

## **‘As if on a magic carpet’:**

### **An Interview with Vanessa Gebbie**

Vanessa Gebbie is author of two short-story collections – *Words from a Glass Bubble* (2008) and *Storm Warning: Echoes of Conflict* (2010) – the novel *The Coward’s Tale* (2011), and the poetry pamphlet *The Half-Life of Fathers* (2013). She is editor of *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story* (2009, 2013). An illustrated flash-fiction collection, *Ed’s Wife and Other Creatures*, is forthcoming in 2015 from Liquorice Fish, a new imprint of Cinnamon Press; two flashes are included in this interview.

Gebbie’s stories have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals, including *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, 3.2 (2010), 5.1 (2012), 6.1 (2013), and 7.1 (2014). They have been broadcast on BBC Radio and have won awards including a Bridport Prize, a Fish Prize, and a Willesden International Short Story Prize. They have been translated into several languages. Her novel was a *Financial Times* book of the year, and her poetry pamphlet was among the *Times Literary Supplement’s* best pamphlets of 2014. She has been awarded an Arts Council Grant, a Hawthornden Fellowship and a Gladstone’s Library Residency, during which she was judge, along with the editors of *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, of the Library’s ‘Mystery Lady’ Flash Fiction Competition. In 2015, she was judge, again with *Flash’s* editors, of the National Flash Fiction Youth Competition.

Gebbie has given flash-fiction talks and workshops around the United Kingdom. Her non-fiction includes: ‘Fireworks and Burnt Toast: The Process of Opening Up Your Writing’, in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, ed. Tara L. Masih (2009), and ‘Leaving the Door Ajar: On Short Story Openings ...’, in *Short Circuit*.

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**Peter Blair and Ashley Chantler (PB and AC):** Vanessa, could you please say something about how you came to write flash fiction?

**Vanessa Gebbie (VG):** Writing flash fiction was, and still is, absolutely crucial to my development as a writer – an ongoing process. I initially wrote a lot of flash with other writers to tight time constraints, inspired by prompts: a single word, phrase or a line of poetry. I found a great strength and a creative buzz in knowing that unseen others were tackling the same prompts at the same time. The concision, the need to examine every word, was a great discipline. The creation of character through hint rather than description was a great skill to learn. Now, I find I will approach a difficult piece of work in exactly the same way. Sometimes, the result will crack the problem and lead on to better work. Other times, I get a half-decent flash – so that’s good!

**PB and AC:** *Words from a Glass Bubble* and *Storm Warning* contain flashes and longer stories. When you start a story, do you have a potential length in mind? What makes you go beyond, say, 500 words?

**VG:** I didn’t have a length in mind for the pieces in either of those collections. The stories would find their own length and were either submitted elsewhere or filed away and retrieved when the time came to pull a collection together. The collection forthcoming, on the chocks, is a very different one – *Ed’s Wife and Other Creatures* was deliberately written as flashes, all on a theme.

When you ask what makes me go beyond 500 words – I can’t answer, I’m afraid. My novel, *The Coward’s Tale*, started as a flash that won a competition. But it didn’t feel right leaving it at that, for one reason and another, so the flash grew and became a short story, ‘I Can Squash the King, Tommo’. That won Second Prize at Bridport in 2007, then it didn’t feel right either, so it carried on growing, and grew over time until the novel was there. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? It wasn’t! All I can say is, it didn’t feel right to leave them short. For me, much of writing is to do with what it feels like.

**PB and AC:** Many other stories in your debut collection, *Words from a Glass Bubble*, also won prizes in competitions, and were first published in anthologies and literary magazines. How did these early successes shape your career as a writer? And do you think they've influenced your writing itself; for example, did they make you more conscious of the demands of readers?

**VG:** Perhaps it is important first to differentiate between non-professional short-story comps with unknown 'judges' and those that are professionally run, with named judges, those competitions which tend to have the attention of the literary establishment – I was lucky enough to be guided by tutors towards the latter.

These competitions were very important to me, both in terms of validation and in terms of providing me with, in the end, a short cut to agents and publishers. First, being able to say to Salt that the majority of the pieces in the manuscript that became *Words from a Glass Bubble* had won something or been placed somewhere good was a powerful thing. Then having my work included in the Bridport Prize-winners' anthology was another important moment – it was read by a literary agent, who asked to meet and talk, and that was that.

Did comps change what I was doing? No – but they provided me with the most valuable validation that what I was doing was good enough. Did they make me more aware of readers? It was great to discover that the sifters for the Bridport Prize are not academics or professional writers – they are just intelligent people who love to read good writing. In the end, that is the sort of reader writers need to value the most, after the competitions are done with.

**PB and AC:** Do you ever have a particular competition or magazine in mind when crafting a story, or is it simply a matter of finding an outlet for what you've already written?

**VG:** I have rarely written a piece specifically for a competition or publication. I write what needs to be written at the time, because that's what I do – and try to make it as good as I can. Prose, poetry – it doesn't matter. Then, if a call for submissions comes up

that fits, it's a question of polishing, final tweaks.

Commissions are a real challenge. Where possible, I try to interpret the subject sideways rather than head on, incorporating something that I care about, not just the topic in hand. It is always fascinating to see where an imposed subject takes my work – I like surprises.

**PB and AC:** One of the many impressive things about *Storm Warning: Echoes of Conflict* is its range – from the persecution of heretics in sixteenth-century England to the World Wars, Cold War, Vietnam, the Falklands, the anti-apartheid struggle, and the recent conflict in Afghanistan. Could you say something about the genesis of these stories? And once you had written them, did structuring them into a collection raise any issues?

**VG:** I just wrote stories, and some of those stories were explorations of the same themes. There was no thought of a collection at that point. The 'echoes of conflict' and how they affect those who are caught up, whether soldiers or bystanders or families, have always interested me. And survival – the strength of the human spirit. The strategies we find to cope. Looking back, my main inspiration for this preoccupation was life with my late father – an ordinary and very gentle man. Before the Second World War, the most physically dangerous thing he'd ever done was play a spot of rugby in Merthyr Tydfil. He was decorated with the Military Cross in the War, for gallantry in the field, and I know his experiences coloured his every day. He was lucky; he coped. Others didn't, don't.

One of the things I love most about this writing gift is its ability to raise you up, as if on a magic carpet, and drop you anywhere, anytime. I was able to explore this thing I cared about in many different ways, taking me, as you say, from sixteenth-century England to the Great War, the Second World War, Vietnam, the Falklands, China, South Africa, and Afghanistan – and more. This exploration cannot end, can it?

There were plenty of stories to choose from – in the end, I chose some that had been published, a few stories that had won decent prizes, and stories I loved enough not to leave them out.

**PB and AC:** Another interesting thing about the stories in *Storm Warning* is that their main focus isn't violent conflict itself, but rather its after-effects or 'echoes'. What do you think is gained by this indirect approach?

**VG:** I am less interested in the *Boy's Own* experience of being in the thick of conflict, although questions of what exactly courage is, especially under fire, do interest me. I suppose I feel that others can do 'fighting writing' far better than me – and my province is mostly the more removed scenarios in which exploration of character can be broader. It is necessary though, occasionally, to relate the exact experience of a character – violent events that have rendered them as they are – and I enjoy that, even if I feel guilty afterwards for the character. Interesting question!

**PB and AC:** The first part of the collection's title, *Storm Warning*, is also the title of the first flash in the collection, a one-page story in which a soldier on leave from Afghanistan receives a mysterious phone call. It's not clear to him whether the vague, ominous warning it communicates is to be taken seriously, but it does seem to reverberate throughout the collection. Is there a sense in which the stories are cautionary tales: is their implication that we should learn from past conflicts in order to avoid future disasters?

**VG:** I don't think the focus is as overt as that. Perhaps that story is a comment on the human condition, in that you can't take a break – we will always have a violent side, which we can't escape. Even the most peaceable people treat others in the most violent ways. For example, there have just been terrorist atrocities in Paris, perpetrated in the name of Islam by fanatics. The media is full of exhortations to the outraged not to take revenge on innocent members of the Muslim community. The British press has recently been full of 'storm warnings'.

**PB and AC:** Recently, in *Flash*, 7.1 (2014), you positively reviewed US writer Katey Schultz's *Flashes of War* (2013), a collection of thirty-two stories inspired by the 'War on Terror'. Can you see any commonalities, or particular differences, between Schultz's

approach to conflict and yours in *Storm Warning*?

**VG:** A marvellous collection, and one I really appreciated being able to review. I warmed to it because her approach seems similar to my own – I recognized her concern with the after-effects of conflict, including on those forced by circumstance to stay at its edges. But she does also tackle the conflict itself, perhaps more than I do.

**PB and AC:** There are some prolific flashers out there (Die Booth and James Robertson spring to mind, having both recently published ‘365’ collections: they wrote a flash a day for a year). Do you write every day? What prompts you to write a flash?

**VG:** Nope, I’m afraid I don’t write every day – my bad, I expect. I write when I have built up a head of steam and can’t not, when I have something I need to say, I suppose, although as ever it is only in the looking back that you can see that.

I have, however, done a few ‘flashathons’ for various charities – great fun, and to be recommended – during which I and others stayed awake for 36 hours, writing to prompts delivered on the hour, polishing and sending the results in before the next prompts are due. No chance to revise after that! Amazing experiences, and amazing to see the varying quality of the results. When you are at your lowest, you seem to find reserves from somewhere.

What prompts me to write a flash? Often, I will begin what I think is a poem, only for it to turn into more overt narrative. I will experiment with the line endings, the layout, until I am happy. Sometimes, you could call it a flash if you like, other times, a poem. I don’t mind which!

**PB and AC:** Regarding being in hospital, watching and listening to the parents of a boy who has died, Graham Greene noted, in *A Sort of Life* (1971): ‘There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer. I watched and listened. This was something which one day I might need.’ Do you have that splinter?

**VG:** Yes – but in my own defence, and that of other writers, I wonder if it is actually ice? Maybe we just share an ability to stand aside during one’s own small tragedies and find them, at the same time as they are devastating, interesting.

Example: I remember being at my mother’s bedside as she was dying, twenty or more years ago, and being transfixed by the fluttering of the artery in her neck. Just like a moth caught under the skin, as her heart was running down, then stopping. I loved my mother very much; perhaps the chance to focus on something fascinating helped me that day. Who knows?

If you are a curious person, interested in everything, it is impossible not to be interested. I’m not sure Greene has it quite right!

**PB and AC:** You’ve described the development of your novel *The Coward’s Tale* from two shorter stories. Do you see other links between your shorter fiction and the much larger canvas of the novel?

**VG:** Absolutely. The whole thing began, as I said, with a flash, which – as we are talking about ‘ice’, or the ability to stand on the sidelines, be interested, and take things in – concerned the death of a friend’s son. Fast forward six years, and a lot of hard work, and voila! Simple, really. (No, it wasn’t ...)

**PB and AC:** Which of your flashes are you proudest of, and why?

**VG:** At the moment, it has to be the flashes in *Ed’s Wife and Other Creatures*. All sixty-five to seventy of them, because I’ve never seen anything remotely like this book – it’s mad and oddly truthful at the same time.

**PB and AC:** What’s your opinion of micro fiction (of, say, 100 words or fewer)? Have you ever written a micro?

**VG:** Yes! When it works, it is fine. *Ed’s Wife and Other Creatures* is actually made up mostly of micro fictions – here are a couple of examples:

## Earthworm

On bright nights, Ed sleeps fitfully. His wife is easy prey outside.

He's been known to go outside before the morning has hardened the night earth, to create tunnels for her, with a biro. But for some reason she prefers to make her own.

He worries too, about her hurting herself on flints. Not because she would die, he trusts her better than that, but injuries could be problematic.

'Suze, stay away from sharp edges ...'

Ed can't help wondering how it would be if there were two of her. Would the three of them get on?

## Chicken

Ed's wife thinks she sings beautifully. Especially outside. First she croons quietly to herself and then she raises her head and sings to the morning.

When she hears herself, she panics.

Then Ed tries to calm her. After all, his wife can't be perfect all the time.

**PB and AC:** Interesting! Have you been tempted to write even shorter pieces, like Twitter fiction?

**VG:** Twitter fiction is another beast. I have had a go once or twice, but it doesn't allow for enough depth, for me.

**PB and AC:** We recommend to our Creative Writing students at the University of Chester both *Short Circuit* and *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*. What top tips do you have for aspiring flashers?

**VG:** Thank you – I love the range of advice in both those books.

My top tips would begin with an exhortation to read terrific flashes as much as you can, to get an idea of how they work.

Don't be fooled by badly written ones: writing brilliant flashes isn't simple. There is a lot of rubbish about, as well as a lot of good – the internet is a boon and a burden in that respect.

Try writing fast, to prompts, as I did. Or try this: I always, always start my writing workshops with a ten-to-fifteen-minute warm-up, the results of which do *not* have to be shared. That is key! I throw out a starter line, then once the writers are off, I chuck words in every minute, words they have to pick up and incorporate. I ask participants to just scribble, fast. Not think, or plan. I tell them when they are halfway through, and when they have two words left, then one. And I wait for them to finish. The result will need a strong edit – but my goodness, the quality can be astonishing.

**PB and AC:** In the Acknowledgements of *Words from a Glass Bubble*, you thank 'all those writers [...] whose words are my teachers. Especially W. G. Sebald, Raymond Carver, Italo Calvino and John Cheever'. What did they teach you?

**VG:** I acknowledge Sebald particularly as he was my inspiration to become a writer in the first place. In 2002 I read *Austerlitz* (2001) in one sitting, and it showed me how you could make something work even when it breaks so many 'rules'. Indeed, he taught me to question so-called creative-writing 'rules' whenever they pop up.

Carver taught me how powerful simplicity is, that you do not need to be writerly to write well. He showed me the potency of concision and a clear-sighted observation of what it is to be human.

Calvino taught me about magical realism, the extraordinary effects attainable when you meld the real with the fantastical – something flash work is so well suited to. Cheever, too: I love how he uses the fantastical set against utterly grounded scenarios to propel his characters towards uncomfortable places, challenging their status quo. I love the disturbances he creates, both for his characters and for his reader.

**PB and AC:** Which flash-fiction writers do you most admire, and why?

**VG:** That is such a hard question, and forgive me – ask it tomorrow and the answer would be different. However, I love reading through the archive of a stunning online flash periodical called *SmokeLong Quarterly*, for example. The work there is extraordinary – and yet many of those writers you will never have heard of! Read their biographies, and follow up all the links. Really useful stuff – including interviews with every contributor about their work.

Two writers to check out, though: try anything by David Gaffney, especially *Sawn-Off Tales* (2006); and anything by Tania Hershman – there's lots by her online, and bookwise, read *My Mother Was an Upright Piano* (2012).

**PB and AC:** Many thanks for your time, Vanessa.

**Peter Blair and Ashley Chantler**

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