The Boat

by Nam Le

Notes by

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The notewriter
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The text
References in these notes are to The Boat by Nam Le (Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Group, Melbourne, 2008).
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The short story

Nam Le’s first book was published to a chorus of praise – not unusual for a debut writer, but what was unusual was that The Boat is not a novel, but a collection of short stories. Short stories are often seen as the poor cousin of the novel, favoured by students and amateur creative-writing competitions and unworthy of the dedication of ‘serious’ writers (and readers). Yet the short story has a long and proud history. While myths, fables and fairy tales are seen as the forerunners of the form, it came into its own in the 19th century with the rise of gothic literature and horror stories. As a literary form, the short story allowed unprecedented experimentation. It needn’t have a beginning, a middle and an end. Characters did not have to be elaborately described, nor their histories painstakingly plotted out. Edgar Allen Poe was a devotee, defining the form as “a story that concentrates on a unique or single effect and one in which the totality of effect is the main objective”.

Many notable novel writers are equally well regarded for their short stories, including Thomas Hardy, Henry James and Somerset Maugham. In Russia, Alexander Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol mastered the form, with Gogol’s The Overcoat (1842) still seen as a perfect example. The rise of modernism and literary experimentation didn’t quell writers’ enthusiasm for short stories throughout the 20th century: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Franz Kafka, Katherine Mansfield, Vladimir Nabokov and Angela Carter were all disciples of the form. In more recent years, however, the attraction of the short story (for writers and readers) seems to have declined, with many publishing houses unwilling to produce collections, apart from the occasional ‘Best of’ anthologies. All of this makes the success of The Boat even more impressive and worthy of discussion.
What is it about these stories that has captured the imagination of readers and garnered for Le such unrestrained praise?

The old verities

In his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner said that a writer must leave “no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed – love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” Le chose this list as the title of the collection’s opening story but it could be equally well applied to any of the stories. While they are all wildly different in setting, character and voice, there are some unifying factors. Each of the stories is told from the point of view of the main character. There are no observatory narrators – all the stories are told from the centre out, allowing the reader to see the world as Le’s characters do. On a surface level, the stories share themes of death, despair and illness. Upon closer inspection the reader discovers an inevitability in each story that sets the parameters of the narrative, providing a border for the characters and intensifying their experience. This is the beauty of the short story – while a novel can ramble on through character’s lives, allowing them to careen from one situation to the next, a short story, by its very definition, must be contained. In ‘Cartagena’, Ron cannot hope to escape the wrath of his drug lord boss, just as in ‘Halflead Bay’, Jamie cannot escape the small town consequences of his liaison with Alison. The inevitability of illness and death overshadows the decisions of Henry in ‘Meeting Elise’, Jamie’s mother in ‘Halflead Bay’ and all the characters in ‘Hiroshima’.

Each of the characters is displaced or in transit – the short story has captured them in a moment of truth. In ‘Tehran Calling’, Sarah’s relationship has ended (her youth) and she comes to terms with this in a city struggling to reinvent itself in a new world of globalism and growing fundamentalism. In ‘Halflead Bay’, Jamie must leave his boyhood too soon as he struggles to accept his mother’s imminent
death. And in ‘The Boat’, which gives the collection its title, the entire story is a journey as Mai makes her way from Vietnam to Australia, just as Le and his parents did.

**Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice**

This story is seemingly autobiographical and its position at the front of the collection was strategic on Le’s part. Here he sets up many of the questions that the following stories will ask: What makes a short story successful? Does ethnic literature have a place? Can you only write about what you know? Can you tell a story that is not your own?

Le uses metafiction, a popular postmodern literary device to set up his collection. Metafiction is a self-referential tool where the writer self-consciously addresses the devices of writing by referring to the parameters of fiction and alerting readers to the storytelling equipment in their arsenal. In this case, Le questions the importance of short stories from within a short story by having a character, who is struggling to overcome writer’s block, turn to the vices of great writer’s past: whisky, late nights and avoidance. The character of Le recalls a writing instructor said, “Ethnic literature’s hot. And important too” (p.8). Le then goes on to write a string of stories that could be classed as ethnic literature – except they are nearly all about ethnicities and cultures that are not strictly his own. In doing so, he questions the instructor’s statement, and actively encourages the reader to do so too.

The cloud of publicity that surrounded publication of *The Boat* ensured that, despite him being a debut novelist, the public knew a lot about Nam Le. As a child, he came to Australia with his parents, a family of ‘boat people’. He grew up in Melbourne and became a lawyer, but becoming bored with that he quit his job and moved to Iowa to take part in the eminent writers’ workshop there. All of these facts apply both to Nam Le the writer, and Nam Le the character in the first story. But while the character has a tense
relationship with his father and a troubled past, the writer has not. Helen Garner uses similar metafictional devices to question the line between fiction and reality. In her recent book, *The Spare Room* she wrote of a character called Helen who shared much of her own characteristics and circumstance – but was (she maintained, in the face of criticism) fictional. This blurring of definitions can ask a lot of the reader, but in doing so, it also rewards the reader with a deeper understanding of the way we tell stories, the assumptions that we cling to and the possibilities of fiction.

In a review of *The Boat*, Martin Shaw pointed out that the final line of ‘Love and Honour …’ – “how that world could be shattered by a small stone dropped like a single syllable” (p.30) – alludes to Kafka’s dictum: “A book must be an axe to break the seas frozen inside our souls.” By finishing the first story with this image, Le is telling the reader that this is what he wants his stories to do – to bring the reader into a brief moment of a life far removed from their own and to shatter their presumptions by giving faces, names and lives to the strangers we are surrounded by every day.

**Cartagena**

Set in Medellín, in Columbia, ‘Cartagena’ is about as far away as possible from a writers’ workshop in middle America. In Medellín, people don’t live long and children perform the roles of adults. The actions that Eduardo, Luis, Claudia and Juan (known to all as Ron) take as revenge are shocking in their (seemingly) unprovoked brutality – and these actions are made all the more shocking as we realise their ages. “It is strange, I think – their readiness to kill – for as far as I know, none of them has ever committed the act.” (p.39)

The form of the short story plunges the reader immediately into the action without giving background. Le uses a completely different voice in each of his stories – here he reduces his vocabulary from the writerly tone of the story before. “I am no child, wet behind the ears. I have now fourteen years and two months.” (p.42) ‘Cartagena’ is peppered with Spanish words that wash over the reader, subtly
reminding us that we are in a different place, but also making us feel a little uneasy: we are outsiders, we don’t know how things work here, we cannot presume that our learned moral codes apply.

The characters are aware of the rest of the world that they will probably never see and which is embodied in the mythical sounding Cartagena. “In Cartagena, everything is nothing like here” (p.32). When the gang tell stories to each other, they verify the reality of these other worlds with the confirmations “like in the movies” (p.31) and “like on MTV” (p.32). Geographically, their existence in the barrios may be limited, but the reader soon learns that the experiences of these children with life, death and the ever present drugs, is unfortunately extensive. They have already seen a friend killed for dealing cocaine, while another has left to join his older brother in the militia.

The character of Ron works because he is sympathetic yet believable. He is sucked in by the glamour and fast living of his boss, El Padre, who instructs Ron on his targets as a hit man. Ron speaks in awe of the punishment El Padre has meted out upon his enemies, but he is also aware that the more involved he becomes, the more precarious is his own life. As the story is told from Ron’s point of view, it has an interiority and honesty that endears the reader to him. “We arrive at the spot. It is dark. Ever since I showed it to Claudia she thinks of it as our spot, but in fact I prefer to go there without her” (p.45). Like the other stories, Cartagena is about the inevitability of death: “It may not make a man happy, he said, but at least there is honour in it” (p.49).

Meeting Elise

“She’s coming today” (p.76). With a beginning like this, the reader is plunged immediately into the action. While the author’s delivery of some background information is rather heavy-handed (Henry reads his daughter’s biography and other information on her website) for the most part Le allows the reader to discover at their
own pace. Henry is a cranky, sick old man – and being inside his head doesn’t seem to make him anymore forgivable to the reader.

It was Jacob Apelman’s doing that I met Olivia eighteen years ago, when I was unhappily married to a terminally passive-aggressive wife, father to a chronically ailing baby daughter, and caretaker of a career that made my domestic life seem idyllic. (pp.83–84)

Ageing and broken, Henry is described unsparingly, but though he is the epitome of the self-involved artist (begging forgiveness when it doesn’t matter anymore) he is also genuine. “I’m screwing this up but I know there’s something I can say, something perfect, something that will smooth over the past, pucker open the future” (p.95).

The reader is first told that Olivia was Henry’s model and that she was only 17 when they met. She is spoken of only in the past tense and we jump to conclusions about their affair being no more than a passing fling. Later we learn that Henry really did love Olivia and their relationship stood the test of time: until death do them part. There is a lot of illness in this story – Henry himself is in excruciating pain and his memories of his daughter are confined to a sickly swaddled creature. Mortality taunts Henry, though the ending suggests that perhaps it will offer the only comfort. The cliché of a painter losing his sight and his sense of colour is underwritten by the detail of his medical problems – this is real pain and suffering, it is not metaphorical.

**Halflead Bay**

This coming-of-age story is set in an Australian fishing town and is essentially a teenager’s explorations of the old verities. The parameters of a small town make it an excellent setting for a short story – the characters and actions are contained and everything is intertwined. Jamie is a good kid who wants to find his way in the world and wants his parents to be proud of him but he knows they are preoccupied with other, bigger things. Jamie’s mother is in the last months of her life, five years after a diagnosis of multiple
sclerosis. She wants to be there for Jamie but is frustrated that her body is preventing her from doing so. When she sees Jamie and Alison kiss, she realises that she is watching him embrace life and discover his body, just as she is turning to death, her body ravaged by her illness. Jamie is aware of this irony too, he watches the immensity of life and the inevitability of death play out in his mother and he feels helpless. “Everyone carried on … as though every moment wasn’t actually a dare. As though every word wasn’t a word more, every act a further act of waiting” (p.112).

Throughout ‘Halflead Bay’ Jamie’s feelings and actions are tempered by the shadowy existence of Michael. In many ways, Jamie resents the fact that things are simpler for his younger brother – he reminds him of the child he used to be and the way things were before his mum got sick. In ‘Cartagena’, it was Hernando who looked out on the world and asked whether people were actually happy. In ‘Halflead Bay’, it is Jamie’s mother who wants people to look beyond the pity, compassion and sacrifice: “Everyone asks me if I’m okay. No one ever asks me if I’m happy” (p.137).

Hiroshima

Much of the power of this story is drawn from its title and everything that this single word conjures up. Le skilfully uses our prior knowledge of what happened in Hiroshima to land us deep in the story – he doesn’t need to describe the circumstance, enabling him to keep the writing spare and true to the voice of a child. The impact of the story is intensified because the reader knows what is going to happen but the characters are entirely unaware. “In Kobe there are bombs. In Yokohama there are bombs. In Nagoya there are bombs. Tokyo, says Mother. Yes, in Tokyo. But not here – we are lucky here” (p.193).

By using a young narrator, Le is able to avoid over-analysing the situation – it is all show, don’t tell. Mayako reports things simply, as she understands them. Her brother is in the army and her sister is in the Young Women’s Volunteers Corps and Students’ Patriotic
League. Mayako looks up to them and parrots the propaganda they believe. “Honourable death before surrender” (p.187). “One hundred million deaths with honour!” (p.190). When Mayako repeats what she has heard to her father: “the Chinese are godless bandits”, he looks away from her for “a long time like a cat” (p.194). His response tells the reader he is upset to hear her say these things and that he doesn’t believe them himself.

Again, like the other stories, it is the inevitable, horrible reality of death that all the characters seem to be careening towards. But unlike the other stories, the characters here do not question the old verities, they accept them as unshakeable truths. There is no narrative arc in this story, no question of futures and choices, just the slow building of tension towards the flash of light, which Mayako compares to a camera flash, but we know is something indescribably worse.

**Tehran Calling**

Sarah, the narrator, is new to Tehran. Her status as an outsider allows Le to unfold the city and present it as it would appear to a stranger’s eyes. Deep in Tehran during Ashura, a holy week, there is colour and passion and religion everywhere – a world far removed from Sarah’s corporate life in America. Sarah had always been unsure of herself, terrified of looking too closely at her life choices and purpose. Her relationship with Paul was not just about love and companionship: “He was the aberration of her life: the relief from her lifelong suspicion that she was, at heart, a hollow person, who clung to hollow things” (p.209). While at university, Sarah was grateful for Parvin’s friendship as he never judged her. When she met Paul, however, Sarah felt she had found someone who “could anchor her” (p.224), and she and Parvin drifted apart. Sarah started to see Parvin’s political convictions and radio show as a staged parody and when she comes to Tehran, despite the vivid reality of the city – words “seemed like a language that had been melted,
meandering up and down like quavers and clefs on invisible staves” (p.229) – she just cannot shake this feeling.

“‘You know,’ she said, ‘what you’re doing. All this. It doesn’t mean anything to me’” (p.241). As an outsider to Iran and Islam, Sarah can voice her confusion. She doesn’t understand Parvin’s motives, emotionally or intellectually. ‘Tehran Calling’ is a discussion of the ‘other’, an attempt to understand those who are not ourselves. The bigger story of Iran is told through the smaller story of Sarah. Both are trying to shake their pasts, find out what is important or what they believe in, and move on into the future.

**The Boat**

The most harrowing of stories, ‘The Boat’ eschews all the old verities in favour of the most primal of human needs – survival. The conditions suffered by these refugees on a boat to Australia would be unfathomable to almost any reader. So desperate is their want to be in a country that we take for granted, that they put their life at immense risk. The story begins in the hold of the boat as it pitches and tosses in stormy seas. In three short paragraphs, Le manages to convey the claustrophobic danger of the situation.

Mai befriends Quyen, and Quyen’s son Truong. While Mai is on the boat at the will of her parent’s, she later learns that Quyen had given Truong over to the care of her aunt as he had been born out of marriage. Wanting to start a new life with the son she hardly knew, Quyen abducted Truong and brought him on the boat. When the damaged boat drifts at sea, she feels remorseful and responsible for the situation and lashes out at Mai, who is only trying to help. Mai’s fever-soaked memories of her own family give the reader some background to her situation, but the current situation is so traumatic and terrifying that her past matters little – this is a story that captures the present and manipulates the reader’s perception of time to match that of the characters.
“They had ventured into the fields of the dead, those plots of ocean where thousands had capsized with their scows and drowned” (p.268). Le reminds readers that this is not a one-off trip, that it happens day after day and many people don’t survive – in this story mortality is seen as a release: “Later that evening, a young teenage girl with chicken legs wandered over to the gunwale and in a motion like a bow that didn’t stop, toppled gracefully over the side” (p.294). Truong does not survive the crossing. The cruel reality of the situation is summed up in the final line, when the men toss his body as far as possible from the boat to ensure he is out of sight when the sharks arrive. A harsher, and perhaps more true, story than the others in the collection, ‘The Boat’ is likely to haunt the reader long after the others are forgotten.

Endnotes


Further reading

Postcards from Surfers by Helen Garner [CAE Box 449]
True Stories by Helen Garner [CAE Box 1501]
Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri [CAE Box 1763]
Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka [CAE Box 806]
Drinking Coffee Elsewhere by ZZ Packer [CAE Box 1829]
Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? By Raymond Carver
Questions for discussion

1. Each of the characters is displaced or in transit. How does this affect the pace of the stories?

2. Le writes about cultures that are not his own and places he has not been. Does this affect your reading of the stories? Do they seem authentic? Can people ‘own’ stories, or can they be told by anyone?

3. Is there such a thing as ethnic literature or is this just a way of marketing writing that isn’t about the Western world? Is it helpful to describe writing in this way or is it a form of pigeonholing?

4. Each story is just a small moment in the characters’ lives. Are there any stories you wanted to read more of? Could you see any of them as novel length, or was Le right to write them as short stories?

5. In ‘Love and Honour …’, Le has named the character after himself and they share many characteristics. Why do you think he did this? Does it change your reading of the story to know that it is fictional? Can you recall any books that have been controversial for their blurring of the lines between fiction and reality?

6. In ‘Cartagena’ Ron’s father was killed when a bus was hijacked. “His death was a mistake – everyone told us this … What no one told us was that in this city, no death is entirely a mistake” (p.58). Considering this and what life was like in Medellin, do you think Ron had a choice in becoming a hit man? What would have happened if Claudia had not given him the grenade?
7. In ‘Meeting Elise’, the relationship between Henry and his daughter Elise is never resolved. Why do you think she wants nothing to do with him? Why has he waited so long to contact her? Do you think his previous efforts were half-hearted or sincere?

8. In ‘Halflead Bay’, when Jamie is punched by Dory, he hears Dory’s voice telling him to stay down. Why do you think Dory didn’t want to fight?

9. ‘Hiroshima’ is told from the point of view of a young girl. Why do you think Le chose her as a narrator?

10. In ‘Tehran Calling’, do you think Sarah would have stepped out the window at the end if Mahmoud hadn’t called her name? Why does he take her to the hotel room?

11. Do Sarah and Parvin understand each other? Are Sarah’s problems with herself and her relationship trivial when compared with Parvin’s life? Why do you think she went to visit Parvin?

12. Does reading The Boat give you more understanding of what people will do to survive or to find a better life? How do personal stories like these affect your reading and understanding of political situations?

13. What makes a successful short story?