

Sacrifice to the Novel

Tom Lee

Bestseller lists are testament to the dominance of the novel; the short story has become a victim of the novel's success. Hoping for a resurgence of this neglected form, with new work, *Greenfly*, Tom Lee delivers a masterclass in the art of contemporary short fiction.

Following in the tradition of seminal writers such as JD Salinger, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck, *Greenfly* is the debut collection of short stories from Tom Lee. Born in Essex in 1974, Lee studied at the University of East Anglia before completing an MA in American Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Lee now lives in East London and teaches at Goldsmiths University, London and the Open University. One story from the collection, *The Starving Millions*, was published in *Prospect* in July 2008, and another, *Berlin*, is due for publication in *The Sunday Times* magazine this April.

Greenfly is an assured collection of 12 individually outstanding narratives. The context of each tale varies wildly, from contemporary East London, to Gold Rush era USA, to a tropical desert island. Lee's talent is not in evoking a specific location or era, but rather for capturing the essence of human emotion and experience regardless of the time and space spectrum. Each story is distinct, yet recurring themes of mental illness, relationship breakdown, infidelity and pregnancy bind the collection with an ever-present promise of menace. Interspersing the often-bleak content are necessary moments of deadpan humour, yet even these remain blackly comic.

For Lee it was not a conscious decision to write short fiction. "I just found when I started writing, that's the way I wrote, like a lot of people do. The way I write is not very descriptive or lyrical, it suits my style." With such little room for error, the short story has a reputation for being notoriously difficult. Brevity dictates the format of a short story follows a very different pattern to that of a novel. There is typically an abrupt beginning, a small number of characters, with the action playing out over a brief time period and often following only a single major incident. "Short stories have to be very tightly written and subtle if they are going to work," explains Lee, "there's no room for great meanderings or whole paragraphs and pages, which are a waste of time. I suppose you can get away with more in a novel."

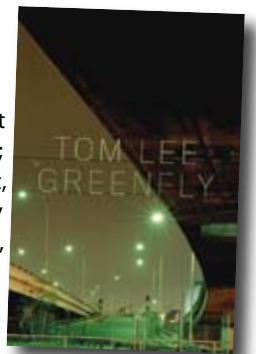
In addition to being hard to write, put bluntly, short stories are also hard to sell. "From the point of view of having a career, as a writer of short stories, it's a bit of a dead end. Publishers always say people don't buy collections of short stories. Even though people say to me 'I love short stories' they clearly don't buy them otherwise the sales figures would be up," suggests Lee. But what are the reasons behind the decline in popularity of the short story in the UK? They are hard to pinpoint. "You would think the short story would be ideal for the times we're in, as people don't actually have much time," Lee continues,

"however, I think short stories are difficult because they have to work in a short period; are sometimes subtle, experimental or different, and that's not what people really want. They want a fairly straightforward read; with a plot, characterisation and final resolution."

It is interesting to note that in the US the status of the short story is generally held in higher regard. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously turned to writing short narratives to pay his debts. Earning a living writing short stories has been lucrative for a raft of American authors, including Isaac Bashevis Singer, Eudora Welty, Alice Walker and John Updike. After the Second World War, the popularity of the short story in the UK declined, whereas the new crop of minimalist writers in the US, spearheaded by Raymond Carver, ensured the form's continuing success.

On the differing attitudes of the two nations, Lee muses, "I've heard arguments about social reality in the US being more suited to the short story. I don't know if those theories stand up." Having studied in both the UK and the US, Lee believes the university systems are a central tenet to the US/UK disparity. "I think a lot of the difference is to do with having these big writing programmes in US universities, people write short stories on those courses, and then the university often has a journal that publishes them, so the whole industry is supportive and encouraging. We're beginning to get that here, but we're 20 years behind in terms of university courses. In that way, I think short stories may become more of a feature in this country, as people come out of MAs writing short stories. I did anyway."

Title-story, *Greenfly*, is an intense and suffocating portrait of a housebound young woman. Janey is plagued by greenfly, which every night infest the house despite her best efforts to keep them out. Boyfriend B remains steadfastly oblivious; ignoring the insect problem is symbolic of how he deals with other problems in the relationship. With economical poetry, Lee's assured exploration of the subtleties of Janey and B's relationship is masterful. Janey is in great distress, but B lacks the emotional tools to help her. Janey's attempts to talk to B are thwarted by contemporary living — the television, his work, his friends, drink or drugs, something always interrupts the conversation they desperately need to have. Lee's uncompromising sentences convey a stark beauty congruent with the bleak content, illustrated in this passage from *Greenfly*: "The greenfly were everywhere. Too little light or not enough air, either way, they were all dead. Everywhere. Greenfly





on the bed, along windowsills, on the floor, on kitchen surfaces, on the top of cupboards and picture frames, the TV and the computer. There were green specks in the sugar, in plant pots, on dirty plates and bowls.

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Thousands of little deaths, all delicately rigid and contorted.”

Greenfly is the only tale in the collection set in modern-day London, although this location is not made explicit. Situational uncertainty is something Lee was at pains to cultivate. “It wasn’t a conscious decision to set the stories all over the place, some of them are hard to pin down. It was easier for me to write in this no-man’s land, I didn’t want to write strict realism, it’s easier to write about these slightly removed places. When you’re living in contemporary London and it’s all around you, it’s harder to write about it objectively.”

Beginning with fables, parables and morality tales, the short story has a tradition of delivering a moral resolution. Engaging with this, Lee explains: “I’m much more in the modern way of being more ambiguous, of not resolving things and not trying to judge.” *Starving Millions* is the story in the collection that has the most overtly political agenda. Two brothers, Nick and Ed, lead completely different lives. Nick enjoys all the trappings of the American Dream, with a big car, nice house and family. Ed and his wife Rosie live and work on a Christian hospital ship. After years of intermittent contact, the brothers are reunited for Nick’s

wedding, where old insecurities and prejudices are revisited. Nick resents his brother for making him feel guilty and frivolous, whilst conversely believing Ed sanctimonious and childishly idealistic. Lee

addresses the fact that opposing religious beliefs always elicit emotion and controversy: “I hope I struck a balance. In *Starving Millions* no brother is damned, or perhaps they both are, but not one more than the other. Politics can really kill a story. I fell out with an American

friend of mine about *Starving Millions*, as she thought the American references were unfair and biased. I don’t have a political axe to grind, not in my fiction anyway.”

Lee is optimistic that recent talk of a short story resurgence will materialise. Magazines in the US, such as *Esquire* and *The New Yorker* have always recognised the literary merit of the form. Culturally important and widely read publications in the UK, such as *Granta*, *The Sunday Times* magazine and the esteemed *Tell Tales* anthology, now also publish and pay well for short fiction. This is not definitive proof of a modern renaissance, but the signs are promising. A good short story delivers as much satisfaction as a 300 page novel, yet can be read and enjoyed completely in one sitting. In our modern lives, where time is the most precious commodity, the short story could still, yet, become the literary choice.

Published by Harvill Secker, *Greenfly* is available in all good bookshops. Visit www.randomhouse.com/harvillsecker.

Samantha Cracknell