and sub-plot, acres of purple prose and wads of exposition. Like the poem, the flash story has visible edges and its beauty lies in the fact that it's designed to be inhaled in one gulp. But this is a slow gulp, a drowsy swallow, where the reader revels in language and action, rather than rushing past to get to the next bit and the next.

The flash reader needs to learn to decelerate and loiter, to let herself stall in the heart of the flash story and wonder about the greater, bigger things that are being alluded to within the story and outside of it. Of course, this linger can't last long – there isn't the space or time to get lost in the body of a flash as the reader might in a longer prose piece. But the flash reader learns to savour the word-by-word joys that good flash offers. In flash, words have particular status, substance and symbolic power – they are bigger than mere meaning, they have to work hard and dazzle. The flash reader learns to watch for the words chosen for their intensity and musicality, the words or themes that appear innocent and/or accidental, but that are sewn like golden thread through the narrative, a stitch here, later, a revealing stitch there. The committed flash reader begins to know that she is meant to savour the judicious use of rhythm and repetition. She learns to appreciate and absorb the swift, economical absence, the hint-laden plot (if there even is a plot). As Rolli said: "Flash...can't be skimmed. Skim and you'd miss everything" (Rolli).

A flash is a blink in time, but an important one, an honest one. And the reader needs to feel that there is life beyond the story. Yes, we can see the flash's perimeters, but the reader should understand that there was a before and there will be an after. And the writer is lucidly choosing to leave things out and concentrate on a white hot moment in this character's life, an unrepeatable event. As Kit de Waal has noted "what the flash will do is cut the reader a slice of time and say: 'Look what happens here and you will know the rest'" (de Waal). Flash are often elusive *because* everything is not spelt out. Suggestion and omission are the order of good flash – the reader has to notice, and think about, the things that lie beyond the story's borders. What has been cleared to make space and let in light? And how do these omissions illuminate what is inside the fence? In each flash we read, what is, as Robert Scotellaro would have it, the "something unsaid that swells" (Scotellaro)?

The good reader watches, too, for where the flash turns and takes flight. Reading flash though similar to reading a short story, is more like reading a poem. The experienced flash reader (and writer) knows that, similar to poetry, a flash story will offer up a moment of oddity or inventiveness that makes the whole piece sing, sting and reverberate. This is the turn and it can be accomplished with great word choices as much as with an instant of revelation. It can also be achieved with a hint, or a moment so quiet it barely registers with the reader; this is the art of showing just enough. But that clue or insinuation, no matter how fleeting, is there, gleaming and certain, and it is important. Luisa Valenzuela says she likes to compare flash to an insect that is "iridescent in the best cases" (quoted in Shapard). Valenzuela's shimmering beetle is that instant in a short-short that holds an odd, transitional, insightful moment that flashes its beauty coyly.

The best flash fiction is like the aftermath of a small explosion, its dust clings to us, the ears ring, the story's form ghosts through the mind at random times, reminding us that it happened, it exists and that it wants to be remembered. This lingering effect is exactly why flash calls on us to re-visit it. As a reader, I love to be suspended in the atmospherics after reading a flash. The fiery moment that is the core of a good flash burns into my consciousness and the millisecond I come to the end, I want to go back to the start. I want to feel it again – the light, heat and brilliance – but I also want to find what I missed, see what treasures are still to be found inside the story and outside of it. Russell Banks has described the ending of a flash as “a radical resolution that leaves the reader anxious in a particularly satisfying way” (quoted in Shapard) . This question-raising anxiety, or frisson, is what propels me to re-read a flash I have only just read. It sends me back, too, to old favourites. There always seems to be new things to see and to apprehend when I read a piece over and over.

Flash revels in concision, in cutting back and honing. As a writer, I'm with Francine Prose who wrote of the satisfaction of having a “sentence shrink, snap into place, and ultimately emerge in a more polished form: clear, economical, sharp” (Prose). This sharp economy is what I look for from myself and from other flash writers. It's not something I have to chase hard for personally: brevity is my thing; I am concise and neat by nature. I like small objects: miniature glass whales, tiny ships in bottles, those 2cm plastic babies you find in American toy shops. And I've long been a fan of the small artwork that conceals a multitude: the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The concise novellas of Steinbeck and Baricco. The intimacy of a Georgian lover's eye portrait. The precise short-short fiction of Robert Olen Butler, Amy Hempel, Grace Paley and Lydia Davis. The flash writer works on a small scale, but there is nothing slight here, rather everything is whetted and compressed to convey a large impression from a modest, concentrated centre.

In flash fiction the author's intention must be crisp and sharp. Every move the writer makes is visible – it is not possible to deceive the reader. There is no room for rambling thought processes or extraneous words; everything is here and now. The short-short story writer needs to use apt, interesting language – so crucial in flash. She must love the possibilities in language and learn to fashion remarkable sentences. She must aim to have words within the story that surprise, that are at once conspicuous but also seamlessly woven into the narrative. Flash is no place for pedestrian prose. The flash writer becomes adept at plucking and hoarding new words wherever she finds them. Often she is a dedicated reader of poetry.

One thing that both writers and readers of flash agree on is that it's a difficult form to define. Pamelyn Casto tells us that flash:

runs the gamut: it can be clever, whimsical, and entertaining, or can be literary, ironic, satirical, or sublime. It is sometimes funny, and sometimes controversial or unconventional. It can be troubling, unsettling, and unpredictable. Sometimes it is enigmatic, elusive, ambiguous, and is quite often paradoxical. This type of story is often rich in implication and is tight and precise, compressed and highly charged. The best stories often speak to us obliquely, and speak of the human condition in a profound way – in truths that cannot be seen as clearly in other ways. The best flash fiction lingers in the mind long after the story has been read, the way of all great literary works of art. (Casto)

Flash may be evasive, malleable and hard to define as a form, and it certainly supports the surreal extremely well, but that doesn't mean abstraction (taken to

extremes) always works. The writer of flash must learn to be definite and daring, beginning with her title (as readers and writers we must never take titles for granted). The flash writer then has to work hard to make sure something happens in her story. She concentrates, finally, on her last lines and leaves the reader with good intent. Her ending will resonate; it may be abrupt or ruminative but it should make the reader gasp a little. With luck, the moment that reader finishes reading a flash, she will be moved to go back to the beginning and read it again.

In a letter to a friend, WB Yeats wrote that “a poem comes right with a click like a closing box” (Yeats 24). The same could be said of flash: when as writer or reader we hear the last sentence – hear the box click shut – and we take it in the context of all that has gone before, there is a sense of rightness that descends, a sense that we have just witnessed something profound, and that something is art.

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