

INTERVIEW

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‘Stealing from life’: An interview with Tessa Hadley

Tessa Hadley is the author of six novels, including her most recent *The Past* (2015), and three short story collections, *Sunstroke and Other Stories* (2007), *Married Love* (2012) and *Bad Dreams* (2017).

Renowned for its psychological depth and insight, her work has been shortlisted for or won various prizes, including the Guardian First Book Award, the Orange Prize and the prestigious The Story Award in the US. Her short story ‘Bad Dreams’, from the collection of the same name, was shortlisted for the BBC Short Story Award in 2014. Her stories appear regularly in the likes of *The New Yorker*, *Granta* and the *Guardian* – and she can often be heard reading her own work – as well as the work of others – on the New Yorker Fiction Podcast. Tessa is a Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University and lives in London.

This interview took place in December 2018, a few weeks after Tessa won the Edge Hill Prize for *Bad Dreams*.

A. J. Ashworth (AJ): *First of all, many congratulations on winning the Edge Hill Prize for Bad Dreams – a brilliant book full of the psychological insight that you have become known for. How did it feel to win, especially after being shortlisted for the same prize in 2012 for your previous collection Married Love?*

Tessa Hadley (TH): Well, it felt lovely. And unexpected – I knew rationally that I had a reasonable chance but actually I’m the sort of person who never wins raffles or prize draws, so it was irrationally startling when I realised Daisy Johnson had read out my name. Other finalists were such good writers. I felt very lucky, though not in the raffle-winning sense, that the judges had liked my stories enough to choose them. I still feel lucky, when readers like what I write, which is conceived in such a private space. What a miracle: it speaks to strangers! The other two prizes I’ve won were both the kind where I didn’t even know I was entered for them, there was no shortlist, no suspense. I’ve been longlisted and shortlisted for quite a few things, so I’ve got quite used to preparing my *I really don’t mind* face. I really never have minded, or not too much. It’s only the face that’s difficult.

AJ: *Do you think prizes such as this are important, especially for short story collections?*

TH: Prizes give you a delicious sense of your words being understood by readers who receive them as you meant them. This is very fertilising for the writing. You write with less panic, you settle more into your voice and style. In the external sense, prizes are

important in reassuring readers. Some brave souls just like what they like. But many readers like to feel that their choices are underwritten by a larger consensus. So you reach more readers when you've won a prize, more readers give you a try, take a chance on what's inside your book. There is no other prize in the UK for a whole collection of stories. I love the Edge Hill Prize for this. It puts short story writing alongside the novel in terms of scope and range. You can't always know, from a single story, whether a writer really has consistency, force, an idea. You know by the time you've read through a whole collection.

AJ: *Can you say a little about how you came to write short stories? Did you start out by writing them or did you gradually become more interested in them as you progressed as a writer?*

TH: I wrote short stories first and always. I wrote bad ones while I was writing bad novels (all rotting somewhere in landfill now – would be lovely to think they'd been recycled into fresh notebooks). But it was in short stories that I first achieved something which was real. The novels were still clunky, inert, false consciousness. But in a few stories I began to feel something flowing, something free, where I knew what I was doing and had something to say. Short stories were the first things I had published – first, in anthologies put out by a Welsh women's press called Honno, to whom I'm forever grateful. Oh, the first £50 I ever earned for my writing! I bought a pair of boots.

AJ: *As you're a writer of novels also, I wonder where short stories fit into your writing life. Do you work on individual stories in and around the gaps in novel writing – perhaps when a novel is 'resting' during drafts? Or do you focus on writing a full collection in one concentrated span of time, in the same way you might with a novel?*

TH: I don't really write my novels in drafts in the way I think you mean. Many of my favourite writers do, so I'm not saying it isn't a good way of doing things, it's just not mine. When I'm writing a novel I'm writing very slowly and densely, and as I go along I'm quite convinced that this is 'it', the final version. In other words, I don't write thin and then thicken it up. Of course in truth there is always some rewriting that comes afterwards. First of all, my own, when I get some distance on the book eventually; and then any rewrites that my editors suggest. And I do break off every so often while I'm writing a novel, say at the end of a chapter or a section, to write a story. It's such a lovely holiday from the total involvement of a novel, and it gives you distance when you return to the novel afterwards: you see the problems freshly, you see new solutions, new possibilities. The stories meanwhile feel playful, flexible, experimental, joyous, by contrast with the intricate engineering of a novel. So the collections are always slow accumulations across a few years, not written as a single entity at one time.

AJ: *I really enjoyed Bad Dreams – in particular, the title story which is brilliantly dark and resonant. I think you're particularly good at capturing those moments of disconnect between people, as shown in the 'silent violence' you describe between the husband and wife in that story. Have you always been fascinated by people and the kinds of interesting undercurrents that can occur in relationships?*

TH: It's difficult to imagine anyone writing who wasn't fascinated by these undercurrents. What else is there to write about? And not just writers: readers wouldn't read fiction, or watch films or TV, if they weren't fascinated too. It is evidence of the

complexity of things that reassures me, and that's what I look for in the books I love. When I was a teenager, I read certain books I didn't wholly understand – Elizabeth Bowen, Henry James – because the way their words assembled material on the page reassured me, that life really was as rich and complicated as I intuited. This is the promise that great art holds out for us – not that everything will be all right, but that everything will be interesting.

AJ: *I know it's not often easy for writers to talk about ideas and inspiration – but I wonder whether ideas come to you via familiar routes or if they arrive out of the blue, taking you by surprise when they do? For example, the American-Chinese writer Yiyun Li has often been inspired by reading the work of the late William Trevor, and has said that some of her own work is in conversation with Trevor's stories.*

TH: Oh, I steal things from all over the place. From films, a lot. From the news, from other writers: sometimes it's just a matter of a mood, a feeling – I think, *I'll do her like a Dostoevsky character*. As well as stealing from life, of course. You have to be a bit shameless, to write fiction. The first story in *Bad Dreams*, 'An Abduction', came to me after watching a documentary on the kidnapping of the heiress Patty Hearst in the 1970s. After watching it I was thinking, 'and when she got back to her "real life", as a super-wealthy pretty American heiress, what did she *do*, in her own head, with that time she spent as a bank robber and revolutionary? Where did she put that aspect of herself?' And then I sort of reworked the idea on a tiny, tiny scale, with a girl in 1960s Surrey who's only kidnapped for one night. Nothing very awful happens to this girl, not exactly, not on the scale of what happened to Patty Hearst. I set myself the same question. What does Jane *do*, afterwards, with this experience that's so radically outside her ordinary life, before and after?

AJ: *In her Guardian review of your first collection Sunstroke and Other Stories, Anne Enright compared you to Alice Munro and said that 'both [of you] are fascinated by the road not taken'. In 'An Abduction' I feel it's more the case that you are fascinated by the temporary diversions taken off the main road of the lives of some of your characters. Jane is abducted by a group of boys and has certain experiences, and then returns home without anyone having noticed her absence.*

TH: I rather fell in love with Jane's stolidity, her seriousness, her apparent lack of imagination: so that she never really probes into what's happened in her thoughts, or follows it up. I asked myself whether inside such a girl there mightn't be the most intense kind of imaginative life after all, only not the kind of imagination that we writers and nosy people put a high value on. Just living with a kind of loyalty to what's happened to you, never letting it go, hanging on to the truth of it, silently, secretly. At that point I was also thinking of Eugénie Grandet in Balzac's novel. Women with a tiny, tiny range of experience, and huge imaginative inner lives – yet along quite narrow moral lines. It's a fascinating subject.

AJ: *In the same review, Enright described you as 'immensely subversive'. Do you feel that your work has subversive elements to it?*

TH: This was a lovely thing for Anne to say. Of course no one wants to have their work described as blandly accepting! I suppose all writing aspires to some kind of subversion. I'm not overtly up to anything – that is, I'm not undermining what happens on the page

all the time, it's not satire, it's not a revolutionary critique of the world I describe. Some of the books I love are revolutionary critiques. But the truth is it's not quite in my nature, it's not in the nature of my relationship to my world. I don't have transforming ideas to change the world, I just watch how it is. But actually I do think that literary realism is inherently quite subversive, even when it isn't angry, even when it's essentially a kind of social comedy. If you just show how things are, how they really and nakedly are, and all the rich comedy and tragedy in that, it can feel at best as if you're uncovering something electric, something shocking and unsettling. That's a kind of revolution in sensibility.

AJ: *In some ways, I feel that the stories in *Bad Dreams* resist the notion of the epiphany, whereby a character may come to a realisation or gain an insight into a person or situation – or they certainly resist the possibility of turning points or change that can come as a result of such realisations. In 'The Stain' for example, there is the possibility of change for the character Marina, but she shuts this down as an option and her life seems to continue on as before. I think this seems more authentic somehow, more a true reflection of how we live our lives, but what do you think?*

TH: Well I agree with you, that on the whole we don't live through a series of epiphanies. They can when they're not done well operate in stories as a kind of literary flattery, making us feel that we can grow up, get better, see the light, behave more wisely – like religion conversion narratives, almost. Or self-help books. Stories ought to be about change, because change is real. But mostly it comes accidentally, and we only get to see it through a glass darkly. Or we see it clearly for a bit and then forget, go back to the darkness we were in before. Actually this story you mention, 'The Stain', does seem to me for once to have an epiphany in the old-fashioned sense, almost a full-blown conversion-narrative. Marina loves the old man in all innocence, she flirts with the idea of him and his wealth, his wide experience. Then when she finds out those secrets from his past, the dirty truth about his wealth and power, she refuses anything further to do with him. She could have taken the house which she loved, and which he wanted to give to her. She would have been a worthy occupant of that house. But after her moment of blinding insight into her own culpable innocence, she's changed absolutely, she knows something new about herself, and about the world. She won't ever enter the house again: except that one last time when she finds him dead.

AJ: *In 2016, you were awarded a prestigious Windham-Campbell Prize and the website for the prize refers to your work as having a 'Chekhovian darkness' beneath its 'placid surface'. Is this something you're aware of when writing?*

TH: Life has a Chekhovian darkness below its placid surface. It's the great subject of realist fiction, with its brilliant recreation of the ordinary flow of daily life in all its mundane detail, mingled with our daily thoughts and fantasies. Under that surface fate prepares itself – the loss, the heartbreak, the heart attack, the treachery, the odd discovery. It's that domestic mis-match between the humdrum of life and its underlying grandeur that I love best. It seems most true to my own mostly rather humdrum experience.

AJ: *Which short story writers do you admire? What is it about their work that appeals to you?*

TH: Chekhov of course, D.H. Lawrence sometimes, Elizabeth Bowen, Mavis Gallant, Nadine Gordimer, Alice Munro, John McGahern. Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, too terrible to read often. Borges. More that I've missed out. Lucia Berlin, Akhil Sharma. Different things appeal to me about each writer. Each one seems to scorch the page with his or her originality, directness, truth. No cheap tricks. Revelations. Beauty above all in the sentences.

AJ: *Can you talk a little about the importance of endings in a short story? In an interview with Sarah Hall for Granta, for example, you said: 'Endings, nonetheless, are still crucial to reading a short story. As we read it, we hold all the accumulating content in suspension in our thoughts, waiting to know what it adds up to – which we find out, when it stops'.*

TH: Yes, this holding in suspension while you wait for an ending couldn't happen in reading a novel. You just couldn't hold all that content, for so long. So this charged importance of the ending is really something that belongs specifically to the short story form, perhaps to a poem too. We only know what the story adds up to, as it ends. Some readers feel cheated by the endings to contemporary short stories, because they don't sign off any longer with a clever surprise, a tonic chord. Yet if you look closely at the throwaway ending, actually it holds so much power, it is significant music. It takes all the structural weight of the story, and the emotion. That's why endings are hard. Ideally you set out writing with some idea of where the story is going to end up. But sometimes you have to write and hope the story takes you eventually to the right place.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Ashworth, A. J. (2019), "'Stealing from life": An interview with Tessa Hadley,' *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice* 9: 1, pp. 65–70, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/fict.9.1.65_7

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A. J. Ashworth is the author of the short story collection *Somewhere Else, or Even Here* which won Salt Publishing's Scott Prize and was shortlisted for the Edge Hill Prize in 2012. She is also the editor of *Red Room: New Short Stories Inspired by the Brontës* (Unthank Books, 2013). She is currently working towards her PhD at Edge Hill University.

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