

Short short stories introductory article / John Boyne

For me, the most satisfying thing to accomplish in writing is the creation of a good short story. For years they were the staples of the literary world. Writers from F Scott Fitzgerald to Alice Munro routinely wrote and published stories in literary magazines and newspapers around the world; sadly there are very few places left that publish such delicacies anymore. There are literary magazines, of course, but these are bought by people interested in fiction in the first place. Finding stories in the glossy monthly publications or weekly newspapers that once thrived on them is increasingly difficult.

The Sunday Tribune has a long tradition of publishing short fiction and remains the only newspaper with a regular column (*New Irish Writing*) devoted to discovering new writers. When I was 21, I published my first piece of fiction on that page and the excitement that I felt in seeing my words in print gave me the confidence to think that perhaps writing was something to which I could devote my life.

I've always loved writing short stories but since *The Thief of Time* was published in 2000 I've devoted myself to novel writing. Over the last year or two, however, I've gone back to my roots and found that the challenge of creating a good short story is as compelling as ever. And what a tradition we have in Ireland for the art form – an international anthology that omitted the names of Frank O'Connor, William Trevor or John McGahern would seem absurd and inadequate.

The *short short* story, on the other hand, is a whole different crate of bananas. To attempt to tell a story quickly, *very* quickly, is an art form in itself. The American writer Donald Barthelme was a master at it, and the McSweeney's gang in America continues the tradition. The point of each one is to reproduce a moment of life where something happens, something interesting, something funny, something sad, just *something*, and write it in such a way that it leaves the reader thinking about what they've read. The challenge I have set myself in each of these stories is to limit myself to 500 words while still producing a satisfying tale. To omit every superfluous phrase or idea; every word must earn its place. The fun in writing them consists of having a first draft that seems like it works, then running the word count and seeing that it adds up to 932 words and trying to get rid of half of them without damaging the story.

The ideas come from everyday moments, notions that come to me on a daily basis and end up as scattered thoughts in my notebook. Some of them you're going to enjoy, some of them you're going to hate and some of them you're going to end up saying *huh? I don't get it*. I'd love to tell you more about them but instead I'll let each one speak for itself. Besides, I've reached my limit. 498... 499... 500.