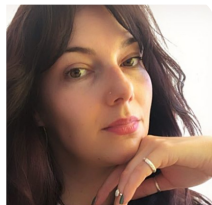


What's new in



TERRI-JANE DOW is editor of online literary journal *Severine* and co-manager of Florence Welch's book club, *Between Two Books*. Her fiction has been published by *Dear Damsels* and *Jellyfish Review*, and she is currently working on a collection of short stories.

Short Stories

Moderate to Poor, Occasionally Good by Eley Williams (4th Estate)

SUBJECT *Moderate to Poor, Occasionally Good* is the second short story collection from Eley Williams, one of Granta's 2023 Best Young British Novelists, following 2017's *Attrib.*, and her first novel, *The Liar's Dictionary*. The 19 stories continue Williams' now-established themes: her stories are playful meditations on language and the gaps in communication, amplifying small moments to become something pivotal. The collection as a whole is full of characters who are on the edge of something: a young girl trapped inside a school locker prays to a lesser-known saint, testing the pronunciation of Wilgerfortis in her enforced safe space; a Shipping Forecast announcer uses their platform to make a declaration of love; and in opening story 'Scrimshaw' (finalist for the BBC National Short Story Award in 2020), the overenthusiastic sharing of a livestream of mating walrus proves perhaps too much, too early in a new relationship.

STYLE Many of the stories here are slight – just under 20 stories come in at fewer than 200 pages – but at their best they carry an air of something menacing alongside the humour. Williams' tight grasp on language offers double meanings aplenty, with protagonists thumbing through mental lists of synonyms to fully understand and voice their own feelings. The final story, 'The escape room', excellently captures the mischief in Williams' characters, as an actor in an escape room debates whether or not to let the escapees out, delighting in their increasing nervousness. Elsewhere in the collection, 'What (not) to do with your hands when you are nervous' is a series of notes on, purportedly, Keats' final writings before his death, and 'Rostrum' sees its central character, Sue, thwarted in her attempts to go to work by an out-of-order automatic sliding door.

SIGNATURE Eley Williams' debut collection, *Attrib.*, was awarded the Republic of Consciousness Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize 2018. Williams' short fiction has appeared in anthologies including *The Penguin Book of the Contemporary British Short Story* and *Not Here: A Queer Anthology of Loneliness*. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

SUMMING UP Read *Moderate to Poor, Occasionally Good* for witty wordplay and a series of characters to root for from one of the UK's best writers.

Hungry for What by María Bastarós (Daunt Publishing)

SUBJECT Following four books published in her native Spanish, *Hungry for What* is Bastarós' first foray into English, translated by Kevin Gerry Dunn. In these 13 stories a woman trudges home from work, unsure of the chaos she'll find her father and husband have orchestrated in her absence; a girl makes a wish as she blows out the candles on her birthday cake; a group of boys meet their match in a girl unfazed by their initiation rites. Each story winds its way to a violent climax, and then abruptly leaves its characters (already held at a distance, referred to only by their status – the face, the mother, the girl, the big boss, the husband) in their moment of realisation. Many of Bastarós' protagonists are children, often surprising in their own agency.

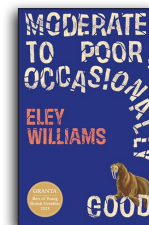
STYLE Bastarós has set her stories in the deserts of Northern Spain, and the landscape seems a character in itself: dry, lonely, caustic. Her writing is brutal, with layers of tension peeled back throughout each story, finally revealing horror at the centre. The opening story, 'A grown up dinner', sees a young girl recreating an adult dinner party, seemingly for her mother and her new partner. Bastarós manages a careful balance: humour, as the girl dusts triangles of cheese with cocoa powder to achieve an imitation of foie gras, and then a sudden twist, as it's revealed that the intended recipient of the meal is the girl's recently deceased father. In 'A few tins of roe', a man invites his boss to dinner with his family, much to the disappointment of his teenage daughters who had plans of their own. The man, fearful of his prospects at work, chooses to turn a blind eye to the events which unfold. Violence rises to the surface of each of these stories, often confused and intermingled with desire.

SIGNATURE María Bastarós Hernández's novel *Historia de España contada a las niñas* (2018) was awarded the Puchi Award, the Cálamo Otra Mirada award and the Narrative Award from the Valencian Critics Association. *No era a esto a lo que veníamos* was a finalist in Spain for the Setenil Award for the best collection of short stories, and is now published in English as *Hungry for What*.

SUMMING UP Read *Hungry for What* for spiky, disturbing, darkly comic stories, all of which present normality and then subvert it, pulling it in unexpected directions.

Highway Thirteen by Fiona McFarlane (Sceptre)

SUBJECT *Highway Thirteen* follows the impact of a serial killer's crimes across 12 overlapping stories covering more than half a century. The opening story, 'Tourists', begins the collection in 2008, with a macabre trip to the scene of a series of murders of backpackers in the



'The key to manifesting what you desire is to cultivate the feeling you want to experience. Sue shut her eyes and tried to conceive herself at her desk.'
(*'Rostrum'*)



'We had never let a girl into our cabin before, but she didn't really seem like a girl. Or a boy either. It was like she was something else, like the tip of a spear, or the hungry wolves with yellow eyes that come down the mountain sometimes to kill people's cattle.'
(*'Girls don't'*)



'Maybe she would feel differently if Paul had brought his victims to the house; and maybe she wouldn't. There was something in that house, quite aside from Paul, that should persist.'
(*'Demolition (2003)'*)



MARÍA BASTARÓS

HOW I DID IT

When I was ten years old I'd spend Sundays at my maternal grandfather's house, where there was a typewriter. In the afternoons, I'd sit down and write stories about

my babysitter. Even today, my stories are full of babysitters. I started writing *Hungry for What* late in the pandemic. I was in the middle of a divorce, so life wasn't

exactly pleasant, but I had plenty of time to write. I also missed my hometown, a city surrounded by desert. After I'd written three or four stories in a very short period of time, I

started to think of them as a collection. I landed on a basic unifying theme – the trap of 'normality' – and I set the stories in Aragon, in the desert. It was my way of going back home.

I'm intrigued by authors who treat a given territory as a central character – like Claire Vaye Watkins does with Nevada – and by short story writers like Joy Williams, Lorrie Moore, A M Homes and Alix Ohlin. I'm also keen

on stories featuring animals, like Marian Engel's *Bear* or Jo Ann Beard's short stories. I start writing without a specific story in mind, springboarding from a sentence or an image. Then, when I can discern a little bit of structure, I start the rewriting process. If things work out, the text itself starts to guide me: to ask me to take the narrative this way or that, and a dialogue starts to emerge between me and the story. That's when I

discover what I really want to write about. I can rewrite a story as many as 30 times; every case is different. 'Those who keep the fire' was very different in its first iteration. It used a major shift in register as a sort of bait and switch. It was fun, and strange, but I realised that I actually wanted to write about our inability to choose our desires and how those desires ultimately shape our identity. So I cut around half of the story and rewrote it.

mid-nineties. From that point, the collection delves into the pasts of the killer and his victims, as well as jumping forward to dark tourism, investigations, crime podcasts, and biopics. The killer himself, Paul Biga, is never the main protagonist; a picture of him is slowly gleaned as the collection continues with those whose lives have been altered by their encounters come to the fore, and he takes on varying roles throughout. Travelling through small-town tropical Australia, Texas and Rome, McFarlane's collection investigates the ripple effect of one terrible event.

STYLE McFarlane dances with the ideas of true crime fandom in a way that feels genuinely inventive, asking why we are so drawn to stories of real-life darkness. 'Hostel (1995)' is a standout; a multi-layered story at the midpoint of the collection, focused on the murders themselves, told by the friend of a couple who had fleetingly interacted with one of the victims. In 'Demolition (2003)', Eva – the now-elderly ex-neighbour of the killer – watches along with numerous television crews as his suburban house is pulled down five years after his arrest, and recounts her lifelong memories of the house, with a surprising and tender story at the centre. The final story of the collection, 'Lucy (1950)', reaches back to the killer's mother, Lucy Biga, and her adolescence. Each story is carefully placed, weaving together the lives of a varied cast of characters, each with a distinct voice.

SIGNATURE Fiona McFarlane's short story collection, *The High Places*, won the International Dylan Thomas Prize. Her first novel, *The Night Guest*, won the Voss Literary Prize and New South Wales Premier's Award and was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, among others. Born in Sydney, Australia, Fiona McFarlane lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

SUMMING UP Read *Highway Thirteen* for a fascinating interpretation of the true crime genre, exploring the possibility of writing about true crime in a way that doesn't glamourise the killers. ■

MORE NEW RELEASES

ASA: THE GIRL WHO TURNED INTO A PAIR OF CHOPSTICKS by Natsuko Imamura (Faber)
PEACOCKS OF INSTAGRAM by Deepa Rajagopalan (Astoria)
CRAFT: STORIES I WROTE FOR THE DEVIL by Ananda Lima (St Martin's Press)
ONLOOKERS by Ann Beattie (Scribner)
IN THIS RAVISHING WORLD by Nina Schuyler (Regal House Publishing)
HOLD YOUR FIRE by Chloe Wilson (Scribner)

CONCERNING THE FUTURE OF SOULS: NINETY-NINE STORIES OF AZRAEL by Joy Williams (Tin House Books)
ZAN: STORIES by Suzi Ehtesham-Zadeh (Dzanc Books)
HER BODY AMONG ANIMALS by Paola Ferrante (Influx Press)
MAPS OF IMAGINARY TOWNS by S J Bradley (Fly on the Wall)
BURIED DEEP AND OTHER STORIES by Naomi Novik (Del Rey)
A NEW DAY: STORIES by Sue Mell (She Writes Press)

Indie in the news Scratch Books



Duets: stories published by Scratch Books

I worked on a series of interviews with short story writers for The Word Factory, a superb organisation led by Cathy Galvin which champions the short story form. I was looking for the 'secret' to the short story – the inspirations, ideals and the work involved. Those interviews became the Reverse Engineering series.

I wanted to continue The Word Factory's work of cheerleading the form; I don't think it gets enough recognition. That's the goal with Scratch Books: to broaden the readership of the short story.

In our first couple of years I've had a white-knuckle grip over the editorial side of things. I've been looking out for writers who have been shortlisted for prizes, who've published short stories in magazines, to see how they go. I wanted to set the agenda initially so that people understand what they can expect from a Scratch Books publication.

We have lots of exciting projects on the horizon. There's a book which has been in the planning for a long while inspired by the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek. He was the editor of a zoological magazine for a time, until he was sacked when it turned out he'd been making up animals. We've sourced those original texts, and I'm now in the process of commissioning some brilliant writers to make up their own animals. It's a particularly interesting project for the 21st Century, when the Anthropocene is doing its absolute worst and we're making a huge number of animals extinct.

In October we're launching *Duets*, a book of eight stories, each co-written between two people. Eley Williams is writing with her wife, Nell Stevens; Jon McGregor asked to write with a brilliant writer called Gurnaik Johal. They're astonishing. There are companies who are doing great conventional short story collections, but I wanted to go further than that. ■

TOM CONAGHAN, PUBLISHER