Title: The Fate of the Long Short Story

Number: S223
Date/Time: 3:20pm - 4:35pm on Saturday February 10, 2024
Location: Room 2103A, Kansas City Convention Center, Street Level

Event Description
The short fiction landscape is crackling with change. Excitement for flash and micro fiction is as strong as ever but as many print magazines shutter, there seems to be an ever-tightening belt about the word counts of longer short stories. Panelists will discuss the challenges of writing and publishing longer short stories in today’s literary marketplace and how magazines' shifting word count requirements are impacting the stories they tell and read.

Event Category:
Fiction Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer and Moderator:
Maegan Poland is an Assistant Professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her short story collection What Makes You Think You’re Awake? won the Bakwin Award and was published in 2021 by Blair Press. Her fiction has been published in Mississippi Review, Pleiades, Juked, and elsewhere.

Event Participants and Short Bios:

K.C. Mead-Brewer's weird, dark fiction often explores issues related to DV and sexual identity. Her stories appear in Electric Literature, Strange Horizons, The Rumpus, and elsewhere. She attended Tin House's 2018 Winter Workshop
and the 2018 Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop.

Yohanca Delgado is a 2021-2023 Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and 2022 NEA fellow. Her writing appears in the 2022 editions of Best American Short Stories and the O'Henry Prize Winning Stories, and in the 2021 Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Tanya Shirazi Galvez is from Lynwood, California. She completed her undergraduate studies at UCLA and an MFA from the University of Pittsburgh. She is a PhD Fiction Fellow at Black Mountain Institute. She is Senior Editor for Aster(ix) Journal and Fiction Co-Editor for Witness Magazine.

Michael Nye is the author of three books of fiction, most recently the story collection Until We Have Faces. His fiction and nonfiction has appeared in Kenyon Review, Epoch, Northwest Review, Pleiades, North American Review, and elsewhere. He is the editor of Story.

**Opening Remarks:** [2-3 minutes per participant]

Maegan Poland: [abridged] I will introduce the topic of our panel by discussing my tendency toward writing longer stories and the sense I’ve had that submission guidelines are increasingly restricting story length. This suspicion inspired my desire for this dialogue. To begin our presentation, I will share a few notes on evidence of diminishing story lengths – submission guidelines, lengths of stories in anthologies, impressions by other writers or editors.

**PART ONE PROMPT:** [2-4 minutes per response]
What has been your personal experience with writing/editing/publishing longer versus shorter fiction? Discuss the impact of the length of short stories on your own writing and – if relevant – on your choices as an editor or publisher of fiction. If you write both flash and longer fiction, you may want to comment about why you work in both genres. What different purposes, effects, audiences, etc. can longer short stories serve?

**Yohanca Delgado:**
There is a lushness to the long short story that is impossible to replicate in the novella, the “regular” length short story, or the flash. There’s a richness of world-building and characterization that becomes possible on that larger-but-not-too-large canvas. And it’s a story length that you can absorb in a single sitting, in a way that isn’t necessarily true of the novella (at least not for me, with most novellas). Longer short stories offer you a true immersive literary experience and it’s that sweet-spot of breadth and depth that I love in the work of writers like Edward P Jones and Alice Munro.

**Tanya:**
A longer short story is a hard thing to land. It’s still a short story, one that has to still be mindful of the economy of language. Sometimes there's a strong desire to shortchange a narrative for the sake of a word count. I’m guilty of compressing my own stories to the point that they lose an essence, a sense of place or the rhythm. It’s already a difficult genre to land in, to be able to tell a whole story in that length of breath. But that’s what is so seductive about a slightly longer short story that when it delivers, it's gold. It gives us the real estate for a haunting setting, for extra lines that really bring a character arc into completion—which is
something that is really hard for shorter stories and flash to land. They leave me satisfied.

**Michael Nye:**

- Story is one of the few literary magazines that publishes longer stories. We take pieces up to 25,000 words, and while we have never published anything quite that long - I believe 19K is our longest - it is something we are open to. For most, I'd say longer stories might clock in around 10K. Of this wide range, in the last five years we have published longer stories by Kyle Minor, Lawrence Coates, Karin Lin-Greenberg, and Michelle Herman. It's probably worth noting these (and others) who are publishing longer stories are established, rather than emerging, writers.

- My most recent collection has two longer stories, one of which appeared in a literary magazine at 24,000 words in length, and the other which did not, at about 12,000 words. Anecdotes about both, if time allows.

**K.C.:**

I've been writing professionally -- that is, writing with the goal of being published, paid, and read -- for about ten years now. I'm onto the second literary agent of my career, and I'm in the second round or experience of shopping a book-length work to editors of my career. The first time I went shopping with an agent was years ago, and all we had at the time was a short story collection. We got painfully close with an editor at Knopf, but ultimately they weren't willing to bet on me without a novel to back things up. So, from a short story writer they wanted a novel. Ok, the tricky thing here though is that a novel isn't simply a long-ass short story; it's an entirely different genre, arguably a different art form. Well, I want to sell my collection, so I start trying to write a novel,
but the short fiction genre is simply what feels like home to me, so of course I end up writing more short stories. Thing is, in the literary magazine world around this time, what starts to become hot is flash fiction. So, from a short story writer they want flash. Maybe you can guess, but the tricky thing here is that a flash fiction story isn't simply a short-ass short story. It's an entirely different genre, and again, arguably a different art form. I'm proud to say that I've found some success with both flash and novel-writing since, but in my heart I still consider myself a short story writer first. In bookstores, I'm still more excited about finding and reading a collection of short stories than a novel or flash collection.

PART TWO PROMPT: [6-8 minutes per response]

From your own experience, what do you see happening to longer short stories? Have you noticed shifts in submission guidelines? Are there any favorite journals that you've noticed making substantial changes in recent years? If you see a future for longer short stories, what does that future look like? Are longer stories switching venues? Are they increasingly relegated to story collections instead of initial publication in literary journals? How does print versus online publication dovetail with this conversation? Does a move toward online publication (and the shuttering of print journals) impact the length of stories?

Yohanca Delgado:
Michael will have the best answer for the question of placing a longer story in a prestigious print magazine like Story, but I suppose they might be harder to place in print because these longer stories take up a larger proportion of the physical magazine, and there are, of course, printing and shipping costs to consider for editors making those decisions. But a good story that earns its length has many possible
homes, I think. I love how One Story, for example, publishes a single stand-alone story each month. And Ploughshares has its Solos series, in which it creates a cover and sells these longer stories individually, like small books. I’ve noticed longer stories cropping up on Amazon Originals, too, which are published in both digital and audio format. They published a batch of longer speculative fictions stories not too long ago called the Trespass collection and it features a bunch of amazing speculative fiction authors, including Carmen Maria Machado, Karen Russell, and Jeff VanderMeer. So, I think there’s a sense, even in the most cut-throat commercial publishing venues, that there’s an appetite for this size story. I think the speculative fiction world does a better job than the so-called literary space with this in some ways, because venues like Tor are great for publishing longer form fiction, and the annual spec fiction awards like the Nebulas and the Hugos have a category for the novelette, which I believe is around between around 8 and 18,000 words.

**Michael Nye:**
[summarized talking point] Generally, I would say stories are getting shorter, closer to three to four thousand words in length. My educated guess is that this choice allows magazines to publish more writers, showcase more variety, because there becomes more room to publish, say, fifteen pieces rather than twelve.

**K.C. (abridged)**
From my own experience with the literary magazine world, as a reader, writer, and sometimes-editor/slush reader, it seems like there’s been a shift in recent years from a dedication to short fiction to a much larger focus on flash
fiction. A big part of this motion, I think, seemed to come from the parallel-ish rise of both the online magazine and the rise of Twitter (RIP).

In Twitter's heyday, when a story was freshly published online, there was often a rush from the writing community there to read and share the work right away, same-day, to the point where some members of the community -- myself included -- often felt like they needed to apologize if they waited even a couple of days before reading and sharing said work. Of course, this meant that the stories that often got the most attention were flash and micros because they were the stories that people usually had time to read and comment on regardless of how busy their day was. So, not only were writers seeing an increased readership for their flash works, but readers themselves were also seeing more benefit from reading flash stories because they were able to build up their place in the larger reading/writing community more quickly; easier to read and comment on lots of flash stories in a week than to read and comment on lots of short stories.

And so of course it makes sense that magazines would note this growing opportunity in flash and increase the number of flash stories they published, and then this eventually spilled over into lots of new magazines popping up that were dedicated solely to publishing flash.

What's particularly fascinating to me about this whole shift, though, is that it seemed to also promote the feeling that, once a story has been out in the world for a few days, the life of that story is then done. If your short story didn't take off flying the day it was hatched, then it might as well have just
fallen out of the tree, because there was likely already new flash that'd been published in the interim. In other words, for the twitter community at least, it became less about exploring magazine issues in your leisure time and more about reading/commenting as quickly as possible to keep up with the latest flash stories being published that day. Reading itself became less about the reading and experiencing -- god forbid enjoying -- of a story, and more about productivity and the growing of social capital. How quickly can I read X story by X author, tag them online, and get my tweet and name connected with them?

I'm suspicious that this shift in reading practices -- this shift in a lot of folks' motives for reading -- isn't also where people got the idea that it was smart to bill flash as "fast reading" (i.e. "the less time it takes you to read a thing, the better"), which then snowballed into the idea that general readers are "lazy" with "short attention spans" and so of course "the shorter the better" because how else can you possibly hold someone's attention? This seems to me like a rather poisonous way to promote flash stories — that is, less as an art form and more as a vending machine — and maybe this even contributed to the slide from calling flash "art" to calling it "content." After all, if it's only about stealing two minutes from someone's day rather than enriching someone's leisure time -- even if that leisure time is simply a lunch break -- then of course this ecosystem isn't going to celebrate longer works, and of course it isn't going to respect the artistry of shorter works either. Who cares about artistry when the goal is just to snatch a couple minutes of attention?
PART THREE PROMPT: [2-4 minutes per response]

How has the popular shift from short stories to even shorter stories impacted your writing and/or reading practice? What advice would you give for writers navigating this issue of the seemingly smaller publication pool for longer short stories? Are there journals that you enjoy that are continuing to publish a substantial amount of longer short stories? How do you decide when it makes sense to edit down a longer story for submission guidelines? How do you strategize the kinds of stories that work better as flash or shorter stories versus longer short stories?

**Yohanca Delgado:**
Writers who have that longer wingspan should stay their course! Give the story the length it needs and worry about where to place it later. I do think that long stories and novellas are due for popular resurgence, though. We talk so much about shortened attention spans. But as much as we like brevity, we readers like that feeling of immersion and intimacy that we get from longer narratives; I think it’s part of the reason series and trilogies do so well. Maybe it’s really a question of reimagining the ways in which help those longer stories find their readers, through specialized vehicles or formats that call attention to their length. In the same way that there are flash anthologies, what if there were something like that for the longer short story?

**Tanya:**
Definitely have to be more mindful of rhythm. I tend to write voicier short stories, and lean more on the poetics. But, I do think that there are so many short stories that I love that are on the longer end. And when there’s a character, a storyline that I think has earned that kind of real estate, I have to
learn how to lean into it without the fear of shortchanging it for the sake of landing it somewhere. But I’ve been on the other end as an editor, choosing from hundreds of submissions, and I know that when a longer piece grabs my attention, I am seized and that won’t discourage me from publishing the piece. On the contrary, I think it’s commendable to be able to hold the attention of those readers for long. I listen to all of the submissions, both while selecting and when editing. There are a few magazines that come to mind that accept pieces that are 6,000 words + [I will expand on this if time allows]. Also thinking of attention span: creating a magazine that focuses mainly on novelette length, or having audio recordings that accompany longer works. It’s about addressing attention spans.

Michael Nye:
[summarized talking points] I can’t say it has made a significant impact on my writing or reading. Staying true to what remains interesting to me as a writer and a publisher is far more important than following any trendy (if that's the word for this?) shifts in length. There are places that take longer stories - Missouri Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, Epoch, Granta - though it should be acknowledged there aren’t many outlets for longer stories. It's really impossible to give a blanket idea of what should indicate a story needs to be edited down - each story really creates and then plays by its own rules - but one thing to keep in mind is that longer stories do not meander. They don't deviate; they don't wander. They should remain tightly constructed and compelling from sentence to sentence, even if takes an entire lazy afternoon to read one.

K.C.:
Like I mentioned earlier, I really think that reading practices generally have been impacted less by the flash genre and more by marketing and social media. But I know that, for me, my writing practice has changed quite a bit from working with flash. Because again, flash isn't simply super, extra-short short stories. Flash is its own genre, its own art form. There's so much more at stake for artists choosing between genres than simply shaving off a few words to appease a submission guideline. Learning to move between writing short stories and writing flash felt akin to me to learning to knit versus learning to embroider. Yes, knitting and embroidery both use needles, and yarn is really just a thick-ass thread, but no one would go to knit something if what they wanted was embroidery -- just like no one would whip out their embroidery supplies if they were hoping to make a sweater. The kinds of stories you can tell with short fiction are different from the kinds you can tell with flash -- that's why both genres are so special and so vital, and that's also why I would urge writers to respect the genre that their story wants to be in rather than trying to shoehorn it one direction or another. Now, this isn't to say that short stories can never be edited down to flash, or that flash can't ever be fleshed out into a short story -- simply that, if you do edit your way from one genre to another, chances are, the story was meant to be in that other genre to begin with.

We will then have 10 - 15 minutes of Q&A.