

CULTURE CLUB

PHIL BROWN



“Any worthwhile writer will have dabbled in the short story form”

Here's my prescription for anything that ails you. Take a book of short stories and go straight to bed. You will feel so much better in the morning.

At the moment my guilty pleasure is reading one each night from a new book called *The Hunter And Other Stories of Men* (Transit Lounge, \$28), by Brisbane author David Cohen.

A lot of publishers steer clear of short stories nowadays, in the same way most steer clear of poetry. But it remains a classic and ancient literary form, and luckily any worthwhile writer will have dabbled in them. I grew up on short stories, particularly Ernest Hemingway and W. Somerset Maugham. Graham Greene was another I relished. Then there are O. Henry, Chekhov, our old master Henry Lawson, and all the other greats.

Cohen is, like me, a great lover of the form and he also cites Franz Kafka and Isaac Bashevis Singer as influences, while the publicity blurb for his book draws parallels between his work and that of Will Self and David Sedaris. Cohen also reminds me of Israeli writer Edgar Kerec. I came across Cohen's work last year when I read his rather brilliant and deliciously pithy novel *Disappearing Off the Face of the Earth*, an absurdist mystery set largely at a storage facility on Brisbane's southside. Sounds familiar? You don't know the half of it.

But Cohen loves that “And I do like writing about the ins and outs of the sort of jobs that have been overlooked by other writers,” he tells me. And so in his book of short stories there is one about some guys who work for a carpet cleaning service in Brisbane. The titular piece is a wonderful tale of a property developer who fears that

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Bangkok sets the scene for a new Australian play by Julia-Rose Lewis (left) with music composed by Gillian Cosgriff. We won't call it a musical but it is a play, directed by Kat Henry, with songs, and it stars Courtney Stewart and singer and guitarist Lisa Hanley. In the play we meet Andy, an Australian traveller outunning a broken heart. She has taken up residence in a Bangkok karaoke bar where she meets a Thai-American woman on a personal quest to connect with her mother's culture. It's a love story set to the beat of Bangkok's back alleys and go-go bars.

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As Cohen points out quite rightly, in the age of the short attention span, this is the perfect form. I find short stories a real tonic and always have at least one volume of them on my bedside table to dip into. A couple of years ago I had a big collection by Patricia Highsmith; I savoured one bizarre story each night and was so sad when I finished. After dipping into Cohen's quirky tales I might go back to a little volume of Hemingway I picked up in Paris last year at Shakespeare and his cronies used to hang out. Pretentious? *Moi?* Don't miss Phil Brown's arts coverage weekdays on The Courier-Mail website

RAKE THE PITH: (clockwise from above) Brisbane author David Cohen, Ernest Hemingway and Graham Greene, all practitioners of the short story medium.

