

TESSA LUNNEY

Long Story Shorts from Affirm Press

Gretchen Shirm, *Having Cried Wolf*
223pp, ISBN 9780980637892

Barry Divola, *Nineteen Seventysomething*
187pp, ISBN 9780980637854

Bob Franklin, *Under Stones*
220pp, ISBN 9780980637847

Emmett Stinson, *Known Unknowns*
222pp, ISBN 9780980637878

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Long Story Shorts are volumes of short stories from emerging Australian writers. They are designed as an opportunity for new writers to show their work, “to hone their craft and demonstrate their flair” as Affirm writes on its website.

This is a brilliant idea, and, in these first four volumes of the proposed six, works very well. Many of these stories would only find an audience in literary journals and magazines, which are then forgotten with the next issue. But these collections are a chance for the reader to see the style and preoccupations of the writer, and for the writer to create a longer narrative in this contained story-telling form. The format is also attractive – small books, perhaps pocket-sized and hand-bag sized, with a lively cover design, the stories commuter-length, the books themselves long enough to be satisfying and short enough to read in an afternoon. This doesn’t make much difference to the quality of writing, of course, but helps persuade others (including me) to choose a book of short stories from a new writer over the newest, lacklustre bestseller.

All four writers evoked mood and detail well. Each has an affinity to place – Melbourne and rural Victoria, fictional suburban Braithwaite, Washington DC and Kinsale, a Kiama-like town on the NSW south coast. Gretchen Shirm and Barry Divola were the most consistent in their detailed evocation of how place shapes action. This makes their collections stand out; in fact, I didn’t expect any of the collections to be so consistently good. However, Franklin and Stinson each have a few stories that are excellent, and which encapsulate the best of their writing.

You know in Kinsale when it's going to rain. When big beads of sweat gather on your thighs, underneath your school uniform and the air is thick as cream. And then, in the afternoon, when it doesn't come, when everyone is tense and expecting it, it feels the same as when you're sad and you want to cry it all out, but you can't. You can't shed a single tear. (87)

It is hard to talk about the separate stories in Gretchen Shirm's *Having Cried Wolf* since they contain the same set of characters, all set in coastal Kinsale. The faceless man who kills himself in one story comes back as the husband in another; a feckless mother loses her child, and then near the end of the volume we meet her again, and come to understand her. I received a shock each time I recognised a character in another form, their change so obvious and yet unexpected. This is not a set of short stories so much as an exploration of loss told through multiple perspectives. The ever-changing yet ever-present ocean sets the tone, as characters variously escape it, succumb to it, or set their internal clock by its rhythms.

The two main characters are Alice and Grace, who've known each other since childhood, and we meet in the first story, "Breakfast Friends". We meet them repeatedly, both as teenagers and adults, as they deal with how the delicately brutal relationships that define small town life. In this initial story, Alice appears as a self-important Sydney lawyer, who "has a skill for eye-rolling." (10), and who doesn't seem too fazed that her husband Richard has left her. When we next meet her three chapters later in "The Shallows", she is at a family wedding back in Kinsale, trying to decide if Richard should be her husband, and feeling trapped by circumstances. Alice and Grace change from girls to grief-stricken women and back again, as if in time with the tides.

The changes that Alice and Grace undergo happen to the other townsfolk as well. For example, Tracee in "Carrying On" watches herself watching her ex-husband dropping off their sons: "She always seems to be looking out of her window at this time. There is something sad and inevitable about Sunday afternoons." (32); in "Smoke and Fire", she is a court-appointed counsellor, her client deferring to her with a childish "Tracee says"; in "Undecided", her son listens to her body language as well as her words: "She was sitting at the dining table, staring out the window...I knew something was wrong then, as she rarely sits still." (152). I started reading each story as separate, but by the time I reached the fourth, I was no longer analysing how each story was structured but let myself become involved for the flick and change of the characters in their surroundings. *Having Cried Wolf* is a portrait of a type of place, and though loss is the dominant force, there is some hope in the endings of the last stories.

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On Saturday afternoons in Nineteen Seventysomething, everything is brown. (1)

The title is not a gimmick. These stories in Barry Divola's *Nineteen Seventysomething* are all set in fictional suburban Braithwaite in the 1970s, as the protagonist Charlie grows from a prepubescent thirteen year-old into a school leaver on the brink of adulthood. There is a tone of sweet nostalgia; yet the work never shies away from the ugly, the hypocritical and the ironic. The stories are set in progressive summers where rock music combines with tragic death, and milk runs uncover hypocrisy; the lazy heat and school holidays making each revelation stand out cool against the endless humidity.

Divola is a journalist, who writes for *Rolling Stone*, the *(Sydney) magazine*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Who*. He won the Banjo Patterson award for Short Fiction three times, for "Cicada Boy", "Nipple" and "Nixon", all of which appear in this volume. "Nipple" begins:

When I first discovered Karen Tolhurst's third nipple, I tried to act casual. (71)

From this humorous start, the story develops into a subtle exploration of teenage desire, with Charlie and Karen attempting to lose their virginity together.

This wistful humour is also present in *Nixon*, which opens with:

I think I fell in love with Angie Perotta when I discovered that she practised typing by tapping out song lyrics. (123)

The combination of Top 40 rock, sex, desire and the mundane mark every story, skilfully managed details that Charlie's older, narrator self both reveres and ridicules.

Both "Nipple" and "Nixon" are part of the slow build of stories, where the voice of mid-teen Charlie winnows down his experience for the reader. It was specifically the 1970s, yet (apart from its lack of the internet) it could be now. The first story introduces us to the time, nineteen seventysomething, and how kids behaved then. Charlie introduces the main characters from the fifth story, "Cartwheel Bill". Here we meet the suburb of Braithwaite as Charlie knows it, with the local Protestant congregation under the shepherding of the bigoted Revered Pitt, as the suburb reacts to the antics of "simple" Bill. From here, we move out, to teenagers teasing the outcast Ray in "Ray G'day", and the combination of sex, music and cars in "Your World is Where You Point It" that dominates the rest of the stories. In "The Cows and the Foxes", set in the early morning milk-run during school term, Charlie starts to grow up:

You don't expect any of your friends' mothers to look like Mrs Fox. She was slim and had long, straight black hair that shone like she was walking around in a shampoo commercial. She wore short shirts and boots to school meetings. Greg Brady would have called her a groovy chick. (144)

Charlie stands slightly to the side of the gossip that surrounds him, just beginning to comprehend the subtle connections between talk and action. His observations are

spliced through with the milk run in the cold dawn, place and time being as integral to his understanding as his father's aphorisms.

However, the final story in the collection, "Patience", is the stand out. Patience is an old woman, and Charlie cleans her flat every Saturday morning, although they spend most of their time smoking and talking:

"Who's the girl?" asked Patience.
"What girl?"
"Don't play dumb with me. I saw you."
"Saw me where?"
"The mall."
"The mall? You never go to the mall."
"You don't know where I go, Einstein."
"Well, if you saw me, why didn't you say hi?"
"Because I was undercover. You could get arrested for doing that kind of stuff in public, you know."
Why was this old woman talking to me like this?
"Stop looking like a guppy," she said. "So – what's her story?"
"She has to have a story?"
"I hope so, or she's just a pair of passable tits attached to a butt that's one size too big for those shorts she was wearing." (169)

It may be because it ends with Charlie living overseas as an adult in nineteen eightysomething, it may be because Patience is a good enough character to knock Charlie, his mate Hendo and his girlfriend out of the way, or it may be to do with Charlie growing up: whichever way, this story is perfectly placed end to the collection.

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Bob Franklin's *Under Stones* is essentially a book of ghost stories. The best ones are menacing, the characters haunted in a way that has long been part of the Australian literary imagination: disappearing children, open spaces devoid of help, violence, and the familiar constantly made strange. The least impressive were simple ghost tales with no surprises in the structure, and the tone the same as the story before. But although Franklin may lack some structural sophistication, the tension of these stories is finely calibrated. He is excellent at establishing mood, and constructing tales that hunt for the dark side, turning over the stones of reality and realism to see what might happen if our irrational fears came true.

All the stories are short, the shortest only two pages. Sometimes this works very well; in "Compliments to the Chef", an absurdist idea is executed succinctly, satisfying in its tight little turn. However, I am not a fan of ghost stories, and sometimes the brevity left me disappointed.

Franklin's writing can be menacing, and this is best shown in "Bag Limit". A man is hunting ducks at twilight, anxious that his limit of five would all be legitimate kills. He hears the sound of a child crying, and with his gun, heads towards the noise.

Franklin mixes folklore, murder, a broken marriage and a national fear of disappearing children in this beautifully balanced story:

The cumbungi were as motionless as his decoys, but a little distance behind them was a slight quivering in a patch of much taller common reed, accompanied by another muffled cry. The sort of whimper a frightened child would make with a hand or tape over its mouth. Hunting had attuned Bridge's hearing in the years since his divorce. These days, he reflected grimly, he would recognise the insincerity that had preceded the break-up, the falseness of tone, the hollowness of Wendy's words. (110)

"Traitor's Bay", one of the longest stories, also conveys this sense of menace. It follows the actions of an abused woman, Michelle, protecting her son in rural Victoria. Whether she is protecting him from her husband, Christian, or from the men chasing her husband, is hard to tell. Again, this story draws on the haunting that often accompanies tales of isolation, and weaves in bigotry, racism and a dead kangaroo. Franklin employs techniques suggestive of trauma, with Michelle repeatedly mishearing and misunderstanding things in ways that feed her paranoia:

What if they come here? They won't. How would they know? Because Christian told people we were coming here. Because being here is his alibi. Because they saw us packing the car and followed us down here. Because I've seen the way they look at me. What if they come here?
"They're animals, Mum," Matthew said. She looked down at him.
"What?"
"The animals," he repeated. "Can we see the animals?" (63)

This muddling of reality and paranoia, fantasy and fear is typical of Franklin's stories. "Take the Free Tour", exploring internet addiction, and "Snow Globe", about sibling rivalry and fate, are particularly good. "Wishbone", involving the return of a roast chicken, and "Learning Difficulties", about a grammar pedant's encounter with a bikie gang, are very short and funny, although the laughter is perhaps that of relief. As Franklin says in his You Tube clip, he aims to disturb. And he has mostly succeeded.

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I woke up with the smell of failure on me. The smell of failure was specific – the perfume your old girlfriend used to wear that makes you feel strange and queasy when you smell it on another girl. Failure smelled of stale cigarettes and beer mixed with my body odour. I hadn't washed for three days. (79)

This is the start of "Local Knowledge", the central story of Emmett Stinson's *Known Unknowns*. It follows a young, enthusiastic History teacher, Henry Adams, and his descent to the status of unemployed novelist. In tone and content, it reminded me of Tobias Wolff's *Old School*, an idyllic school-bound existence tragically broken because of the fatal flaw of the first-person protagonist. But "Local Knowledge" has much greater emphasis on the dark aftermath of being thrown out of paradise, especially in a fearful, post 9/11 Washington DC.

Stinson is American, now teaching at the University of Melbourne after completing his MA at the University of Adelaide. His stories are well-written, sharp, complex, and paranoid. They explore stunted growth in young people, particularly young men, in modern America, as well as sex and alcohol, and not quite knowing what you want but knowing it isn't what you have. It all plays out all in a world where innocence is short-lived and fear is, once again, the dominant social emotion. The resonance with the Cold War paranoia is acknowledged in the opening story, "The Russians are Leaving", both funny and surreal:

So I said, "Tell him, tell him that happy pizzas are all alike, but every unhappy pizza is unhappy in its own way." (9)

Quite a few of the stories convey a sense of ambiguity by not revealing exactly what is happening. For example, in "Dry", the protagonist is only addressed in the second person, but it seems that the "you" is really "I". In "The Weight", the outline of plot is less important than the lyrical linking of water and memory. Unlike the other volumes in this series, stories such as "Great Extinctions in History" and "Last Men" are not immediately clear in their meaning or intent, and require a second thought for them to cohere.

The most impressive are those that outline contemporary American life. Of these, "Local Knowledge" works best. However, I enjoyed the aggressive dialogue between Steve and Dave in "Something So Helpless", and between Steve, Dave and Laura in "Laughing at the Holocaust":

"It's anti-semitic," says Laura.

"What?"

"The joke. It makes fun of Jews."

"Okay, yes, kind of, but not for yarmulkes or circumcision or usury or something. It's a joke. I could've said gypsies or German homosexuals or post-Weimar anti-Nazi political dissidents-"

"Why didn't you?"

"Actually," David steps in again, though it's becoming unclear even to him whether he's trying to keep the peace or provoke, "Steve's got a point. It's shock value. Jokes are about brevity. Jews is more shocking, see – " (145)

These circular arguments which have no point other than anger are all part of the longing which acts as counterpart and counterpoint to fear. Stinson's young men desperately need to know that they have a place in the world, but this need will never be answered:

Be a fucking adult, he thinks to himself. *Be a fucking human*.

He holds Emerson's shuddering shirtless body. He feels the rhythm of his friend's breathing in his arms, the convulsions too, and tries not to hear his crying, which has reduced to a low whimper.

"Shhh," he says, "It's okay. It will all be okay. Everything will be okay."

But it won't. He has no illusions. The sun would rise, Matter knew, and things would persist because things always continued to be what they were until they fell apart...

He thinks how he'll be there tomorrow, and probably meet Carrie at some bar in Dupont Circle, sipping on a Bloody Mary with too much Tabasco and horseradish, recovering. Or trying to recover. Then he'll be there. Then he'll be somewhere. Home. (218-219)