

# Iatrogenic Fictions

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Peter Goldsworthy

THE LIST OF ALL ANSWERS: COLLECTED STORIES

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SUSAN SONTAG has identified in contemporary fiction what she calls an 'impatient, ardent and elliptical' drive. These are features, above all, of the well-wrought story, and they are also adjectives that well describe its inherent paradox: the story is contained but somehow urgent, intensified but working in a system of concision, suggestive but employing referential exorbitance. Four pages might betoken an entire world.

Peter Goldsworthy's *Collected Stories* is the work of an accomplished and established writer, perhaps better known for his librettos and his six novels, the most recent of which, *Three Dog Night* (2003), has met with particular critical acclaim. Yet the thirty-three stories in this collection suggest a sustained engagement with the short story form, and an abiding interest in the stringent aesthetics of smaller narratives and particularised moments. Nor are they radical departures from the novels: the qualities so exemplary in his first book, *Maestro* (1989) — an interest in the evocation of distressed masculinity, a lucidity of purpose and prose, a commitment to vernacular, non-nonsense realism — are here still apparent. After the lyricism and tenderness of *Maestro*, Goldsworthy developed skills as a high ironist and a comic writer, and these features, too, are evident in the collection, at least one half of which is comic in tone.

It may be a matter of personal predilection, such as reviewers are meant to disguise or suppress, but the darker stories in the collection seem of a different order entirely to the comic tales. The latter, while without exception witty and engaging, are often somewhat casual comedies of manners, relying on a kind of joking 'one-liner' ending to cement their design. Stories about dry cleaning, bad neighbours and homicidal sprinklers fall into this category. However, there are also stories here of magnificent achievement and disturbing power; enduring, complex stories concerned with fundamentally difficult knowledge and the topic of concealed suffering.

The opening tale, 'The Kiss', is perhaps the most impressive in the entire collection: it tells of two boys awaiting the Darwin Wet, swigging sherry, practising bravado, taking the mickey, talking big. They steal the family car and end up stranded at night in a water tank, unable to escape. One boy drowns; the other is forced into a macabre parody of a lifesaving ritual, to inflate his friend's lungs in order to ensure his own survival. The dialogue is brilliantly exact; the special-effect thunderstorm and the atmospherics of impending downpour are utterly compelling. It is also a devastating portrait of the destructive culture of young men — at once vulnerable, misogynistic and with its own distinctive idiolect of hyperbole, brag and threat.

'The Bleeding', the story of a father-son relationship, is also exceptionally fine, and, in its preoccupation with the overlap of symbolic and actual violence, reminiscent of the short-fiction writers of the Deep South: Welty, O'Connor and Faulkner, in particular. Told from the son's point of view, this is a wise, understated tale about the misery of a child whose father is remorselessly brutish and authoritarian. Emotional violence is played out in the treatment — and indeed, execution — of greyhound dogs, and the sacrifice of

a kitten caught in a possum trap to 'blood' a dog that has been pacified by petting. This is an audacious story of great moral import, identifying as its centre the abuse of the child and the atrocity of an instrumentalist attitude to animals extended to human relations.

It is Goldsworthy's moral compass that also directs his astute and engrossing portraits of country-town life. Eschewing easy nostalgia, he is more interested in social relations founded in the challenge of 'otherness', and he deals, most centrally, with varieties of racism. 'Country-town Sketchbook', which sounds like an innocuous and light excursion of memory, is in fact a masterful anatomy of internalised racism, not only between Anglo and indigenous Australians, but also European migrants. Forms of habitual racism and family estrangement are paralleled, and Goldsworthy also tracks the linguistic culture — dago, boong, abo — that legitimates and naturalises base social attitudes. Middle-class urban Australians are not exempted from scrutiny: 'The Nice Chinese Doctor' is a study in the hypocrisy and self-interest that sabotages an outsider of great integrity who wishes to enter the medical establishment.

It is worth mentioning at this point that at least a dozen stories in this volume concern medics of some sort (medical students, surgeons, both plastic and inflexible, professors,

general practitioners — even dental students get a guernsey) and that many stories employ as their narrative incitement a medical emergency (death during sex, choking at a restaurant, pneumonia, cancer). Read from cover to cover, this book is thus strikingly ‘medical’ in subject matter — unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that Goldsworthy is also a physician. However, what is striking is that the doctors’ chief occupation in these narratives is attending dinner parties and functions, and that, overall, they are subjects of the bitterest irony and ethical denunciation. This is an assembly of medical professionals ‘behaving badly’: many are repulsive, insensitive, venal and crass. ‘A Cobbler’s Child’, an allegory of doctors’ mistreatment of their own children and the adoption of superstition in the face of crisis, is typically critical. In the last story, ‘The Duty to Die Cheaply’, the figure of the doctor has transmogrified into a grotesque: a medico travelling in business class is forced to ‘mind’ a dead passenger in economy class, and the ensuing subsidence into gross insult and unprofessional delinquency is memorably distasteful.

It would be a mistake, however, to blur the specificity and range of tones of these tales. ‘The Nice Surprise’, a story akin in its strange suffering to that in Patrick White’s ‘A Cheery Soul’, ends with a visiting grandmother’s pneumonia, not as a kind of reflex device but as a register of deep familial neglect and the proximity of emotional and physical destruction. It is a sophisticated tale, diagnosing, once again, the disregard of children’s life-worlds as the aetiology of family dysfunction. Similarly, ‘Pointing the Bone’, despite its unfortunate title, deals with the peculiarly irrational realms of gossip, credulity and anxiety that attend the detection and announcement of cancer.

*The List of All Answers*, in short, is a kind of pathological text — indeed, one might mischievously call it iatrogenic fiction — but it is also deeply humane, concerned and relentlessly forensic in its effort to expose the agents that produce malaise and despair. It is particularly clever at demonstrating how cliché (‘democratically elected truth’) supplants circumspect speech, and the sheer preponderance of unthinking dialogue over interiorised states of reflection reveals a culture given to fake lexicons, insincerity and emotional torpor. The ‘impatient, ardent and elliptical’ qualities of the fiction are employed surgically, as it were, as instruments of highly intelligent cultural critique.

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