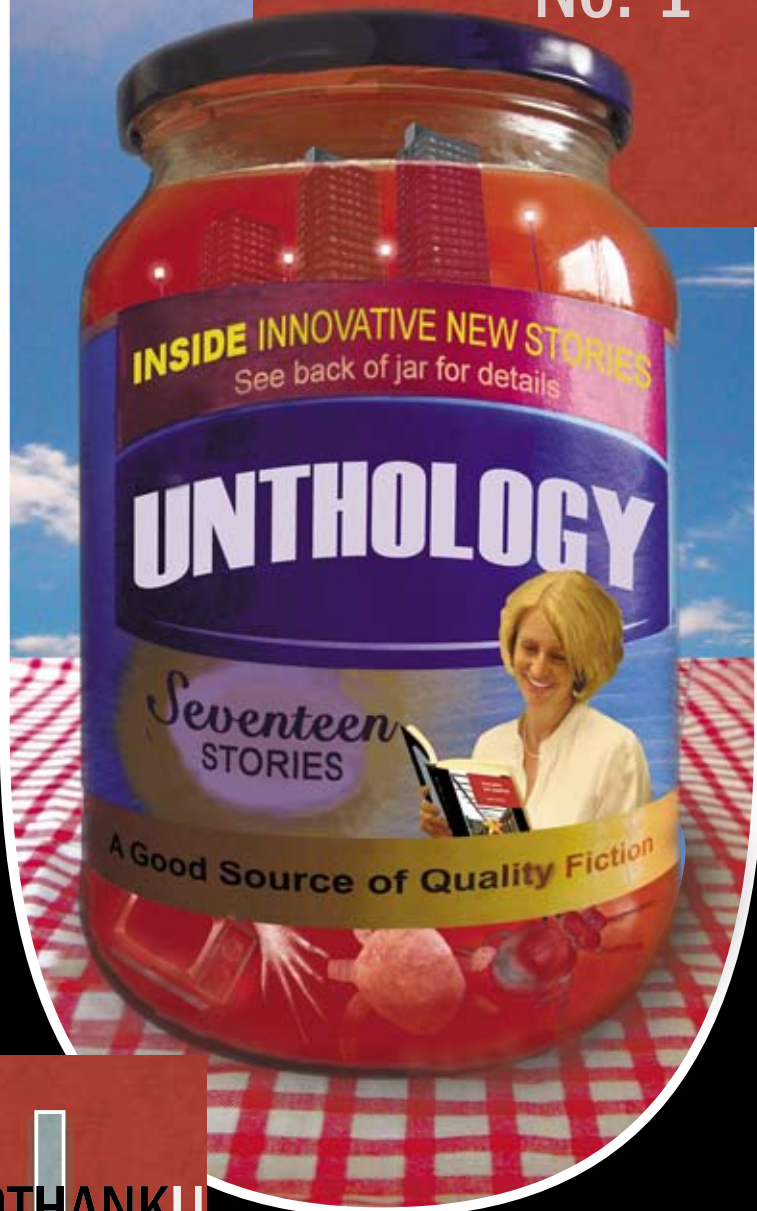


UNTHOLOGY

No. 1



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UNTHOLOGY 1

2010

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UNTHANK BOOKS

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Edited by Robin Jones and Ashley Stokes

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Introduction

- The Editors -

In 2001, on the publication of his *Complete Short Stories*, JG Ballard said that the reason he had written far fewer stories in the eighties and nineties was because the market had ‘dried up’. It wasn’t just that the magazines that habitually used to carry stories had ceased to be or had stopped publishing them. According to Ballard, people had ‘lost the knack of reading short stories...They feel—when they buy a volume of short stories, if it’s slightly on the slim side—they’re somehow being cheated. They want a big fat read, represented by a novel—they’ve lost the knack and...it’s a great shame.’

Nothing to cheer up JG occurred in the subsequent decade. The market for short stories has contracted further. Publishers refuse to publish short story collections by anyone other than the very well known (we have to go back to Helen Simpson or Will Self’s debut if we’re to think of a writer who made his or her name on the back of short stories). The spread of the Internet as a means of publishing stories has done nothing to expand their scope, specialized fiction sites seeming to prefer very short stories that can be read quickly like blog entries. These stories often seem like overdressed anecdotes or marginally evolved pub jokes. Outside of magazines specialising in genre fiction, like *Crime Wave* or *Interzone*, or competition anthologies the short story can often seem like a poor relative included under sufferance in poetry journals. Constraining

Unthology 1 Sampler

the short story to a one or two thousand word limit (what Ballard would call ‘a tiny little squib’) often produces what seem like protracted poems, all glittery surface but with no room to manifest a greater sense of significance or surprise. The longer story, the story unafraid to chase a few clouds, to play with chronology and form, the story that might have some semblance of plot-drive risks dying of neglect.

Unthology is an attempt to reverse this trend. *Unthology* has no word count limit for submissions and no formal agenda. In accordance with the Unthank Manifesto we tend towards the unpredictable and the unconventional yet we’re not ideologically opposed to the two thousand word domestic story or the short, sharp slice of life. We only ask that a story make us think and make us feel. Here, we’ve assembled seventeen pieces: fourteen short stories, two novel extracts and one piece of life writing. Some of these writers are veterans of the small press scene; for others this is their first time in print. All of these writers, though, in discrete ways, we believe, write stories that no one else could conceive. They ask questions, as all good stories do, about how we live now and who we think we are. To ask these questions is the knack in writing a short story if not the knack needed to read one.

- Sampler -

**Opening Paragraphs From
Unthology 1's Seventeen
Contributors**

Extract from **Doing it by the Book**

- **Vicky Adams** -

It was cheaper to travel by coach, but I'd walked to the wrong station. I remember the ache in my arms from carrying my case so far already. After the woman at the ticket desk had told me that the coach station was the other side of town, it seemed like a good idea to take the train. I had with me a handsome red leather suitcase. Spanish leather. Brass fittings. My initials next to the catch. Good, solid workmanship. I'd had it for years; it was an engagement present from one of my wife's relatives. It had been part of a set, but she took the other two when she left; one for her, one for our son. I had that suitcase for five or six times as many years as the marriage lasted. It was an excellent piece of work. Not like my wife with her restless feet and tendency to unravel into tears at the slightest provocation.

Write or Die

- **Sandra Jensen** -

I done him no wrong. None that no one else would in a sharp night under the prickly trees. A black heart he had and teeth brown as a feathered bat dropped in shit. Cow shit to be exact. That cows got a name and her names Petal. But no one knows this around here they all think she cant hear nothin but she can. She cleverern most and then some. Thats not what Im here to tell you. Im here to tell you about the man with the black heart. I aint sayin it was black coloured in effect and now Im thinkin you might consider me racist or somethin but thats not what I mean neither. I mean he was evil. As evil as they come. He come and dug out my cows eyes jes for the fun of it.

The Burning

- Mischa Hiller -

Helen's concentration was broken by the sound of Jack's key in the front door. She was standing at the kitchen table still in her work suit, reading a newspaper spread out flat before her. She tried to find her place in the article but it was too late; she was distracted by the noises Jack was making and her whole body clenched. The sound of the door closing, the thud of his case on the hall floor, the short scrape of the metal studs as he pushed it behind the door with his foot; there were marks on the wooden floor from eleven years of him doing that. Then came the rustle of his raincoat as he took it off. A grubby, stained raincoat he refused to replace, even though they could easily afford it. She heard his laboured breath as he bent to pick up his post where she had left it on the floor coming in. Worst of all though, was that inevitable sigh at some presumption, possibly the fact that his surname had been misspelt again or that he had received some harmless junk mail.

The Latvian Motorcycle Princess

- C. D. Rose -

The Latvian Motorcycle Princess rides her dreams across vast empty spaces, no destination other than the limitless horizons of her imagination. Every day she cruises through wide flat fields, riding the light from dawn to dusk, watching for the moment when the huge skies briefly turn the colour of tail-lights. The Latvian Motorcycle Princess leans back, feels the roar of her engine, the gentle burn of exhaust and breathes in the motorcycle emptiness of the open roads, dreaming racetracks and laurel wreaths, spuming magnums of champagne, flame-retardant Belstaff leathers and extensive sponsorship deals. The Latvian Motorcycle Princess ignores road signs, closes her eyes and dreams of walls of death, leaping canyons and endless wheelies. Such dreams help the Latvian Motorcycle Princess to ignore the fact she no longer lives in Latvia and does not yet live in Los Angeles. At this current moment, the Latvian Motorcycle Princess lives in Thetford.

Turtle

- Melinda Moore -

Kitty had never really considered how often people died. There seemed to be no end to the stream of covered bags being wheeled into the Funeral Parlour. She craned forward out of the window, her chest pressed uncomfortably hard against the thin metal frame, and peered into the narrow street below. The sun beat down on her nose and forehead, adding to her despised freckle collection—little flecks of melanin, like the floaters in her eye: a constant irritant since she had ignored Dad’s instruction not to stare up at the sun. Even the roar of traffic seemed muted, as wheels thrummed on melting tarmac, its pungent smell masking the usual sulphurous tang of seaweed. The seagulls’ frantic cawing seemed to have calmed to a lazy, sporadic squawk and, over the screams of other children in the park nearby, Kitty could hear, as always, the sound of sawing. Shading her eyes with her hand, she watched as faint clouds of sawdust rose from the workshop below, floating rapidly upwards and then slowing and circling in the currents of hot air that lay low over the streets and the town. There was no discernible breeze.

Dick’s Life

- Maggie Ling -

My wife slips quietly from our bed, silencing the programmed alarm clock before time, so as not to disturb her sleeping husband. But her husband is awake; I have woken before her, and feign sleep as she moves about the darkened room.

She takes underwear from the chair—removed from the drawer with the jingling brass handles the night before—and pulls on the obligatory panty-girdle: the kind she took to wearing after our daughter was born almost thirty-six years ago, believing the firm support offered by the two-way stretch tummy panel was needed to restore her post-partum body to its pre-partum shape. The girdle, though not needed then, has since become necessary. My wife—seeing no need to change this habit of a lifetime—has several of these corrective garments, washed from virginal snowy whiteness to slush-grey.

Extract from The Lemonade Girl

- Sarah Dobbs -

My wife knew my missing-presumed-dead ex girlfriend was back before I did, right before I got the letter.

'You've got that look, Michael.'

Karen was naked when she said this, in the bed where we made our two young children, the darkness a cloak to all the detritus that we ought to have tidied away, a darkness pricked only by the lemony glow of my reading lamp. Karen was on her right side, turned towards me, hands pressed together under her head as though in prayer. I could smell the coconut body milk she's used since I bought her a set on our first anniversary. I don't think she likes it; it's a concession to me. In reality, I picked it up last minute at The Body Shop in Euston after a conference.

Waiting Room

- Martin Pond -

I've never been anywhere that is so white.

The walls are white, the ceiling's white, the floor is all white tiles. The door in the far wall is white too. Even the magnetic lock thing that holds it shut is white.

In fact, the only thing that isn't white is the bench I'm sat on. That's stainless steel and it's not really a bench, it's just a long slab that sticks out of the wall. The edge is hurting the back of my legs.

I've been waiting about twenty minutes now. Well, I think so, they took my watch and phone off me when they signed me in, so I'm guessing but that's how long it feels like. I said to Mum that we shouldn't have got here so early but Dad got stroppy and said it was important and that every little thing could count towards the result. It didn't hurt to be early, he said, not when every little thing counts.

The Mall

- Deborah Arnander -

I saw your mum today. After thirteen years, I'm surprised I recognised her, but I did. She's working at the church next to the mall; I think she's serving coffee there. At any rate, she was taking in the board. And I was walking through the graveyard, on my way to the shops, when she looked up, with a frown on her face. For a second, our eyes met. I couldn't move. She looked me in the eye so searchingly that I imagined something floating there, curled over like a comma in the green part of my eye. But then her mouth shut in a disappointed line, as if her hope had made her sad, and there was nothing left alive in me at all. She turned away, still carrying her board, and I walked on. As I walked I realised that she'd been searching there for you. I didn't turn back then. My heart was pounding and I couldn't catch my breath. I thought: at least I didn't smile. Not after last time. She might have run at me and ripped the hair out of my head. She might have kicked me to the floor and stamped on me. And I wouldn't have fought back. I'll tell you now, Rhia: if I could make it up to you, I would.

The Last Dog and Pony Show

- Sherilyn Connelly -

The Dog and Pony Show was a few days away. It was the biggest animal role-playing event of the year, and my girlfriend Vash wanted me there to see her as a pony. Even though her other lover and primary pony trainer Dietrich wasn't going to attend, the event didn't feel safe. But it was a rare and wonderful thing when Vash wanted me around these days, so I couldn't say no.

I asked her what I would do at The Dog and Pony Show, and Vash replied: 'You can be one of the humans who grooms me and feeds me carrots.'

I winced. No. No, no, no. That was so *distant*. I needed to be more involved, to be on her level, to *participate*, not to just be another anonymous visitor at the petting zoo.

Post Day

- Lora Stimson -

I am sitting at the top of the apple tree, up higher than I usually go. So high that when the breeze shifts, I feel my stomach lurch. The leaves shimmy, their shadows dancing bruise-coloured across my skin. It's hot out on the lawn but up in the tree it's cool and damp as a fridge. I watch as my brother Max walks across the patio and out towards the greenhouse. I watch him take a joint from his shorts' pocket. When he reaches the greenhouse he lights it, leaning against the doorjamb. He thinks no one knows he smokes.

Impilo

- Jenni Fagan -

I fall backwards into the screech. The lawnmower blades whirr once, twice then gouge into flesh. Muscles sever, bone cracks and splinters; the sky turns white. The motor snarls, its jagged steel teeth rip into sinews, tear at globules of fat and gnaw tissue ragged. Blood arcs slowly up into the vast bleached-out airless nothing. Daffodils nod their heads quietly. The lawnmower sputters to a halt.

Silence.

I am falling.

In the kitchen I see Ama put her mug on the draining board. She looks up and covers her mouth. Between us on the lawn the mowers blades still grind round all spattered in blood and raw lumps of meat. My leg spurts out blood, the severed shin and foot no longer attached. Ama is running down the small back hallway, her bare feet thud off the creaky old floorboards. My severed leg struggles upright; it half turns round to where I lay gasping at it, then it lurches frantically away toward the rosebush. The ankle is purple. Flesh curls away at the calf. One clean shard of bone stabs out the top. The back door whacks open. Ama unwinds her headscarf frantically as she runs and skids down onto her knees.

Herringbone

- James Carter -

He remembered hearing once on a cookery programme a television chef saying there is no such thing as a sardine, that what we buy as sardines are just different types of herring. He had this in mind when he went to the supermarket on the way home from work and brought some fresh sardines. After the week he had just had he was looking for a way of calling the bluff of whatever had been governing his experience for the past seven days. Later when he opened the bag and looked at the fish for the first time he regretted that a tin of pilchards would have done just as well.

Parallax

- Tessa West -

Background

The part of the scene that appears behind the principal subject of the picture.

Justin, my Head of Department, was waving the *Times Educational Supplement* at me as he approached. ‘Cassie, look at this! There’s a job here that fits you perfectly!’

He made me stand right there in the corridor and read the ad he’d ringed.

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The Soul of Cinema

- Karen Whiteson -

Of course, I'd thought, on first spotting him earlier, during Registration, Irwin Kohn would be here, wouldn't he? For Irwin was nothing if not ubiquitous. Possessed of the small, clever man's terror of being overlooked, he'd a whole array of devices by which to ensure visibility: his ecstatic lapdog gurning and sanctimonious aura of One Who Serves—not to mention the heel to throat blue denim outfit he wore day in day out. (The students had a running joke that he was a blue-denim rag doll who could never get undressed). Irwin was Irwin: he was, if not quite a national treasure, certainly an institutional fixture. He was, after all, God's representative on Earth of the film-making avant-garde: the historic, analogue, avant-garde: those makers of radical celluloid and video, who were back in the spotlight.

A Short Story About a Short Film

- Ashley Stokes -

So, first things first, Lucile. Ease yourself into your seat. Get comfortable. Slip off your heels. We're the only ones here, so you can slurp your Diet Fanta and scoff a packet of M&Ms as big as a boxer's punch bag without disturbing any snoggers or cineastes. You don't even have to turn off your mobile and can text your mates throughout the whole film if you like. I hope you don't, though. Because look, up there, moving and flickering, with its soundtrack and dialogue and beautiful black and white print. We did it. We made it. We finally finished it. Or, to be more precise, I did. I made it. It may have taken two and a half years but I did make our film, Lucile, the film that on our first date I promised you we'd make. You remember our film, Lucile? No? Really? You do, surely. It must all be flooding back to you now. Our first collaboration. Our shot at fame. This screening is just for you. Welcome to our private cinema. Enjoy your personalized director's commentary.

Bleach

- Michael Baker -

Sometimes, I think there's a ghost in the box. The channels have been changing without me pressing anything. I've even sat away from the remote to make sure it's not me doing it. I've put it on the other side of the couch, in a drawer, out the window. Things flash up, too. I can't make them out. They're so quick that sometimes I'm not so sure they're there. But they are.

I called the people at the company, and I said 'what I think is happening is, I'm picking up *God* through my satellite dish. Is this possible?' They replied in one of those voices where you can't tell if it's a person or a computer, so I checked. I said 'what comes once in a minute, twice in a moment, but never in a thousand years?' The voice said 'the letter 'M'.' Then I knew it was a computer; no one is that quick.



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