

Your book of short fiction, *The Shenanigans*, is due to be published soon by Grand Iota. I gather that some of the stories go back quite a way.

Decades, in a couple of cases. 'The Siblings Jones', the oldest piece in the book, dates from 1985. It was originally part of a giveaway publication entitled *Excursions in the Dark*. I don't recall how many copies were made – perhaps only twenty-five or so – which, mimeographed and stapled, were foisted on friends. There are probably still a few copies kicking about. Then, a decade later, I wrote 'Trelawney the Lion-Tamer'. Nearly everything else in *The Shenanigans* was written in the last few years.

But when you started to publish, in the '70s, you wrote nothing but poetry.

My interest started even earlier than that, when I was still at school. I was young and impressionable, stunned by the power of words. Poetry meant everything to me. I was totally obsessed with it. Frank O'Hara, Tom Raworth, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, JH Prynne, and William Carlos Williams, to mention but a fat handful, were poets whose work I discovered around that time. I read a lot of fiction, too. Mainly novels. But I never thought I'd write one.

Why was that?

At the time, fiction posed problems I wasn't capable of solving. Plot. Character. Narrative. All were beyond me. Perhaps I wasn't reading closely enough, or intelligently enough. After all, WS Burroughs' fiction wasn't plot-bound or, except in the most sketchy way, character-driven, and his narratives tended to proceed in short, dislocated bursts. *The Naked Lunch* and the three books that followed it showed that his cut-up method could dispense with most of the standard props of fiction and still succeed. Of course, they're more like prose poems than novels; I suspect that's why I found them so appealing. He and Kafka, James Joyce, Blaise Cendrars, Julio Cortázar, Gertrude Stein and a host of inimitable others taught me not only how to see fiction differently but also how I might write a fiction that understands the rules but decides to downplay them. Or ignore them. Or gleefully bend them out of shape. Slightly later, mid '70s or thereabouts, I discovered Gilbert Sorrentino, John Hawkes and Robert Coover, all of whom had a profound influence on me. Also, in the UK and Ireland, Flann O'Brien, Ann Quin, BS Johnson, Sam Beckett, Christine Brooke-Rose, James Kelman, and one of the UK's few public intellectuals, Anthony Burgess. Later still: Georges Perec, Thomas Bernhard, Italo Calvino, Robert Walser.

You certainly love lists, don't you?

Evidence, I'd argue, of a tidy mind. Anyway, as my reading increased in breadth and depth, it became apparent that the most challenging and most satisfying fictions more often than not lay beyond the mainstream, in the margins.

So you were drawn to experimental writing?

Depends on what you mean by experimental. Actually, that's a term I don't like. As the composer Edgard Varèse put it: "I do not write experimental music. My experimenting is

done before I make the music. Afterwards, it is the listener who must experiment.” Well said, Ed! And what goes for music goes equally for writing. Unorthodox is, to my mind, a better term than experimental to describe what I do, but I don’t much care whether anyone agrees with me or not.

Okay, but terminology aside, the point still stands.

I suppose so. Next question, please.

Your novel, *Apropos Jimmy Inklings*, published in 2019, took a scattergun approach to the idea of a courtroom drama. In a café-cum-courtroom a gangster is on trial for his life, though he may actually be dead. The narrative pursues numerous, often quite elaborate asides, and the evidence presented is almost entirely of dubious value, leading to an unexpected conclusion. It’s quite a complex book. Did you block it out, section by section?

No.

Did you know what shape the book would take when you began to write it?

I didn’t even know what it was about or how long it would turn out to be. I wrote a first sentence that seemed promising and I continued until I had a page I felt comfortable with. Then I pressed on, one page at a time, with no real idea of where I was going. I try to surprise myself. I hope to surprise the reader, too.

You didn’t know what the story was about?

I still don’t. Not really. I think of it as the literary equivalent of a Swiss Army knife, with scores of specialist tools stored in the handle that can be pivoted out to meet every circumstance, however strange or unexpected. It’s a book about lots of things, most of which have something, however tangentially, to do with Jimmy Inklings, a showbiz personality who stands accused of being a gangster. Evidence is given, most of which is hearsay. Although a picture of Jimmy Inklings is built up, it’s probably highly inaccurate. He’s a folk hero of mythic proportions, having only an air-kiss relationship to reality (whatever that is).

Okay. So let me get this straight. As a writer you’re not a realist.

Yes.

Yes you are or yes you aren’t?

In fiction, reality is mediated. Raymond Carver to Leonora Carrington: less or more, more or less. Non-fiction is heavily mediated, too. Mediation is where the art creeps in, if it can.

So is *The Shenanigans* a work of art?

It's a work of fiction – sixteen fictions, to be precise. Some very, very short, some very long. Some fairly grim, too, but all, I hope, fun reads – in the sense that Kafka's and Bernhard's stories can be classed as fun reads, which to me they are. The role that humour plays is important.

You've ducked the question.

I have, haven't I? Despite being a bit of a know-all, I don't have the answer to everything.

The book of yours that was published prior to *Apropos Jimmy Inklings* came out as long ago as 2006, and the publication before that dates from 1985. Why such long gaps between books?

I write when I feel like it. When I don't, I don't. Sometimes I don't feel like it for years at a time – decades, even – but unlike some writers I don't fret when I'm not writing. I do other things instead. Photography, for example. As neither my photography nor my writing are money-spinners, the pressure is off. I can write what I want, when I want.

But Dr Johnson said, 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.'

Well, that's the kind of blockhead I am. Happily so. Dr J had to write for a living because he was otherwise unskilled. According to Boswell his bricklaying was atrocious.

Are you working on anything at the moment? If so, what?

Two projects. A novella which may turn out to be a novel, provisionally titled *U12*. Snappy, eh? Short for Unit 12, a prefabricated structure on an industrial estate in Catford. In basic terms it's about a civil servant going off the rails. The other project is bigger and bolder: a palimpsest novel entitled *Crime, My Destiny*.

Palimpsest? As in writing that faintly shows through a written overlay?

That's it, approximately. I've taken a true crime book, *Crime, My Destiny*, self-published in 1959 by an anonymous author, Charles W....., and woven every twentieth sentence from his book into my own, though not in the order that Charles W..... placed them. But even though I've adopted the title of the book, its chapter headings and many of its key characters, my story is completely different from the 1959 story. It's an exercise in formal constraint, a challenge and a source both of inspiration and, when the sentences I've adopted don't fit, like pieces from one jigsaw puzzle forced into a different puzzle, irritation. The book's first chapter can be found in *Golden Handcuffs Review # 29*.

Given your slow rate of production, should we expect to see more of it in the near future?

Probably not. *Crime, My Destiny* is likely to be a long-term project, years in the making. I've completed only two chapters so far. *U12*, or whatever it will eventually be called, will cross the finishing line first.

You've mentioned a number of writers who were, and perhaps still are, important to you. Perhaps you could recommend ten of their books, one per author.

I'll take this opportunity to broaden the scope, too, if I may.

Fine by me.

Then here goes:

Thomas Bernhard – *Concrete*
Nicola Barker – *The Yips*
Stanley Elkin – *The Living End*
Renata Adler – *Speedboat*
Gilbert Sorrentino – *Crystal Vision*
Johan de Wit – *Gero Nimo*
Flannery O'Connor – *A Good Man is Hard to Find*
Douglas Woolf – *Ya! & John-Juan*
Jocelyn Brooke – *The Orchid Trilogy*
Stacey Levine – *Frances Johnson*

And here's another ten, just for the hell of it:

James Purdy – *Cabot Wright Begins*
Antonio Lobo Antunes – *The Inquisitor's Manual*
Can Xue – *Five Spice Street*
Robert Walser – *The Tanners*
Brian Evenson – *Immobility*
Muriel Spark – *The Driver's Seat*
Robert Coover – *Pricksongs & Descants*
Henry Green – *Loving*
Diane Williams – *The Collected Stories*
Joseph Roth – *Hotel Savoy*