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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Peter Goldsworthy’s short stories can be arresting and powerful. At their best, they unsettle comfortable beliefs and rip away the protective coverings respectable people prefer to retain. His new collection, *Gravel*, is not consistent, but the good stories are up there with some of his best.

The first in this collection of eight stories – some of them expanding beyond the short story genre – is ‘The Nun’s Story’. A boy called Robbie has a mild crush on the nun who teaches him piano. This feels very much like an out-take from *Everything I knew*, perhaps prefiguring the passion Robbie develops for his teacher in that novel. There is an uncomfortable revelation at the end of this story (literally), but it’s a tasteless kind of joke rather than a valuable life lesson for this young teenager. ‘Shooting the Dog’ is better: a morality tale of town and country ways with a few well-placed surprises along the way. The title, and indeed the subject matter, suggest a reference to Orwell’s gut-wrenching ‘Shooting an Elephant’, and though it’s a good story, it’s not quite in Orwell’s league.

Many of Goldsworthy’s protagonists are hapless souls driven not so much by their passions as by a kind of reckless curiosity, and easily manipulated by appeals to their vanity or challenges to their self-perceptions. In ‘The Bet’, a children’s soccer coach is goaded to behave disgracefully, against his own better judgement and to his wife’s disgust, by the pugnacious coach of the other team. ‘Mirror Mirror’ is the first of three stories which feature Rob, a middle-aged lawyer. In this story his somewhat younger second wife, Lucy, is tempted despite herself by the advances of a female shop assistant. In a later story, ‘The Fourth Tenor’, it’s a famous opera singer whose sleazy world she allows herself to be drawn into. This wry story is perhaps a little long, and it may be just me, but I found the snide references to the body shape of opera singers – ‘the music does its usual trick of suspending any disbelief that such short fat people might fall passionately in love’ – and the tired typecasting of my profession, in the person of ‘a young Italian beauty trying hard to hid behind a librarian look: severely tugged back hair, austere wire-rimmed glasses, pursed lips’ – somewhat galling. The last story of the
collection, ‘The Formal’, revisits Rob, but this time he is the wayward one, conducting a passionate affair with schoolgirl who has not quite reached the age of consent. Lucy, it seems, has been sidelined in her turn, and this story is narrated through the eyes of Rob’s implausibly starry-eyed young fiancée.

In ‘Get a Life’ it is the male protagonist’s turn to be the object of unwanted but nevertheless tempting attention. A stalker named Rose (could this be an intentional inter-textual reference to the American sitcom ‘Two and a Half Men?) contacts Paul after a silence of ten years. Paul’s wife is scathing about Rose’s claims to be dying of cancer, but Paul can’t quite bring himself to ignore them. Though it’s a little too long, it’s one of the most satisfying stories in the book. ‘Run Silent, Run Deep’ is the pick of the bunch. Shorter than most of the others, it revolves around a father-daughter relationship and a small-scale moral dilemma. ‘In a world that had largely turned its back on him, [where] bed at least remained inviting,’ the somewhat defeated Nick’s daughter Emma is basically loving but at that difficult, scornful stage of adolescence, where ‘within minutes she would have [a moral issue] boxed and sorted.’

Gravel is full of small pleasures like this, but it also contains rather more in the way of irritants. Despite the ambivalence of Goldsworthy’s characters, their opinions of others can be smug in a way that doesn’t seem part of their character development, and their morality too often comes pat. And for a writer who relies on stark moral dilemmas and startling denouements, most of these stories are too safe and limited in their emotional range.