

Flash Fiction by Bronwyn Mehan



Flash fiction is not new. As award-winning UK flasher, Tania Hershman¹ says, it was not ‘invented by the Internet generation to fit onto a tiny cellphone screen or to suit increasingly hectic lifestyles’. Jorge Luis Borges, Margaret Atwood, Richard Brautigan and Raymond Carver all produced flash fiction and Lydia Davis, whose short-short stories are in some cases only a sentence long, was awarded the 2013 Man Booker Prize.

What is flash fiction? It is a very short story, usually under 1000 words. It goes by many names such as micro or sudden or postcard fiction or short-short stories

Who writes flash fiction? Those for who find the short story isn’t succinct enough. Flash fiction is contained, limited – even more than in the short story there is no space for unnecessary words or punctuation. Flash fiction is set out like prose and is usually, but not always, punctuated into complete sentences.

For some Flash Fiction writers, the emphasis is on fiction, or narrative. *Gotham Writers*² for instance, warn that ‘Flash fiction doesn’t give you the permission to skate by with an anecdote or a vignette. You still need to adhere to the demands of story: crafting character and conflict, increasing the intensity of tension, and building a story arc. It’s still a short story—just shorter.’ For others, the definition of Flash fiction is less rigid. The aim is for writing that is not just pithy but also edgy or quirky. In the best Flash Fiction, there is no spoon feeding, the Flash Fiction writer trusts the reader to fill the gaps, to sit with unresolved endings and ambiguity. For some, like Joanne Burns, Flash Fiction is a close cousin to the prose poem, sharing its conciseness and breezy vernacular³.

Who is publishing Flash Fiction? Right now in Australia, the form is flourishing, especially on-line (Cordite, Mascara) and in magazine format (Seizure, Going Down Swinging, Kill Your Darlings) and a handful of small press such as Giramondo and Puncher & Wattman publish collections of Flash Fiction. (Please see Opportunities for publishing section for details).

The Joanne Burns Award

The short story press, Spineless Wonders, which is run by UTS alumni, publishes the only annual anthology of microliterature (including Flash Fiction) in Australia. Since 2011, it has auspiced an award for microfiction and prose poems in honour of foremost Australian experimental poet, Joanne Burns. A former UTS Creative Writing teacher, Joanne has been particularly concerned with the blurring of the distinctions between poetry and prose in her work, and has written extensively in prose poem/ microfiction forms. Her poems have appeared in numerous Australian literary journals, poetry magazines and have been set for study on the Higher School Certificate syllabus. The award is open to people residing in Australia and to Australians living overseas. Finalists chosen by each year’s judging panel are offered publication in our annual anthology alongside invited writers.

Three Spineless Wonders anthologies, *Small Wonder*, *Stoned Crows & other Australian Icons* and *Writing to the Edge* include flash fiction as well as prose poems of up to 800 words. The forthcoming, *Flashing the Square*, produced in collaboration with Melbourne video artist, Richard Holt contains pieces up to 200 words. Twelve of these, including the one below by UTS academic, Kirsten Tranter, will be flashed onto the large screens at Federation Square during the Melbourne Writers Festival.

Turing Test Study Guide

Sweat. Don't sweat. Try too hard to relax. Forget your robot friends, their lilted gait. Wrack brains for quotation from Romeo and Juliet to add to your response to question 5; just leave it. Revert to even more citationality. That is not what computers do. Make a pentameter by accident while claiming that you are not writing verse. Hide your machine heart, broken, present a bouquet to the judge.

Study. Don't study. Be yourself, don't think of who you were this morning, or how strange your feet seemed seen in a strange bathtub. Suppress that nervous laugh, or at least leave it out of the teletype. Remember the apt quotation from the Sonnets, but get it wrong, just; you will seem less intelligent, but more human. That is the aim of it. Don't claim the sky is blue beyond compare. That is just the impossibility trope. Come up with something more original. Bare your analog soul, machine heart, broken, roses tattooed down the arm.

Here's another flash from forthcoming 'Flashing The Square' which is an example of the more narrative style.

Hold-up

Rain scuds the late-night servo. A van in a parking bay, bearded driver asleep. A car at a pump. In the shop, Mrs Mac's pies sit in the warming box. A man in a hoodie thumbs through girlie mags under the white light. As the car leaves the pump, he fronts the counter. The attendant's palms rise. Empty the till, says the hoodie, waving his pistol. Okay, says the attendant. It's not. Is it? Davo? Morton Primary? Shut up and give me the money. Okay, says the attendant. I remember now. Fish paste sandwiches. When I didn' bring me lunch, ya'd share. Ya had the best sandwiches. Meanwhile the van driver wakes, rakes his beard. Climbs down and heads for the glass doors. At the sight of the gun he backs off. Whattaya need it for, Davo? the attendant is saying. Ya hungry? I can give ya a pie. Take a pie, Davo. Go on. As the van driver pulls out his phone his hi-vis vest gleams. It catches the hoodie's eye.

Spineless Wonders was founded by Bronwyn Mehan in 2011 and is run with the assistance of two other UTS alumni, Linda Godfrey and Julie Chevalier. www.shortaustralianstories.com.au

Notes

1. <http://www.taniahershman.com/thewhiteroadflash.htm>
2. <http://www.writingclasses.com/WritersResources/AskTheWriterDetail.php?ID=126>
3. <http://shortaustralianstories.com.au/the-joanne-burns-award/>