

To make a long story short... We want your short stories!

1ST PRIZE: \$1000
2ND & 3RD PRIZES: \$500

Submit to The Hudson Review's 2023 Short Story contest!

Opens September 1



BEHIND THE DESK

No. 8: Thomas Morris

"My first proper short story I wrote when I was twenty, for the Undercurrents short story competition in Abertridwr, which is a village just down the road."

By Callum McAllister
22 February 2018



I caught up with Thomas Morris in Caerphilly on a blisteringly hot summer's day. We met outside Glanmor's Tea House but immediately decided to go to Court House pub's beer garden, which boasts a panoramic view of the Castle. The bartender asked Tom how old he was, guessing at twenty two, and then guessed my age at thirty two, getting it almost perfectly ten years wrong for us both. We talked about what we were reading—Tom had just finished judging the Edge Hill Short Story Prize—and university. We both studied English Literature and Philosophy, and agreed that the reading was far lighter for Philosophy.

—Callum McAllister

CALLUM McALLISTER

What was the first thing you remember writing?

THOMAS MORRIS

I wrote a series with my father when I was three: it was called "Owl Man." Owl Man was a detective, and he was also an owl. He rode a skateboard, ate sugar mice, and had an arch enemy named Zac the Bear. After that, there wasn't much until I was eight and I wrote a horrible series called "Susan Goes Through Hell," which my mother read and was hugely disturbed by. It was basically an amalgamation of all the soap operas I'd been watching. I watched a lot of Neighbours. Like, religiously. I used to

Author Recent Posts

Callum McAllister is Assistant Editor of *The Cardiff Review*.

Join the thousands of readers who've signed up for our newsletter.

Your email goes here

SIGN UP

go to nursery just up by there [pointing to the community centre] and I'd say to my mum I didn't want to go because I was afraid I'd miss Neighbours. So there was very adult content in "Susan Goes Through Hell". A lot of abuse. A lot of murder. A lot of devastation. But I vividly remember that special glee of writing something and taking it through to my mother and watching her reaction as she read it.

My first proper short story I wrote when I was twenty, for the Undercurrents short story competition in Abertridwr, which is a village just down the road. The deadline was the Monday, and I finished the story on the Sunday. I thought I can't post it—it's not going to get there in time. So I went to the organizer's address, and as I put my story through the letterbox he saw me through the window. He invited me in and we had a chat about writing and I thought nothing of it. And as I came home, the phone was ringing: he'd read the story, and he was calling to tell me he really liked it. Such instant gratification! I was very lucky to have an unusually positive experience from the start.

It's hard to know what the impulse to write is. It's partly for myself but at some stage in the writing the reader does come into mind and you think, what do they expect? I think I'm especially in that frame of mind having been an editor, and having read so many poor stories. I was reading a thousand stories a year when I was editing *The Stinging Fly* so I'm very much aware of the reader, perhaps overly aware, more concerned with the reader than I should be. I've got to get that out of my head and go, "No, there's no point in me writing something just for someone else." I have to have some skin in the game.

CALLUM McALLISTER

Even now does it feel like you're writing purely from enjoyment?

THOMAS MORRIS

What's strange, for me—and for most people the first time out, I suppose—is that when I wrote *We Don't Know What We're Doing*, it was with no expectation of being published. Then the book did get published, and the process feels, in a way, like a loss of innocence—it has changed my relationship with my own writing. It's taken a good while to go back to that fundamental reason of why I began to write, which was to process experience and put some aesthetic shape to those experiences. I recently wrote in very big writing on a piece of paper, which I then stuck on my wall: "Write about how you're feeling!"; "Be real!" Very basic, silly things, but I needed to remind myself that it shouldn't be about writing in order to be published. You know, you can get lose the run of yourself very quickly. One of my favourite genres of TV is those midnight BBC 4 documentaries with a band from the 70s, where they talk about writing music and the whole recording process. It's always the same story: "And then we got to the fourth album and we had a full 36-piece orchestra playing with us, and we were like, what are we doing?"

CALLUM McALLISTER

I had so much enjoyment reading that Huck article about your first book which you never published, in a *schadenfreude* way.

THOMAS MORRIS

I read over some of the novel recently. It's not as bad as I've made out, but it's just not doing what I want fiction to do. I had this idea of what

literary fiction should be and I was writing under those constraints rather than allowing myself loose on it. The thing I'm writing at the moment—I don't know what it is, it's a long rant that's taken the form of a letter—I'm trying to be a little bit more immediate in it. So I'm just trying to let my mind go where it wants to go within a topic and then follow the associations. Whereas I think the stories in the collection, they're very considered. What I'm after now is a little more rawness.

CALLUM McALLISTER

You did a Creative Writing MA. Do you find that the formal structure of education is conducive to writing?

THOMAS MORRIS

For me, the MA was a year where I was going to take myself seriously. And also a year in which, other people were paid to take me seriously! The feedback aspect was so invaluable. I heard Karen Russell comparing writing a story to building a house and being locked out at the end—that when you've finished the house, you need someone else to go in and tell you what it's like from the inside. That's where the feedback is so important.

In September I'm moving to Cork, where I've got a Writing in Residence job at the university—I've been given the freedom to set my own MA module. What I've come up with is some kind of imitation/parody course where we'll read great short stories and then the students will have to write a parody, or something inspired by the work. It's partly based on a module I did on my MA with the Nabokov scholar, Thomas Karshan, based on parody and play which I found so, so freeing after the rigor and the structure of the workshop. To go and read Borges and Calvino and Ann Quin and be reminded that this element of play—which isn't necessarily encouraged in the workshop environment—is the hallmark of so much great literature. In a group environment, people can sometimes become risk averse. People are so often writing with kind of one hand tied behind their back. They're not letting loose. And I think tutors can loosen inhibitions through the reading that they prescribe as well—and I use the word prescribe in the medicative sense. People talk about influence that writers give, but I prefer the word "permission". When I read Donald Barthelme and Richard Brautigan, I took from their work a permission to write in a way that I hadn't when I'd been reading Carver.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Speaking of permission, do you think there is a sense of gatekeeping around the term "writer," and in the literary world generally?

THOMAS MORRIS

Having encountered publishing in London I can't get over how middle class and white it is, and how unrepresentative of Britain. And the workshops, the MAs, they're part of that institution. But at the same time, publishers in the UK see such a dearth of excellent work, they're rarely going to turn stuff down for any reason other than the work. But it's about who you've got in there making those decisions: white, middle class editors don't necessarily see the value in some stories, and can't relate to them in a way that someone from a different background would.

But in terms of the permission to be called a writer, it's a personal thing as well. I'm still very reluctant to say "I'm a writer." The imposter syndrome

looms large for me. And maybe for reasons of class and background. But I also just think that it's a typical experience for anyone who makes something and puts it out in the world. You're like, "Oh no, you've got it wrong, you shouldn't be taking it seriously!"

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Is there a way you artificially create the workshop community now?

THOMAS MORRIS

I've been sharing work with friends from way before I got onto the MA, so I always knew the benefits of that. And then there's a lot of others writers who I'm friends with, but with whom I wouldn't share my work. For some of them, that's not their process. I think that's something to bear in mind when people apply to MAs. I have a friend, Sam Coll, who published *The Abode of Fancy*. A gigantic novel, 200,000 words long. So overwrought, but that's its energy—in the richness of the language. In a workshop I have no idea how that would've gone down. Possibly not particularly well. I wonder: are some writers obsessed with the idea of editing, because they don't consider writing to be real work, that they're secretly ashamed of it as a job? So they talk about the drafting, they talk about the training, as a means of justifying it in a capitalist system.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

I'm interested in constraints on writing. One of the constraints that you've spoken about before is Caerphilly as a setting.

THOMAS MORRIS

There can be something overwhelming about absolute freedom. But once you set a constraint, you're freed from the burden of choice. Once I knew the stories more or less had to take place within this basin, it allowed for a certain imaginative freedom.

To be entirely honest, I think the whole Caerphilly thing has been overplayed in reviews and interviews. I wanted to write about psychological states. Once I had a real place, everything else became real in a way. Once I had the town, then I knew the people, and I knew how they would feel. But I didn't sit down with the intention of writing a collection set in Caerphilly. I wrote one story, set in Caerphilly, and then I wrote another that was set here, and someone said "You're writing stories set in Caerphilly," and I was like "So I am!" and I started setting all my stories in Caerphilly. Then say, Caerphilly Mountain; the way it appears differently to different characters reveals something about them. When a teacher sees the mountain in the story "Castle View", he thinks of the word "lumpy" and "bored" and then later on, in "Strange Traffic", the pensioner sees the mountain, he feels like it's at his back, supporting him. So there's a variety to be found in the one thing and that's interesting.

I was wary as well of reviews, because there can be a kind of think-piece-ism that says, "Here's a book set in a small Welsh town. What does it tell us about small towns across Britain?" And I understand the temptation to talk about the town element, but I did find it restrictively narrows the conversation around the work. Very rarely at an event do I get asked about individual stories. It's always: please talk about the short story and how it's different to the novel. The stories are never allowed to stand on their own. As a form, the short story is like the postcolonial Other to the novel. On literary panels, it never feels like I'm being asked to get grips with any

of the book's material, its thematic concerns. I just get asked, "Well, Caerphilly: it's a bit like a character in itself, isn't it?" And it's hard to remain polite, because what does that actually mean? Because if you go down that route of thinking it all becomes meaningless: I mean, what isn't a character then? Is time a character? Is language a character? And if we say yes to those things, then how do we distinguish those things from characters as in people? But if you sit on stage and deconstruct a question in that way, you'd likely look like a dick. The whole public interview thing is very strange, the entertainment side of it. It's hard to know for what purpose any of this is happening. It can be kind of galling to be on stage, getting laughs from a middle-class English audience who come up later and say, "Tell me young chap, how do you know so much about ordinary people?"

CALLUM McCALLISTER

I do wonder about the accessibility of writing, in that context.

THOMAS MORRIS

Jon McGregor made a speech where he's talking about how literary events can be so middle class, and how they've basically taken their form from an Oxbridge discussion. This idea of two people at the front, a table between them, a glass of water for each, sitting in front an audience, and the writer answering questions. Why have we decided that this is the form in which we're going to celebrate and discuss literature?

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Is there a tension between the solitary act of writing and the public nature of publishing—doing talks, signings?

THOAMS MORRIS

For some people there really is a tension. I'm actually someone who kind of enjoys it. As long as the event is set up in a way that some thought has gone into it, then it allows a connection to be made. I used to be kind of extroverted, though I find I'm becoming more introverted the more time I spend on my own. But I'm comfortable enough in that public environment. I know plenty of writers who aren't. And they feel that if they don't do an event, that they're letting down the publisher, or they're letting the book down; they're not giving it as good a chance as there needs to be. There's a tension there. And there's a definite economic tension. Most authors who publish a book still have a job, and then suddenly they have to take days off work to do an event—and then they're not necessarily being paid properly for it. And this is a bigger problem in Wales, where I think the conversation around writing being a "profession" or a "career" is at an earlier stage than it might be, say, in Ireland. You know: writers still not being paid to do readings where people are paying in, or not getting their travel paid, or their accommodation isn't being sorted, stuff like that. I think there's a lot of stuff that happens your first time round, and the second time round, you don't know what to avoid. But you don't want to look ungrateful, you know? You've spent so long where no one gives a shit, so for anyone to give a shit, you go, "Oh excellent, great! I will walk to Glasgow to do this event!"

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Do you conceive of stories thematically, or on the basis of some sort of philosophical or conceptual idea? Or is it more about character and storytelling?

THOMAS MORRIS

I do both. The final story in the collection came from my aunt. Her husband had passed away, and then some years later she was remarrying; I was eight at the time, and I remember her saying, “What happens when we all get to the afterlife? I’ll have two husbands!” And that was it: for twenty years I carried that idea round with me. Once I looked under the bonnet of it, it was filled with these very heavy ideas of the past, the present, and how you deal with regret. And that’s one of the things I only realised after finishing the story: when someone has died and you’re in grief, you’re in a kind of afterlife yourself—it’s the life after that person has passed. And that’s a very different state; it’s another life, in a way. And this all came from a very neat idea, though as soon as I looked at it properly, there were all these knotted philosophical questions attached to it. My first attempt at the story was too top-down heavy with the ideas. And so often if I approach a story with my own theoretical framework on it, then it doesn’t go anywhere. If the characters are acting according to this scheme that I’ve set up, then they aren’t acting freely, and the story can’t live.

The story “Fugue” was very much based on my experience of coming home from Ireland and feeling such disassociation—I had a moment of pure horror when I was looking at my mother and thinking, “I don’t know who you are.” And the writing became an exploration of those feelings, which led me to more interesting territory: the divided self, fugue states, derealisation, mental health. But so often, the difficulty is trying to come up with a story that transforms the specific psychology of a character into an observable behaviour, so you’re not just saying “I’ve come home; I feel disassociated.” It’s about trying to find a story which enacts the theme in some kind of way.

But I’m always changing my mind about the way to approach a story. For two years, I was thinking, “Right, I must make behaviour out of psychology.” And now part of me is wondering, “Well, why? Why not just go for pure psychology?” I’m always looking towards film to see what I can steal, because it’s the dominant storytelling mode. But one of the gifts of fiction, one of its great advantages over film, is that you’re freer to delve deeper into the interior. What I’m writing at the moment is a lot more interior, almost as a reaction to my own obsession in the collection of having things happen. So as a kind of constraint on myself, I’m trying to see what happens when I write less action and just try to pin down emotional states, through language alone—you know, actually try and articulate psychology without so much reliance on the behaviour. It’s a different kind of challenge, and one I might not yet be capable of doing well.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Do you think that creativity is about seeing what we can steal from other forms and other works of art?

THOMAS MORRIS

I think so often emerging writers feel limited to books—and they think that’s the only place you’re allowed to take influence from, which is utter bollocks. I was in Liverpool yesterday and I went to the Tate Gallery. They had an exhibition of William Blake’s paintings. I studied Blake’s poetry at GCSE, at A Level, and then at university, so I felt familiar with the work—but to actually see it up close: I was literally crying in the gallery. There’s nothing I can steal from those paintings, but there’s a reminder that there’s

a standard. So often you can set your sights so much lower, and start to see things in terms of the prevailing literary culture. It's important to remind yourself that there's such great art out there: painting, music, film, TV. And to remember that fact, not even for the purpose of "being creative", but just to encounter it, to just to allow yourself to be awed by brilliance.

In mainstream literary culture, we're all reading the same books, transmitting from them the same thoughts, and then writing the same things. If you look at visual art, and then you look at literature, you realise how realism is the utter, utter dominant mode in fiction. And I feel writing is always behind visual art. What's the equivalent of, like, Tracey Emin? I don't know. Knausgård? I remember seeing Picasso's early works at the National Gallery in Dublin and discovering that he started off as a realist. He was painting these very respectable portraits. I really don't know much about art, but I felt I was able to understand the journey he must have gone on in order to get reality down on the canvas as he saw it. And the move away from realism must have—at some level—felt like a risk for him. So yes, there's a huge well of inspiration to be drawn from other mediums and seeing how other artists make things happen, so to speak.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

I was reading an interview with David Foster Wallace where he said that realism had taken over literature. If you did anything different people would think it was weird up to the point it was published, at which point it would be accepted.

THOMAS MORRIS

Penguin have reissued a new translation of some of Kafka's short stories. They're so odd, and they're unfinished, and you look at them and you think a writer wouldn't put those out now—which, of course, Kafka never would have had Max Brod not got in there after he died—but the stories are brilliant. And with his Letters to Milena, I can't begin to imagine how Kafka would feel about people reading them. But they're glorious, glorious works of literature. And maybe a part of that is because maybe they were never meant to be published—they were never meant to be read or criticised by anyone except Milena. I think the fear of criticism can wield such a strong, negative influence on writers—and I don't know how you're meant to shake it off.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

That reminds me of the last story in your collection "Nos Da"—which I loved. It was one of those stories that made me feel physically anxious. Reviewers have written about that as "magical realism." It kind of illustrates that point, that if you do something different, people assume a trend, or categorise it, and are those genre and form definitions even useful?

THOMAS MORRIS

Yeah, there were a few reviews that said, "This is the last story in the collection so this is clearly the direction he's going in". But it's more the case that I'm constantly trying to find a form that's fitting for the story. So with "All the Boys", the stag-weekend story, I didn't know why it had to be in future tense but when I'd written an opening in past tense, it was just so dull. And I experimented, I played, I twisted it around, and once I'd landed on the future tense, the story emerged very quickly. I think in the last few years I've been reawoken to literature of ideas. And I think once

ideas are an impulse, it would seem inevitable that you might go off into slightly different non-realist modes. But also, I'm interested in emotional and psychological states. So the end of "Fugue", for example—that's a non-realist moment, but to me it felt psychologically true.

But I'm not really clear on what people mean when they use the phrase "magical realism"—sometimes I suspect just a way of granting work a certain literary respect that calling it "fantasy" or "sci-fi" wouldn't. You've got Margaret Atwood saying, "I don't write sci-fi, I write speculative fiction". On the one hand, I get what's she saying, but I also feel it's her say, "I wouldn't want to be a sci-fi writer, I don't want to have those covers for my books." I know "Nos Da" is different to the other stories, but it wasn't as if I put on different clothes to write it. What I learned was how hard it is to write that kind of story. It took two years to write. When you're world-building, the challenge is very different to when you're just writing about the world as we know it—you're trying to work out the rules of the place, its logic, and the implications of that logic—and then you need to decide how to convey all those details so that it's embedded in the fabric of the story, and you're not just dumping a whole load of exposition onto the reader.

I was asked recently what I thought the future of the short story would be, and my answer was: the merging and cross-pollination of genres. That's actually where the interesting stuff will happen, and I think it'll happen at this moment now because there's a generation of people who've gone through an education system which has eroded a lot of those old boundaries between the idea of "high" and "low" art.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

How do you feel about contemporary Welsh literary culture? Is there less of a scene here, compared to the rest of the UK and Ireland, and if so, are we doing something wrong?

THOMAS MORRIS

I think we're absolutely doing something wrong. What I learned in Ireland is the way in which a well-nurtured scene will seed other things. The Stinging Fly was set up twenty years ago, and around the magazine and press, so many other magazines and presses have sprung up. That's partly why there are so many journals in Ireland. Because people go, "Oh, anyone can set up a magazine? Cool, we'll do that." And there's a lot of mutual-support between those magazines, in terms of going to each other's events, co-hosting each other, promoting each other's work, subscribing to the magazines, reading the magazines, and generally being in conversation with one another, as well as offering practical support.

I've complained about this before, but there still aren't enough outlets here in Wales for emerging fiction writers. You've got the New Welsh Review, say, and you go to submit, and it says "Due to the volume of submissions, we currently aren't accepting fiction submissions." And you go, "What? Because you're getting a lot you're not accepting any?" I'm guessing it's a budget thing, but come on, just get someone in to read those submissions. And for a long time—this was before The Lonely Crowd, and before yourselves—New Welsh Review and Planet were the only places to submit work to.

You've got the bursary scheme in Wales, which is there to support writers and it does do good work, but I think it should be opened up to Welsh writers who live outside of Wales. I've met so many young Welsh writers in London, for example, who've moved there to get work, and because they're not living in Wales, they're not eligible for funding. Where's the sense in that?

I think we also need more individuals to step up to the plate and set up magazines and reading nights. And then we need to see the Arts Council, via whichever bodies it deems appropriate, to give real financial support to these new journals—because writers need these outlets, and a literary culture needs that kind of noise. It might be harder to immediately quantify, but giving £10,000 to a journal is so much better for the literary culture than giving £10,000 to a big literary festival. A journal allows an author to write into a space, but also against a space as well. Say you're a writer, and there are ten vibrant journals you can submit to, as there are in Ireland, and you go, "Right, I'm writing this weird story, Thomas Morris is editing *The Fly*, he's not going to be into that, I'll send it here to gorse where they take on weirder stuff; actually no The Dublin Review would prefer that; The Penny Dreadful, I think they would like that." I mean, you're automatically—if you choose to be—in a rich conversation with contemporary writing and contemporary writers. But that kind of "conversation"—one in which there's space for work of all stripes—can't take place here in Wales. And that's partly because we're stuck to England, and partly because the talent leaves Wales, and partly because I think there's a wrongheaded approach as to how we're funding things—there's too much focus on putting on expensive live events, and not enough focus on supporting writing on the page. If you gave £10,000 to a magazine, and said, "Right this is your budget for the year, you find that talent, identify, and then you disseminate that money through publishing writers, paying writers for their work, paying for editors to edit that work, and then organizing readings and launches," then suddenly you've got these networks that organically emerge. At the moment, the Welsh publishing houses, fair play, are doing all the heavy lifting, but they're publishing many writers who aren't ready, and for whom there's no obvious steady readership. Writers need permission and they need encouragement, and that's what the journals give. It gives them the experience of being edited, of being taken seriously. You get a story published, and there's hope. You go "All right I'll write another one!" And that's not to say a Welsh writer can't submit into Ireland or to England, but it's a different literary conversation that's being had in those countries.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Do you write short stories because you enjoy reading them, or is it something specific about writing them?

THOMAS MORRIS

It came from receiving so much pleasure from the reading. I can think of perfect short stories, in a way that I can't think of perfect novels. Those final lines in a short story, when it hits home and you get those shivers; I'm addicted to that feeling. A lot of pseudo theory is taught about the short story, based essentially on Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice*, where he talks about it as the form for people "on the edges". And in every single academic book on short stories, this theory is trotted out: it's a form about loneliness. As if novels don't address loneliness! As if that's all a short story can do! And in fairness, in a lot of the classic "literary" short

stories, it is about that moment where someone is left alone in their head, staring out the window. And for my book, this notion of loneliness was a big influence. I was writing from my own head-lonelinesses, my own bouts of solipsism—and trying to write through those feelings. I wrote the stories between the hours of eleven at night and three in the morning; there's a very special kind of loneliness going on then.

And there's something about the short story, because of its length, where you can have that sustained level of melancholy: there's a controlled despair. You know it will end soon. You can obviously do that in a novel, too, but as a writer you're going to be steeped in those feelings for a lot longer—however long it takes you to write the thing! That's why I was anxious about going into a novel because I thought I can't dig that far down again for such a sustained period. Especially after "Nos Da", which I wrote over two years. I was very down during the drafting of—for many reasons—and writing the story kind of killed me. Afterwards, I thought fuck, I can't do that again. There are so many other ways to write, but that was the only way I knew how to. Now I feel like I've got a better sense of how to access those feelings.

One of the things I'm particularly interested in at the moment is not so much characters but the senses of self. Generally, the short story has fewer characters than a novel—and that means there are fewer possibilities for the character to be in flux. In a novel, you think of Virginia Woolf, her characters are constantly changing depending on the people they're with. In the short story, we're often getting closer to this one self, and that's not to say it's the true self, but it's often the self that's in despair. Whereas at the moment, I'm interested in this moving between our various selves.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Is it a more freeing experience, writing something longer?

THOMAS MORRIS

I spent a year and a half writing different things, thinking I was writing novels, and I was bored because I didn't want to be stuck to one point of view, one mode. But I've struck upon a voice now, and a form, and it's allowing me to go directly into all these different modes within the one voice. There's something different going on in an extended form. Often, short stories are about a turning point; a character sees the world anew. But what happens next? That's what I found when I was writing "Nos Da"—I was reaching the walls of the short story, or at least the limits of my abilities as a short story writer, because I was trying to deal with time. I was into novel territory because I wanted to deal with the implications of things. And there's a distinct pleasure to be had when you're dealing with one character, trying to follow that point of view and that psychology and seeing how they're impacted by change.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Do you still keep up those midnight writing habits? It seems unsustainable.

THOMAS MORRIS

It's horrible for your health. When I came back home last summer I was living in a different time zone to my mother. I was going to bed at five, waking up at one, and even if you get eight or nine hours sleep, it's not the same sleep. Your perceptions get skewed: you hear and see things differently. It was like I was living behind glass. But I had this very purist

idea of: this is what I need. I was basically performing surgery on myself without anaesthetic. The material I was dealing with was very personal, wounded stuff. It's very self-punishing. So here I am, living at home, I'm on a farm, I can't drive. I don't want to be a hassle to other people so I don't get off the farm as much as I should, and I'm in my room writing into the dark hours of the night. That was the only way I knew how to do it. But that's not a sustainable life. I've been back home for a year now, and I feel like I've learned more about myself and the process in this year than I have in the thirty years up to it. I'm also trying now to come to terms with why I felt I had to be so hard on myself. I don't know if part of that is about this guilt around writing, about it not being a real job.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Also, that if you start writing, there's no real way of having that be your job in the way that it supports your income. And because of the society we live in, we've then got to spend the nine-to-five—which is probably the best time to be writing anything—doing something else.

THOMAS MORRIS

It's the absurd way that things have been set up. How much time have you got left for yourself and the endeavour you want to pursue, if you're not getting that fulfilment in your work life? My motivation for a long time has been to not work in a job I hate. There's that Sartrean idea of freedom to and freedom from—and what I wanted was freedom from having to do things I didn't want to do, but I hadn't considered what I actually wanted the freedom to do. I ended up building a little prison for myself out of guilt, for having the freedom in the first place, when other people didn't have it. But I think all this is take a lifetime of work in itself—to be at ease with the thing that you're doing.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Do you think that studying a book ruins it?

THOMAS MORRIS

Not if it's my book! But yes, I think of my A levels: I studied *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, *Brave New World*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and I felt I knew them inside out by the end, in a way that is completely different to when you study books at university, even. Getting that close to those texts taught me how to get closer to all texts, how to pay attention to the way language is used all around us. But it's not essential, and I'd be less concerned about those kind of fears than, say, the fears of people who haven't studied literature and worry that they aren't enjoying the book "properly". I have friends and family who say this about books, and it's really quite sad. So part of me would want to question the validity of formally studying literature in order to give support for those who haven't formally studied it. But—and with that large caveat—I do feel I've benefited from studying literature. Though I often wonder what kind of stuff I'd be writing now had I not done an English degree, if I didn't know the "rules".

Sometimes, what-you-don't-know is hugely freeing. I think about my relationship with the Welsh short story—I had read so few dead Welsh writers, and that was liberating because I didn't feel I was writing in answer to anything. I was responding, in a way, to American writers and Irish writers. Whereas I know of Irish writers who are trying to write short stories, and you only have to say the words "Irish short story" and there's suddenly all these connotations.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

You said before that every Irish writer has to confront Joyce. Were there writers you had to confront?

THOMAS MORRIS

It was less about “confronting” and more about getting certain authors out of my system. My first stories were Carver rip-offs, or Frank O’Connor imitations. I went through stages of trying to write different kinds of stories in the modes of these writers. And then I’d realise the limitations of each. Raymond Carver, whenever I imitated, there was an air of depression to my work, and so I needed someone else. So I brought in Barthelme, and suddenly there was more absurdity. Then I was like, oh I don’t have the tenderness now. And it’s like being at a music deck. That said, every time I write a short story and I come to the end, I do feel I am, in some way, confronting “The Dead” by Joyce, because it’s such a glorious ending.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

I’ve found that, at least in the last few years, every time I see writer I read their short stories first.

THOMAS MORRIS

What’s your thinking around that?

CALLUM McCALLISTER

I think there’s a certain craft to the short story; if you read their short stories, and they’re great, you know they have the consideration for everything they do.

THOMAS MORRIS

I think that’s absolutely true. And you can tell when a novelist has written a short story if they’re not a real short-story lover. The best short story writers encode a sentence with more information than it has a right to bear.

CALLUM McCALLISTER

Away from the writing, do you find that you need to have other projects to remain sane? You’re still part of The Stinging Fly, you’ve got Out of Office Stories and the Tynyletter, and you had Dubliners 100, a little while ago.

THOMAS MORRIS

Absolutely. I’ve heard prose writers talk about moving into theatre, just because they wanted to work with other people, have colleagues. There are a few projects I have in mind, things where I’d like to collaborate with others. To be honest, I’m prone to bouts of solipsism, so I like the feeling of being connected, of sharing things with people. With Tynyletter, I send out my favourite stories every two weeks. I was really enjoying it, but after a while I felt uneasy about how quickly I was trying to commodify it. Within a few months, I had a thousand subscribers, and I was like, “Woo! I’ll get publishers involved, we’ll have a free-book-giveaway, I’ll build myself a brand!” I had to catch myself and go, “Wait, I actually just want to recommend stories to people.” In a capitalist society, things have an uncanny knack of flowing towards “professionalism”.

And what's what's been strange these last two years. Being a "professional writer" brings with it these whole other questions you've never had to consider before: your public persona, how you're being received, personality traits that seem affected when put under a different light—and also this strange humming fear of having your gross ignorance made public. At the start, one of my fears was turning up to a panel event and the interviewer saying to me [extends an imaginary microphone] "So, Israel and Palestine: What do you think?" That's a particularly absurd example, I know, but I do think that when a writer is up on the stage, there's an assumption that they know things. But so much of writing, or my writing at least, is about not-knowing, it's about stumbling through the dark, trying to work out how things piece together. It can be disorientating to go from a public event where you feel there's an expectation to be an expert, to have thought-through opinions—and then to go back to the page, and give yourself up again to the humility, to the process of stepping back, and letting the work emerge in its own way.

That's partly why, in the lead-up to today, I directed you to the interviews I've done in the past—so that I knew I couldn't just trot out the same old answers, because I end up feeling so phony doing that. That's why it's nice to be asked questions you haven't been asked before. The answers won't sound particularly smart, but the process of working them out will hopefully take you to somewhere you didn't expect your mind to go.

Thomas Morris' debut story collection, We Don't Know What We're Doing (Faber & Faber, 2015) was chosen as a Book of the Year by The Guardian, The Observer, The Spectator, The Irish Times, and The Irish Independent.

This interview originally appeared in issue 8 of *The Cardiff Review*—
Summer 2017.



PREVIOUS READ:

New Welsh Writers: Susie Wild

NEXT READ:

Foucault's History of Sexuality Gets
a Fourth Volume, Against the Late
Author's Wishes

The Cardiff Review is produced by a small but mighty team of editors who strive to publish superb and diverse writing, including fiction, poetry, nonfiction, criticism, and interviews.

Your donation will help ensure that we can continue to publish the magazine and give emerging voices a home.

Following your donation, a receipt will be emailed to you.

Donations of £50 or more will receive a free **Bookish tote bag** from *The Cardiff Review's* sister brand, **Bookish**.