

‘A Pop Star Trapped in the Body of a Flasher’: An Interview with David Gaffney

David Gaffney, the UK’s leading writer of flash fiction, is author of four collections – *Sawn-Off Tales* (2006), *Aromabingo* (2007), *The Half-Life of Songs* (2010), and *More Sawn-Off Tales* (2013) – and the novel *Never Never* (2008). Renowned for their humour and poignancy, his stories have also appeared in numerous anthologies, e-zines, and periodicals, including *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, 1.1 (2008), 3.1 (2010), and 6.1 (2013). His collections have been reviewed in *Flash*, 2.1 (2009), 4.2 (2011), and 6.2 (2013).

An accomplished and innovative performer, Gaffney has given readings and flash-related workshops around Britain. Special commissions include: ‘Destroy PowerPoint’, a series of stories in PowerPoint format (Edinburgh Festival 2009); ‘Buildings Crying Out’, a story using lost-cat posters (Lancaster Litfest 2009); ‘23 Stops To Hull’, a series of stories about every junction on the M62 (Humber Mouth Literature Festival 2009); ‘The Poole Confessions’, stories told from a mobile confessional (Poole Literature Festival 2010); ‘Station Stories’, in which Gaffney and five other writers performed to audiences linked by wireless headphones in Manchester Piccadilly railway station (Manchester Literature Festival 2011); ‘Errata Slips’ (2011), in which fake slips and accompanying stories were secretly inserted into periodicals for sale at Manchester’s Cornerhouse arts centre; the site-specific sound installation ‘Boy You Turn Me’ (Birmingham Book Festival 2011), scored by contemporary classical composer Ailís Ní Ríain, with whom Gaffney also collaborates as librettist on ‘Sawn-Off Opera’; and ‘Preston 3Twenty’ (2012–32), a twenty-year arts and literature project.

His non-fiction includes: ‘Get Shorty: The Micro Fiction of Etgar Keret’, in *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, ed. Vanessa Gebbie (2009; 2013); and ‘Stories in Your Pocket: How to Write Flash Fiction’ (*Guardian*, 14 May 2012).

This interview took place in May 2013, shortly after the publication of *More Sawn-Off Tales*. It was first published in *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, 4.1 (April 2014).

Peter Blair and Ashley Chantler (PB and AC): David, could you say something about how you came to write flashes? When you started, the form was not as widely known in the UK as it is today (its popularity due much to yourself).

David Gaffney (DG): I began writing micro fiction after I had finished my first novel and was struggling with a second. A website called thephonebook asked me for stories that were exactly 150 words, so I wrote a few and I really liked the feeling of achievement when I'd finished one – a completely different feeling to what you get when you finish a chapter of a novel, which is like reaching the brow of a hill and then finding that there's another massive hill to climb after it – and not only that, the second hill doesn't meet up with the first hill properly, so you are going to have to go back to the bottom of the first hill, knock it down, rebuild it, then climb up it again. And then you decide to rewrite the whole 100,000 words from the point of view of the main character's pencil sharpener.

I wrote my first few micro fictions on the train from Manchester to Liverpool, where I was working at the time, and enjoyed the precision of editing and the close-up microscopic work. Micro fiction is like heart surgery on ants: tinkering around in the tiny little parts of a tiny machine, re-engineering some elements, replacing others, welding one ant's heart with another ant's heart to see what happens – then burning the ant with a magnifying glass, and showing the corpse to the strange laughing man at the bus stop.

I still focus on micro fiction because I feel that the form has developed over the years into a prose-poetry/cartoon-without-pictures kind of format, which I think is unique and in some ways more like the practice of text artists than a branch of literature.

PB and AC: Harold Pinter said that he began to write *The Homecoming* (1965) because the question 'What have you done with

the scissors?’ popped into his head. What prompts you to write a flash?

DG: I often work from small prompts like that too. I was talking to a bloke the other day who said he was building some shelving in his house and that he was skilled at carpentry because he used to build stage scenery. I then got to thinking about the false perspective that stage carpenters use and how it would be interesting if the man built the things in his house using false perspective – miniature wardrobes that look a long way off, staircases that taper to a point, like in the set of silent horror film *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari* (1919). This idea is going round in my head, and at some point will come out as a story.

PB and AC: Writers of flashes quickly use up material. Your stories are very wide-ranging. How do you keep generating new, original stories?

DG: I have an ideas folder which has separate files for some story ideas, and a long Word document where I put scraps of ideas. The files are full of cryptic sentences like ‘The gypsy in me: story about a man with a small gypsy living inside him’, and ‘Story about a woman who dreams she runs like a lemur’. Some of these story ideas may never get made into anything. My ideas usually originate in real events or things people have told me. My girlfriend told me she worked in an office where someone would fly a remote-controlled helicopter about and someone else would play a trumpet. That went into a story and my girlfriend now says I stole it from her. ‘You’ve stolen my ideas’, she says. But I didn’t, I just stole her experiences, which I think is all right.

PB and AC: *Sawn-Off Tales*, *Aromabingo*, and *The Half-Life of Songs* are great titles. How did you come up with them?

DG: The first book wasn’t supposed to be called *Sawn-Off Tales*; ‘sawn-off tales’ was the description I was using for the product I was producing at the time. But when Salt Publishing saw them they said they wanted to go with that title. The title doesn’t really

make sense because ‘sawn-off’ would mean you’d taken a structural part away from the stories, which isn’t how my micro fiction is produced.

Aromabingo was a title I’d had knocking around for years. When I was in a band I wanted to call an album *Aromabingo*. The idea was that middle-class activities such as aromatherapy could be combined with working-class activities like bingo to make a social-engineering project. The book’s title-story refers to this.

The Half-Life of Songs is about a karaoke evening in a pub near Sellafield nuclear-reprocessing plant. I like the fact that it refers to the power of cheap music, the way simple popular songs seem to cling to us forever, never leaving, having a half-life like that of spent plutonium rods. At some point, we will need to bury ABBA albums in repositories deep under the earth; 1000 years later, emotional power will still be radiating out.

PB and AC: How did you work out the order of the stories in *Sawn-Off Tales*? Did you purposefully juxtapose certain stories? Why did you open with ‘Your Name in Weetos’ and end with ‘Life Just Bounces’?

DG: The order of the stories in *Sawn-Off Tales* was less planned than in my subsequent books. The publisher chose the first and the last story: ‘Your Name in Weetos’ because it kind of summarizes the book, with its message that sometimes a few moments are worth a lifetime; ‘Life Just Bounces’ because it ends with someone jumping in a bouncy castle they’ve spent their redundancy pay on. The rest of the stories are in no particular order, to be honest. I see the stories as all being read separately, as independent entities. I’d love to put together a collection in which the stories were shuffled randomly every time you opened the book. That would work better for me.

PB and AC: On first reading *Sawn-Off Tales*, our students find it humorous, but in seminars they quite quickly move to discussing the characters’ isolation, need for love, inability to say how they feel, mental health, dead-end jobs, financial insecurity, and so on. Do you see your writing as being more than just entertaining?

DG: Yes. I'm never really happy with a story that is *just* funny. It will always have something else about it or I wouldn't really have bothered taking the time with it. For example, a short from *Aromabingo* called 'All Mod Cons' has a number of good jokes in it and can sound a little like a stand-up routine. But at heart it's about loneliness and a kind of Asperger's-like obsession that people who spend too much time on their own might develop.

I find that I am drawn to the quiet people on the edges of things, people who have rich interior lives. It's in these opulent private worlds that dramas take place every day, dramas which the rest of the world has no idea about. I find some of the stories both sinister and funny at the same time. On occasion, people ask me to festivals to read my stories live for kids, like 'Potato Smiles', the one where a man sticks Potato Smiles on his bedroom wall and the environmental health officer comes round to tell him off. And though that sounds like just a funny, weird story, it's not a story that kids would easily relate to; it's about emotional turmoil and the peculiar ways some people react to events.

PB and AC: In what ways do you see *More Sawn-Off Tales* connected to *Sawn-Off Tales*?

DG: It is connected by format and style. The stories are all exactly 150 words and deal in similar weird and offbeat themes. For the first time, there are a few sets of connected stories in the book. For example, a set of three stories relate to glass eyes and taxidermy – hence the cover image.

In *More Sawn-Off Tales* I have sequenced the stories in a very deliberate way. I divided all the stories into types and discovered they fell into two main areas: weird ones and ones about relationships. Roughly half and half. The ones about relationships were dividable into three: people looking for love; people currently in a relationship; and relationships breaking up. So the sequence is this: (1) a looking-for-love story; (2) a being-in-a-relationship story; (3) a breaking-up story. These little triptychs are followed by three weird tales to cleanse the palate, before going back to love stories

again. I hope that knowing this formula doesn't spoil the book. Don't tell anyone else!

PB and AC: *Aromabingo* contains flashes but also 'Long Players'. Is there something that the 'Long Players' do that the short-short players don't? What would have been lost if you had shortened them?

DG: Yes, there are some stories I write (not many) that I don't think could work in the shortened form. It's mainly about building on the consequences of certain decisions, which take you into the next part of the story, then another decision takes you further, and in that way you can explore in greater depth the path these decisions might take a person.

PB and AC: Which stories in *The Half-Life of Songs* are you particularly proud of, and why?

DG: I like 'Remaking the Moon' because of the relationship between the neighbour and the man; again, it's about lonely people coming together and not really knowing what to do together, so they do a jigsaw.

I also like 'The Only Man With Fire', which makes me laugh when I read it because I think it's such an odd idea. It's one of those stories that looks to be about one thing, and then there's something much more odd lurking in the village and its occupants, which is hinted at by the strange man to whom no one in the village will speak.

PB and AC: In all of your collections, there are references to popular music. Are you a pop star trapped in the body of a flasher?

DG: Yes, I really am, I think! I play guitar and piano, and in fact I am now part of a musical act called Les Malheureux, which combines short fiction and organ music, which I write and perform alongside Sarah-Clare Conlon. I like titles of stories and spend a lot of time on them, because I want them to read like the

titles of songs on an album; I'm probably aiming for them to look like a list of titles by The Fall, my favourite group.

PB and AC: Many of the very short flashes that get submitted to us at *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine* tend to be rejected on the grounds of superficiality, lack of depth, lack of resonance. What is your view of micro fiction?

DG: I tend to call what I do micro fiction, but I know what you mean by very tiny fiction of only a few words. There are examples of strong song lyrics which are very short – like the repeated line in 'Remember Me', the 1997 dance hit by Blueboy: 'Remember me? I'm the one that's got your baby's eyes'. That line has everything – a setting, an incident in the past, a relationship which we know was brief, and a current encounter which has conflict and meaning. I think that good song lyrics have the distillation of meaning we strive for in a really compressed short story. Some pieces of text art say a lot in a short line, such as Jenny Holzer's 'Protect me from what I want', and some pieces by David Shrigley really pack a lot of meaning into a tight space. But if you are looking for plot as well, then no, I don't think the really short ones can deliver that.

PB and AC: Which flash writers do you most admire?

DG: I like Etgar Keret and Tania Hershman. And although it's not flash, I'm currently enjoying the poetry of Helen Guri.

PB and AC: Many thanks for your time, David.

Peter Blair and Ashley Chantler

© *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*. All rights reserved. This interview may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission of the copyright holder.