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Reviews contents

Who's the Reader?

Review by Tom Shapcott

The Writer's Reader: A Guide to Writing Fiction and Poetry
Edited by Brenda Walker
Sydney: Halstead Press, 2002
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This collection consists of an Introduction by the editor, Brenda Walker, then 26 brief essays, then a coda by Peter Bishop. There are 15 pieces on writing fiction, 5 on the subject of poetry, and a half dozen essays on general topics ranging from publication to the overall necessity for writers to be readers and, perhaps most interestingly, a piece by Meme McDonald called 'Whose Story?' which addresses an issue I find comes up again and again among writing students: What are the moral obligations of a writer to others, where material is based upon actual characters or direct and recognisable appropriation?

Reading the book, my first question was: Who is the actual intended reader? It is described in the title as 'a guide to writing' but I quickly became aware that, though virtually all the articles are addressed to an imagined apprentice writer, they were really intended for apprentice teachers of writers.

A separate author has been commissioned to write each essay, and these, in my mind, divided into writers-who-are-teachers, and teachers-who-are-writers. There were a couple of surprises there, when I began to make that mental distinction. As a general rule, though, writers-who-are-teachers had a native cunning that insisted their pieces be immediately readable, be lively or entertaining, and personal. They illustrated the primary adage that an author cannot afford to bore his/her reader. The pieces which I mentally classified as by teachers-who-are-writers did tend to be a tad didactic, or eager to prove a point or a philosophy, or pointed to a mental line in the sand that pupils might be expected to toe.

The specific subject of each essay was useful, and the first recommendation I would make on this book was that these bite-size essays provide an excellent crib for writers new to the teaching game. In the opening section, 'Writing Fiction', Sari Smith has a pithy piece on that first imperative, *Journals and Notebooks.* Then Marion Halligan provides a highly readable chapter on *Structuring the Story*, Michael Meehan discusses *Open Forms of Narrative*, while Glenda Adams opens the subject of the question of *Voice.* This is a theme that is, in various ways, further developed by Marele Day, Antoni Jach and Anthony Macris. As we all know, it is a field crucial to the whole structuring of a piece of writing.

The surprise discovery of this opening section, though, is Kevin Brophy on *The Sentence in Time.* It is brilliant and riveting. One should not be surprised; Brophy's ground-breaking book *Creativity* was an important Australian contribution to contemporary considerations of the craft.

Tess Brady, on *Place*, in contrast offered immediate insights into this essential, but sometimes neglected, aspect of establishing and consolidating your fiction.

The essay which required most 'allowance' on my part, as a reader, was Antoni Jach's piece on *The Narrator and Narrative Modes in the Novel*. It was a slightly dogged disputation with the 'Show don't Tell' line of persuasion, arguing that the narrative voice can be hobbled by too much reliance on the 'Mimetic' to the exclusion of the 'Diegetic' (using, assiduously, Gerard Genette's definitions). I use his own novel, *The Layers of the City*, in my own classes, and I found this essay interesting as an exegesis on the structure and intent of that book. But as a general proposition to new writers, I felt it held the cane in one hand and the Theory in the other.

The second section, 'Kinds Of Fiction', provides some entertaining and thought-provoking pieces by Jean Bedford, Delia Falconer, Alan Gold (a cheeky run-down on *Popular Fiction*), Van Ikin on *Science Fiction and Fantasy* (which almost converted me 100% to the genres) and a marvellously alluring essay by Stephen Muecke on *Fictocritical Writing*, which he titles, perhaps tongue in cheek, *The Fall*. Only Heather Wearne's piece on *Autobiography* seemed a bit, well, ponderous, for such a fascinating subject. It carried too many burdens of personal, or feminist, discord, and did not even cite some of the spectacular instances of autobiographical writing by women in Australia. I would have expected at least some reference to Dorothy Hewett's *Wild Card*, or even Eve Langley's thinly-fictionalised *The Pea Pickers*, for instance.

The section 'Writing Poetry', which is the only one with two essays each (by Dennis Haskell and Marcella Polain) struck me as a bit perfunctory, as if Brenda Walker, as editor, felt an obligation but not a passion to include this area. It did not pass my notice that these two contributors were, like Brenda Walker herself, also from Western Australia. Only Deborah Westbury is a tothersider. Dennis Haskell's pieces cover the ground allotted to them, but I must say, this is not the book to suggest to your student who has discovered a passion and an aptitude for poetry.

The remaining half-dozen short pieces are fillers, which means that the real meat of the volume is its concern with prose writing, and particularly fiction, though the crossing of genres is becoming increasingly commonplace, and aspects of the implications involved are touched on here.

Nigel Krauth has a necessary and splendidly down-to-earth piece on *Learning Writing through Reading,* in which he pre-empts what I would have said in this review on the plethora of How-To books. My shelves groan with writing manuals, from Robert Louis Stephenson (*Essays on the Art of Writing,* Chatto & Windus 1920) to Ursula Le Guin (*Steering the Craft,* The Eighth Mountain Press 1998), Nadine Gordimer (*Writing and Being,* Harvard Uni. Press 1995) and all the many recent Australian ventures into this obviously lucrative market. I am selective, though, in loaning specific volumes to students (and I keep that invaluable 'Check Book' from Dymocks to keep trace of borrowings). Some students wax enthusiastic over Carmel Bird's sharp-nosed informality, especially in *Dear Writer* (Vintage 1996), while others prefer to stay with Kate Grenville's *The Writing Book* (Allen & Unwin 1998), both of which have gone through reprints.

The outstanding book, overall, in providing in-depth encouragement and illumination of fiction writing, is the Canadian Jack Hodgins' *A Passion for Narrative* (McClelland & Stewart 1993). It is still the leader in the field, for my money, and its careful modulation through the processes of evolution of a manuscript, with lively and likeable exercises and lots of specific illustrations

from the work of Canadian, American, Australian and British authors, remains a tribute to the breadth of his reading and research. He even offers suggestions on postmodernist techniques though, frankly, he remains at heart an advocate of the 'Show don't Tell' school. In my own classes I certainly try to suggest the positives of that approach, though I also point out limitations, and offer a plethora of illustrations from very recent writing. If, as Nigel Krauth points out in his essay, reading is a crucial aspect of the process of becoming a writer, then reading in the whole spectrum of immediately contemporary writing is also very important. After all, novice writers will, in due course, be submitting their manuscripts to publishers who will not only be aware of what has appeared in the bookshops over the past eighteen months, they will also know what will appear. A manuscript modelled on the style or approach of a book well-loved thirty years ago will not necessarily seem pertinent to a publisher's editor this month.

Knowing the poverty (in money terms) of students, I prepare a Course Reader each year which is as important as the craft manuals (even Jack Hodgins') on the recommended reading list. It covers the range of writing genres, and though it sometimes traces a line of development (say, from examples by Gertrude Stein, to Patrick White, to Ania Walwicz) more generally it groups pieces by immediately contemporary writers, Australian and overseas. Gillian Mears may be juxtaposed with, say, Alice Munro; Rohinton Mistry with Christina Stead. The object is to invite the student to widen their range of reading, as well as to look at the challenges each author may have faced in tackling each particular subject, or theme. My purpose is to ask the apprentice writer to look at the challenges faced by authors, not be authors-as-theoretical analysts.

In looking at *The Writer's Reader*, then, my next question would be: Is this a book to offer to students? Frankly, I see individual pieces as full of pithiness and appropriateness; I would be tempted to use these with my students, or to refer them on to them, after we had had a seminar on the relevant subject. As I said at the beginning, it seems to me an intelligent crib for a novice teacher in creative writing, a short-cut to hone in onto necessary aspects in the teaching process. I am glad to have it on my shelves. Its real value is in the essays on prose writing. But for in-depth writing in that field, the Jack Hodgins book remains my centrepiece.

For anyone interested in writing poetry, one book I have found particularly helpful is *Writing Poetry* in Hodder & Stoughton's *Teach Yourself* series (1997). Like Jack Hodgins' book, it offers many and stimulating on-the-spot exercises, guaranteed to help the novice poet to become inventive, as well as worldly-wise.

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Having it out with Robert

Review by Julienne van Loon

Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting
Robert McKee
New York: Harper Collins, 1997
ISBN 0060391685
466pp

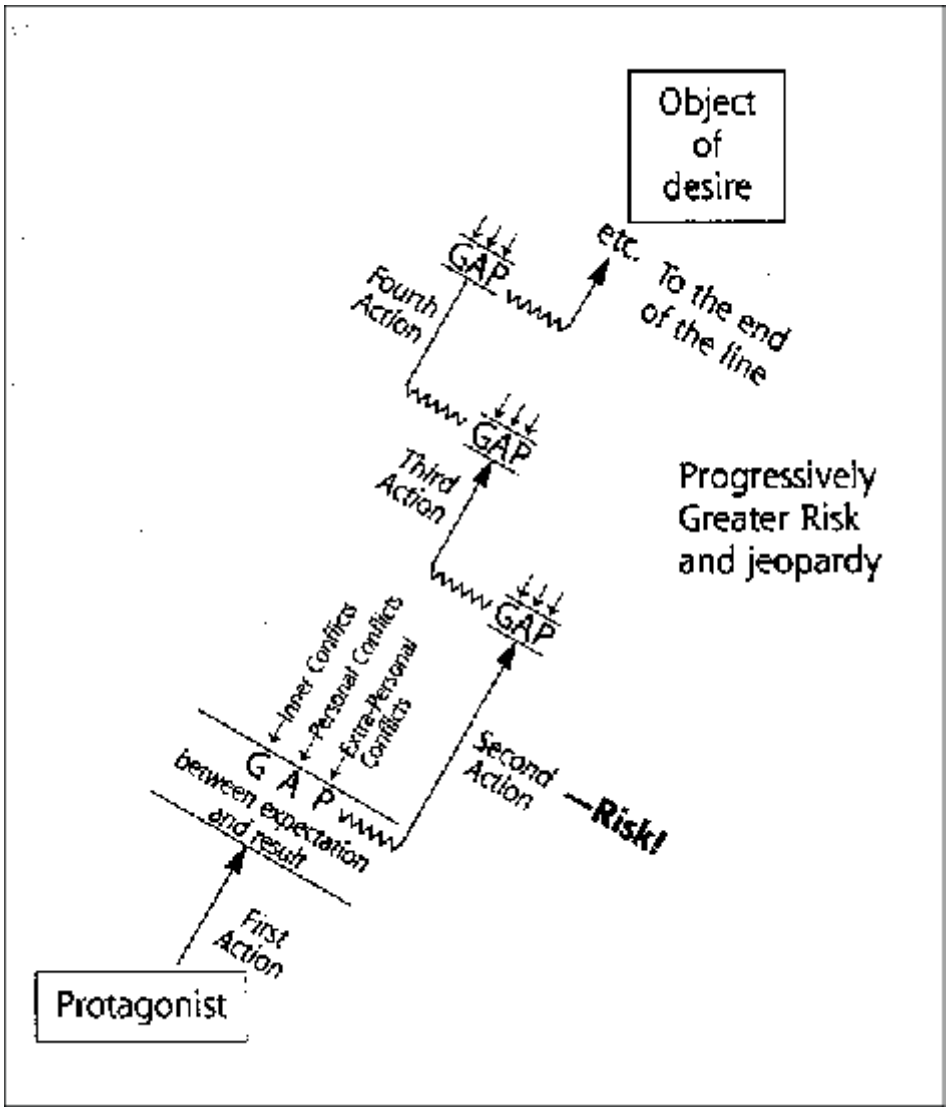
You have to hand it to Robert McKee for his ability to put into simple, kick-ass prose many of the key narrative principles of use to writers of long narrative works. Some of his jewels of wisdom, simply put, include: "Dialogue is not conversation" (388); "We can turn scenes only one of two ways: on action or on revelation. There are no other means" (340); and "A protagonist and his [sic] story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them" (317). McKee backs his own work up with similarly straightforward jewels from other writers. He quotes Hemingway, for example: "The first draft of anything is shit" (315).

Predictably, McKee's book suffers from the same disease many Hollywood-based scriptwriting "how-to" books suffer from. That is, it smacks of that *You too could be rich and famous if you could only come up with the perfect Hollywood screenplay* sub-text. And it frequently has that dreadful self-help/motivational tone about it. But if you have the strength to set those things aside (put them down to genre, if you will) then it's also a very useful book. Significantly, I did not pick up McKee's book for the purposes of getting advice on writing a blockbuster screenplay. I picked it up when, at the end of one of *those* first drafts of a 30 000 word novella, I felt I needed a damn good talking to. There were some questions I needed answers to: Why isn't my story working just now? What is wrong, structurally, with this work? Which scenes need throwing out? Which scenes are missing? It is in this sense that I am interested in reviewing McKee's book. How useful is *Story*, I ask here, for writers of prose fiction? The answer, in brief, is very useful indeed, particularly for writers of long fiction.

Despite the title, McKee uses the word "story" without strictly defining it. He certainly doesn't use it, as E.M. Forster would have it, to differentiate *story* (a sequence of events) from *plot* (the order in which they are narrated). McKee's first chapter explains, in a rather enigmatic way, what he thinks "story" might be about ("Story is about principles, not rules… Story is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas" [3]), but he doesn't pin the word itself down. Basically, this is a book about narrative structure and narrative design. So McKee's "story" is a complex dramatic narrative, and his pointers on structure and design are relevant to writers working across theatre, cinema and the novel.

As will already be evident from the quotes I have chosen to open this review, the kind of story McKee has in mind is also what some might call an Archetypal one. McKee's "story" is classically structured, it is comprised of scenes and acts, it progresses towards crisis, climax, and resolution. McKee's "story" has a protagonist (or multiple protagonists) who will confront a variety of conflicts. It has a "controlling idea" (116), it has dialogue based on "what is known in Classical Greek as *stikomythia* - the rapid exchange of short speeches" (390), and it has "true" characters ("True character can only be expressed through choice in dilemma" 375). If you have any post-structuralist bones in your body, you are already shifting in your seat, waiting for McKee to address other narrative possibilities or other approaches to narrativity. He doesn't.

In fact, one of the things I really enjoyed about McKee's *Story* is his capacity to make you want to argue with him *even as you continue reading.* I was reading his book while staying with a friend in Brisbane. "Having it out with Robert," she called it, because I couldn't help but scoffing "Oh, come on, Robert!" every little while, and getting up and pacing around the room before sitting down again. McKee believes, unashamedly, in genius. He doesn't like minimalist plots. He thinks art films "cling to the dark side for reasons more fashionable than truthful" (60). He emphasises the uselessness of formulae, even while providing us with several very useful schematics illustrating common narrative techniques.



"The Gap in Progression" p. 151. This is an example of one of McKee's schematic diagrams, in this case explaining the way that the gap between a protagonist's expectations regarding a certain action and the actual results of

> that action can be used to produce progressively greater risk and jeopardy, thereby compelling the narrative along.

McKee separates what he calls "literary talent" (by which he seems to mean a writer's ability to craft language effectively) from "story talent" (the capacity to structure a dramatic narrative) and proposes that the latter is more important than the former. He oversimplifies and anti-intellectualises, even in the midst of making what are otherwise some very valid and useful points:

> Trends in literary theory have drawn professors away from the deep sources of story toward language codes, text - story seen from the outside. As a result, with some notable exceptions, the current generation of writers has been undereducated in the prime principles of story (16).

In my own experience as a teacher and an examiner of creative writing, I would have to agree with McKee that weakness in narrative structure is one of the most common flaws in work by beginning writers, and often it's the greatest weakness in novels by well-known authors too. But I doubt it's the fault of semiotics professors. I think it's more likely to be because narrative structure is a difficult thing to fully understand and an even more difficult thing to do well, whether you are resisting generic conventions or not. And as to whether "story talent" is more important than "literary talent" - bearing in mind the arbitrary nature of the dichotomy - in the case of longer works of fiction, I think Robert does have a point.

McKee spends over four hundred pages on relating narrative structure to genre, to plot, to character, to setting. He uses a whole swathe of examples in the way of Hollywood screenplays to illustrate key concepts, and one could argue that his tendency to oversimplify actually makes this a very accessible book. His extensive work on scene design and scene analysis, where he writes the sub-text in behind the dialogue in key scenes from *Casablanca* and *Through a Glass Darkly*, would be invaluable to use in teaching the principles of dialogue and scene design to new writers (as long as you don't mind scenes in which the women are either mad or hopelessly trapped).

You can imagine how relieved I was when, in preparing to write this review, I went to see Charlie and David Kaufman's *Adaptation,* directed by Spike Jonze. Aaagh! Somebody else has been driven a little mad by Robert McKee! I don't know that *Adaptation* is a great success, by the way (perhaps I've seen one too many Hollywood films about Hollywood filmmaking) but it's ironic that the Kaufman & Kaufman screenplay demonstrates, quite self-consciously, both the value *and* the limitations of so much of McKee's advice.

Whether McKee is aware of Barthes and Mulvey and various others on the pleasure of the text, I don't know. But I can't conclude this review without sharing with you his marvellously masculine moment in the chapter on composition. Here, McKee is discussing the finer points of building and releasing tension, of pacing along the path of the story:

> It's just like sex. Masters of the bedroom arts pace their lovemaking. They begin by taking each other to a state of delicious tension short of - and we use the same word in both cases - climax, then tell a joke and shift positions before building each other to an even higher tension short of climax; then have a sandwich, watch TV, and gather energy to then reach greater and greater intensity, making love in cycles of rising tension until they finally climax simultaneously and the

> earth moves and they see colours. The gracious storyteller makes love to us. He knows we're capable of tremendous release… if he paces us to it. (291)

It took me a while to get that picture (McKee in pink track-suit swanning in front of a television, perhaps watching *The Love Boat* or something similarly eighties, and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches between pre-coital sessions) out of my head. Especially when the sub-heading that immediately follows the above paragraph turned out to be "Rhythm and Tempo". Granted, McKee's habit of putting key concepts of conventional narrative structure into very simple language does sometimes fall flat!

On the whole, McKee's book is really worth reading, especially if you are at a crucial point in writing a lengthy manuscript and you have questions about design. That is, it is more than likely to motivate you to ask the right questions of your own work. It would also be invaluable to illustrate key narrative design concepts to students developing their own longer narrative works. A few years ago I was supervising a Masters student who was writing an autobiographical novel. Some way into the project, we had a series of lengthy discussions about the structure of her manuscript: precisely about things like building and releasing tension, and the importance of having scenes "arrive somewhere" and so on. "How do you know all this stuff?" she said. "How come I haven't learnt any of this already?" If only I had known of McKee's book then, I would have directed her to it. Even a resistant reading of this book is likely to problematise, in a useful way, crucial questions around the nature of narrative structure.

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Going Feral

Review by Phillip Edmonds

Academia Nuts
Michael Wilding
Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 2002
ISBN 0 909331 94 4
RRP $26.95 Pb

This latest contribution by Michael Wilding firmly establishes him as the leader of a new genre - the feral. Of course it has been building for some time, in the stories of *The Phallic Forest* and *Political Fictions* (all those years ago) and more recently in the loosely autobiographical, *Wildest Dreams*, where he further developed an unruly stance. This time, he has cast manners aside and gone for the jugular over obsessions such as economic rationalism in the universities, the potential superficiality of some creative writing courses, gender wars over promotional possibilities in the academy, and cultural studies as a possible Trojan horse for the 'end of ideology' theory, among others. Similar concerns to many of the novels of David Lodge in Britain and of Hannie Rayson in her play *Life after George* where the academy is the subject and object of its own history.

It needs to be said though, that with the publication of this book, Wilding could be trying to reclaim satire back from the grunge postmoderns who thought that sex and drugs were trangressive twenty years after Truman Capote and Hunter S. Thompson. Even so, he may stand accused of being a grumpy old man in that the choice of narrative implies a notion of 'old' politics. If so, this may be an unfortunate confusion between author and narrator, and given international events, a naïve view of 'politics'. These are 'stories', after all, you could say.

He has always been a satirist, but this time the voice is intemperate and deliberately over the top - a kind of feral kamikaze attack on the stylized, and at times vicious, manners of an academy under attack from all directions and often unable to articulate its strengths. The training for most academics privileges a complexity that sometimes resists plain speaking and is unable to organise collectively because it is always predicated on individual passions and positions. Strong on dialogue, *Academia Nuts*, races across the unconscious and employs a controlled violence against the pain of the decline of the humanities. The characters are literally hysterical and paranoid, which is an appropriate stance given our times: a period in which universities are often confusing fashion for scholarship in their course-offerings and where business faculties always get the best new buildings. Literally and metaphorically, Public Relations is an academic discipline!

The dust jacket describes the book as a 'novel', something I am unsure about even when, these days, there are increasingly fluid notions for the form. I rather think that the numbered 'chapters' are stories in themselves and that the book is a discontinuous narrative, not unlike Moorhouse's early work, in that there are ever-present characters (Dr Bee, for example) and some who pop in and out. You can read the pieces in any order you wish without losing your place, as it

were. I don't think you can do that even with the most 'postmodern' of novels. That said, it doesn't really matter what it is. It is good writing, taut, racy, and a work that employs the notion that often the writer's vocation is to parody our social formations without merely being content to present another pastiche of experience. There is no authorial lack of nerve here and no debate about whether there might be something to say.

It is a seamless effort, rarely clunky, given that Wilding hasn't bothered to create rounded characters. They are, rather, like devices or staging points for the polemics, which in less-skilled hands would seem preachy and clumsy. In 'Think of a Book', for example, 'some things were too painful to write about', according to the narrator. Lancaster finds that he is some kind of relic who believes in books and his role in producing some of them. He had tried to be 'relevant' but the final straw is when the library remaindered his work to clear some space for itself. In 'Cultural Studies', Pawley believes that literary theory is part of the roll-back of radicalism. 'They introduce this gobbledygook, promote it through the American publishers. And disempower entire generations,' he says. 'If you looked around the other campuses you could see all the new appointments had been people who claimed a competence in theory.' Pawley specialises in such generalisations, which are partly a reactionary response to change, but as in all good feral fiction, Wilding wants to get things out there.

'Quality Control' was a chilling reminder to me of a time in my career when I taught in TAFE. We had to spend most of our week filling in quality control forms instead of doing our jobs, in an environment where the mention of the word 'solidarity' was like farting in polite company. The academics at Wilding's mythical university can't get it together because they have been for so long erudite loners. In 'In the Lists', Wilding returns, if you like, to one of his consistent speculations - the problem of documentation in an age of ASIO, MI6, the CIA and MOSSAD. The context here is, of course, the kinds of things that went on in and around the Vietnam War when no one really knew whose side some people were on. Michael is imagining where some of the bodies are buried. Is that an 'old' politics?

'Sacrificing the Scapegoat' continues the theme, this time; Robert just can't cope with the impression that he is about to be consigned to the dustbin of history, so he goes quietly into retirement. 'A Famous Edited Book' is a wicked parody of the cynical uses of cyber publishing at a time of extreme publication anxiety and something I hope readers of *TEXT* don't take too seriously. The 'absence' joke is a corker, worth reading the story for that alone. 'Absence is as good as presence. Look at what their careers are based on. Utter invisibility.' 'Writing Class' is also wicked. Lancaster, for example, is interested in a life of teaching without texts. Creative writing teachers should rise to that bait.

'Research Assistants' is surreal like all satire, where Rowley's assistant is shamelessly exploited. Luckily, most of us don't behave like that. There is a link made between downsizing, multiskilling and feminisation of the department in another story, in case anyone thought that the conspiracy was one-dimensional. In 'Literary Lunch' hardly anyone turns up to a talk by the visiting Writer in Residence in a kind of grotesque parody of the 'death of the author'. Thankfully none of it is true. All 'post-structuralists' (excuse the pun) should make 'Imagining the Gym' required reading as an exercise in deconstruction, or in 'the endless refusal of closure'. In 'Administrative Matters', we have the 'hamburger' university, and an American software package of some description. It is just too awful for words, and in this way, like Brecht, Wilding never gives the reader any room for rest and recuperation. It is no wonder then that 'Better Dead than Red' comes towards the end where old Bannerman is found dead in his room after years of bashing his head up against a brick wall, as it were. It reminded me of

battles in the Economics Faculty at Sydney over twenty-five years ago over the teaching of 'political economy', which might suggest that this book is a circular narrative rather than a linear one. There is also an insinuation that the previously marginal has become central to the representations of late capitalism.

There is a slight sense of rising action, as it were, towards the latter half of the book, and in 'The Raising of the Curtains' even a little note of narrative optimism amid the gloom: '...there was another reality. Somewhere. He had to believe that. Otherwise it was all-unstoppable.' The author just can't let go. I enjoyed it. It is a good thing that these pieces are stories.

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