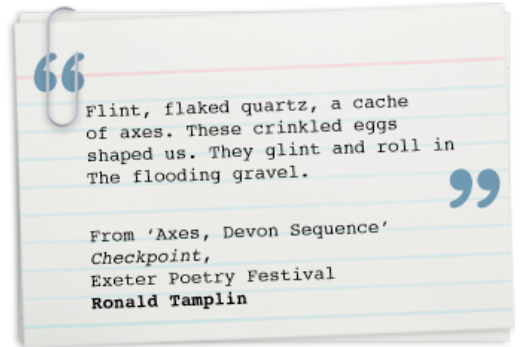




Good Morning! It's Thursday on September 01, 2011.

Literature for everyone in the South West

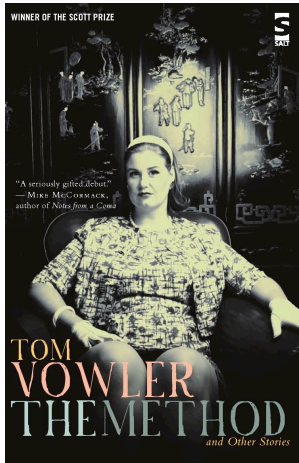


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Tom Vowler



Tom Vowler's debut short story collection, *The Method and Other Stories*, won the international Scott Prize in 2010 and Edge Hill Readers' Award in 2011. His forthcoming novel, *All That Binds Us*, is a dark psychological thriller set largely on Dartmoor. In 2007 he completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Plymouth.

Cyprus Well caught up with Tom last month to ask him a few questions about his writing.

The Method and Other Stories has been very well received. Can you tell us a bit about how the collection came together?

It began life in 2007 as part of my dissertation on a creative writing MA. Having previously been a faithful lover to the novel, I started discovering some of the best short fiction out there, and the adultery has continued since. I had wondered if it was possible to recreate the impact these stories had on me in my own fiction. By early 2009 the collection had doubled in length, whereupon I entered it into the Scott Prize.

I saw someone describe the collection as 'pint-sized vignettes of misery' and comparing you to McEwan and Malamud. How do you see the themes of the collection?

Ha, yes I read that review on Amazon. I think firstly I would say there is also much humour and lightness in the collection, but I suppose many of my stories are born from dark places. And whereas I'm aware of conscious choices such as narrative point of view and the voice



Literature Clips

M.R. Hall *The Disappeared*



John Haynes and You (courtesy Seren Books)



in a story, theme, like some primordial swamp that rises up into the composition, tends to choose me. The characters in my stories often endure much suffering, but it's their reaction to it that interests me.

What are you working on at the moment, and how's it going?

A second novel (third if you include a clumsy, credulous first attempt). This stage, for me, is both a thrilling and terrifying one. Exciting as the story slowly starts to consume you, to unfurl and take over your life, the possibilities endless, the characters waking you at night, making themselves known. But a little frightening that you're about to commit two years of blood, sweat and tears to something that, if you get it wrong, will forever gather dust in a drawer.

Are there writers who have particularly inspired you, and the way you write? Are there any new writers you admire?

Certainly there are writers I admire, who inspired me to write, but whereas I've tried to emulate the impact their prose had on me, I've not been aware of any pastiche of style. If we're talking short story writers (although the distinction is often a distraction: writers are writers, are they not?), it's good to start with the masters of the form: Chekhov, Carver, Updike, Munro, Tóibín, Helen Simpson and Lorrie Moore, to name a few. And there are some exciting new voices out there: Claire Wigfall, Philip Ó Ceallaigh, Adam Marek and Kevin Barry. I've not read an Ali Smith story I didn't love. But I rarely have to look beyond William Trevor, whose oeuvre is unlikely to be surpassed for its mastery.

There seems to be a slight resurgence in short story collections at the moment – what draws you to the form?

There's an intensity to the best short fiction, and a resonance that's often absent in its longer cousin. Even the best novels can become lumbering behemoths, weighed down by structure and form, by their necessary contrivance. The story can be both exhilarating and unsettling, shining as it does some small and oblique light on the phenomenon of being human. Linking the narrative arc of longer fiction with the lyricism and cadence of poetry, the story forces us from our comfort zone, whilst being better suited to allegory and experiment. Some of my favourite stories have reverberated far longer and more loudly than any novel I've read, something I never thought I'd say. And I read recently that there are some truths we can only express to each other through stories. I liked that.

Can you describe your writing environment and practice – do you have a particular place where you write, or time of day, number of words, for example?

There's a space in the garden for a writing den, which will be soundproof, except for the nearby river and lilting birdsong. There will be a small log-burner for the winter, an old radio, antique furniture and the smell of fresh coffee. Until then I'm in the spare room on a laminated desk, listening, as I write this, to a chainsaw and a hedge trimmer. The coffee is instant, the chair from Ikea.

I prefer to compose fiction in the mornings and edit it after dark, but hours are often irregular. The discipline of a daily word count is, for me, essential, especially for a longer project, otherwise it's easy to become overwhelmed looking at a blank page, wondering where a hundred thousand words are going to come from. A thousand a day is a useful minimum.

When you have a germ of an idea for a piece of writing, how do you begin to plan for the writing stage. Do you map events in advance, for example, or do you simply begin?

Writing a novel, I'm a great planner. Once I've researched everything, developed the characters, I like to know where I'm heading plot-wise. Of course this invariably shifts once the journey begins, but it's comforting to know there's method in the exposition, a sequence of events unspooling. The genesis of my short stories is somewhat different, as I allow myself free rein once the germ, as you term it, emerges. I like to get the bones, the first draft, of the story down in one sitting, or at least one day. And then the revision can begin: all writing, as someone said, is rewriting. So in this sense, I suppose there's a frisson, a visceral energy, to the latter not found in the former.

Do you have any advice for our readers who may wish to see their work published?

To be patient. To not submit work too soon. Rejection is a big part of most writers' lives, even those you regard as successful, so viewing the game as a long one is key. Sending stories to literary magazines and journals is a good place to begin – a barometer of where you are – starting with the smaller ones. Perhaps enter your work into a competition, though the numbers, and therefore the odds, involved here are vast. But you can improve your chances by making your fiction as strong as possible. And there's only one way I know to do

that: read. Everything you can. Learn why the best stories work, how the writer's achieved such effect. And I think a dissatisfaction with your work is key: it can never be good enough, you can, given more time, always make it better. Don't solicit feedback from anyone other than published writers, agents, publishers or editors – and especially not friends and family, unless they happen to work as one of the aforementioned. Be brave. Take risks.

At Cyprus Well, we are keeping an eye on developments in the digitising of books, Ipads, Kindles, etc. As an author, how do you view these developments?

There's an inevitability to this. I think in the US ebooks are outselling their physical counterparts for the first time. It's understandable for writers to be apprehensive at such sweeping change, but there's room for optimism as well, once the technology is embraced and made to work for authors and not just the companies who utilise it. I'd like to think of the two formats coexisting; certainly, for me, the tactility and smell of books and bookshops is an inestimably precious thing, but then again I've not bought a CD for quite a while now.

[Visit Tom Vowler's website](#)

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