

Breaking News

THE IRISH TIMES

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Features

Creativity in a flash

An intense, poetic sub-genre or just another outlet for writing novices? Ultra-short works are dividing critics, writes **Haydn Shaughnessy**

At the start of the film *Bedside Story*, a woman lies on the ruffled sheets of a double bed, apparently alone, wearing a skimpy nightdress. As the seconds tick by we hear running water from the bathroom. Dark and compelling, she is a woman with a harsh line to her face. It comes, we suspect, from time spent as a victim. The sense of a woman oppressed is underlined further by the sight of a slightly brutish and vain man who has evidently slept with her and who now enters the bedroom from the en suite. The woman reaches into the bedside drawer and takes a handgun between her thumb and forefinger.

To tell you any more would be to reveal the whole of the plot, because *Bedtime Story*, one of the great ultra-short movies, is about to end, even though it seems hardly to have begun. Suffice it to say that the outcome is a big surprise.



Paul Baker directs Kimberly Estrada in the ultra-short film *Bedtime Story* from the 'flash' fiction by Jeffrey Whitmore. *Bedtime Story*, a complete narrative with plot, character, conflict and resolution, runs to 56 words; the film two minutes.

Bedside Story is a great film even though it lasts only two minutes. It is based on a great story (a "flash" or "sudden" story) which runs to less than 60 words, less than half the number it has taken me to explain it so far. It is one of a growing number of ultra-short works and miniatures appearing across the expressive arts: film, literature, photography, abstract art, even fashion is beginning to opt for ultra-short movies as a medium to convey the artistic vision of designers.

The obvious point about the ultra-short, of course, is that it introduces a vastly enlarged population of artists to the world. The less obvious point is that creativity is beginning to permeate our work and leisure

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lives as never before, from the ringtone to the synaptic structure of the World Wide Web. In whatever guise creativity comes calling, we need to understand what this new expressionism means.

Not everybody favours it. Peter Anny-Nzekwue, editor of Dublin Quarterly, a literary journal, refuses to publish flash stories. "I think a writer needs to do more," he says. "Of course we receive flash stories. They are booming, but I don't think at this length they are engaging the reader and they don't reflect an ability to write."

For Sale. Child's Shoes, Never Worn. That's a six-word Hemingway, perhaps the stand-out masterpiece of the ultra-short.

"Flash fiction is the most concentrated, intense, poetic sub-genre of fiction," argues Mark Budman, editor of Vestal Review, an American journal that specialises in flash stories. "A good flash story replete with a plot, rich language and enticing imagery is the hardest fiction to write. A good flash engages your mind not only for the short duration of the read but also for a long time afterwards."

This is certainly the case with Bedtime Story, directed by Paul Baker, an up-and-coming director based in Los Angeles. "I made it out of frustration while rewriting a feature script, and having a block," recalls Baker. "It was supposed to be practice, but it came out a diamond, and sold - my first sale in 11 years at this."

Anny-Nzekwue's contrary view is echoed by Jason Sanford, a writer who has gone out of his way to criticise the rise of the ultra short-form. The problem as Sanford sees it is that ultra-short form stories are not bad, but they are mediocre, and in a world where publishing is now open to a much wider creative community, the mediocre not only gets published - it more or less has to be published, filling as it does the great well of opportunity suddenly opened up before us.

"There is a level of decent but uninspired narrative across all genres," says Sanford, who blames writing schools and the requirement for writing undergraduates to have an outlet, and a lack of depth in contemporary writing for the malaise. "Instead of using narrative as exploration, writers today use narrative as mere statement," he argues.

The opportunity to publish (story, film, videocast, blog or podcast) is both becoming a matter of commercial necessity and reflecting deeper underlying changes in society, according to Professor Richard Florida, of the School of Public Policy at George Mason University in Washington DC.

Florida says not only are we now living in a creative economy, but international competitive advantage is largely decided by who nurtures and retains creative talent best.

First the art. The ultra-short is a way for inexperienced communicators to get a step on the creative ladder. Bedtime Story for Baker was "a way to learn the craft of film-making at its purest, non-studio, non-union, free work for the sake of some guy/girl's obsession to make film".

Then the commerce. Telecommunications companies want to encourage our creativity because it means we interact more. Flooding us with ultra-shorts is a way for software companies and broadband service providers to justify their products and services. Put in a less cynical way, burgeoning creativity in society is being met by a number of new tools (blogging software, podcasting, desktop video editing), and outlets.

The issue of what counts as an authentic creative voice, compared with what is

driven by ego or boredom, is still a tricky one.

Creative jobs are now the fastest growing employment category in countries such as Ireland, gradually replacing service jobs, which of course previously replaced blue-collar work. That's according to Florida, whose book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, spent months in the New York Times bestseller list as the 20th century gave way to the 21st.

Florida calculated in 2004 that 26 per cent of the jobs in the Irish economy were creative jobs, but that it also has "far and away" the greatest growth in these occupations, experiencing a 7.6 per cent average annual growth since 1995, which would give us close to a 30 per cent creative class by now.

Creative jobs include the obvious - songwriters, artists - and the less obvious. Technicians, says Florida, are today creative contributors to their community. For example, in medicine physicians have become so highly specialised that they often rely on technical staff to interpret diagnostic results. This is a creative, interpretive role.

There is then, arguably, a return to the creative job content of the craft era of previous decades. Looked at this way, the existence of websites such as [atomfilms.com](#), which hosts *Bedtime Story* and many more ultra-shorts, serve an economic as well as a social need, beyond what we might be tempted to sneer at as an outlet for beginners or for the egoistically inadequate. They are a way of training a new cadre of creative individuals.

The idea that we live in a liberated and creative society is at odds with what most of us might experience. The single biggest complaint of the early 21st century has been that work dominates our lives, spilling out into leisure time and quality time with the kids. Short-shorts are the only thing we've got time to consume. They reflect quickie culture. Conor O'Connell deals with these issues inside many Irish organisations where he trains people in creative and time-management techniques. "People say they're time stressed, people allow themselves to be helpless about it, people say they are worn out, they think they're in a rut when they're not, though they're happy to think that it's all being done to us: the stress, the pressure."

O'Connell points out that the internet is showing us what creativity is. All those surprising connections and leaps you can make, he says, replicate human creativity, "and it allows us to make connections with people who might become customers for things we create."

The trick in becoming part of the creative upswing is to be ruthless with ourselves and our perceived limitations.

Such ruthlessness might be applied to a swathe of ultra-short stories, whether in print or on film. On the other hand, not only are there new classics in the making, there's a new type of society emerging where the ability to create ideas and innovate are the mark not of an elite circle but of the average person. That, as they say in philosophical circles, is the real paradigm shift of our age.

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