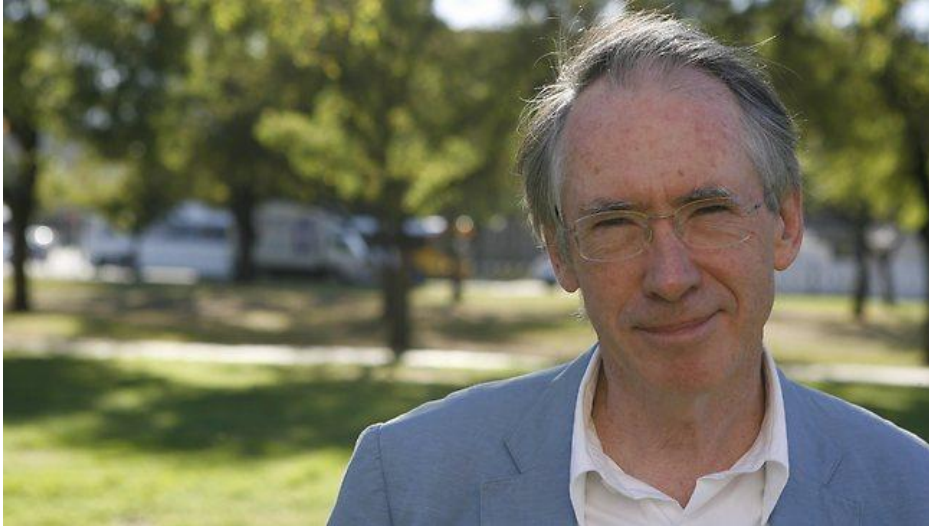


Novella is on the short side but in fine form

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Author Ian McEwan has long championed the novella. Picture: Kelly Barnes *Source: The Australian*

THE novella is "the perfect form of prose fiction", Booker Prize-winning novelist Ian McEwan declared in *The New Yorker* recently.

Compared with the novel, it is "the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated ill-shaven giant". He wrote of Voltaire and Solzhenitsyn, DH Lawrence and Alice Munro. He singled out the achievement of James Joyce's *The Dead* and sang the praises of novellas by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka:

The tradition is long and glorious. I could go even further: the demands of economy push writers to polish their sentences to precision and clarity, to bring off their effects with unusual intensity, to remain focused on the point of their creation and drive it forward with functional single-mindedness, and to end it with a mind to its unity. They don't ramble or preach, they spare us their quintuple subplots and swollen midsections.

All this was surprising to learn from a man whose reputation as perhaps the senior figure in contemporary English literature rests on his novels: the epic historical mode of *Atonement*, for example, or state-of-the-culture works such as *Saturday*. It was as if a cruise ship captain had suddenly announced his preference for sailing dinghies.

But if we take a longer view of McEwan's career a different writer appears, one who bears out a love of the shorter form. His 1978 debut "novel" *The Cement Garden* is just 138 pages long, yet it introduced a wholly new note into contemporary English fiction. The author's account of four children, orphaned suddenly by the death of their mother, who entomb her corpse in the basement of their suburban home to avoid being taken into care, is shocking, not for the atmosphere of squalor and psychological unease, or even the transgressive sexuality that is related. Rather, it is the clear, elegant, precise means with which McEwan describes events: he plays the purity of the novella form against the oozing corruption of the narrative.

The result was radical, the fictional equivalent of those three-minute-long punk singles making their first appearances in record stores.

Nor did McEwan abandon the novella form. Instead he nested shorter narratives within his longer works. Think of the extended, hallucinatory encounter with a pair of sinister hounds that caps his 1992 meditation on European history, *Black Dogs*. Or the awful specificity brought to bear on the long sequence in *The Innocent* (1990) in which the protagonists are obliged to dismember the body of a murdered ex-husband and stuff it in cases for disposal. Perhaps most famous is the opening of *Enduring Love* (1997): a long chapter where a balloon accident unfolds in horrifying slow-motion. A decade later, *On Chesil Beach* was the first title by McEwan to bear the description "novella", but really it was only the first to remove the fictional pearl from the larger setting of the novel and present it separately.

Why has it taken McEwan so long to come out of the closet and admit his love for the form he describes as being "between 20,000 and 40,000 words, long enough for a reader to inhabit a world or a consciousness and be kept there, short enough to be read in a sitting or two and for the whole structure to be held in mind at first encounter"?

I'd argue this has a little to do with the residual cultural cachet of the novel and a great deal to do with the structural demands of publishing in recent decades.

Novellas have fallen out of vogue primarily because of a perception they don't sell. Too long to be wedged into a short-story collection, too short for the full-spectrum marketing push given to longer (and so more expensively priced) fiction, novellas have fallen between the twin stools on which literary publishing usually sits.

This is not the first time a shift in the length of fictions has been dictated by the marketplace. In the 1890s changes in copyright and the calculation of lending library fees led to the decline of the three-decker novel typical of Victorian literature and a shift to single-volume works. So the 1899 publication of Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* not only presaged the literary development we call modernism, it also reflected new financial imperatives facing British publishers.

The final decades of the 20th century saw a similar shift. The older model - of smaller, longstanding publishers whose career-long associations with their authors meant they were willing to publish everything from essays to wine-cellar notes, even if these resulted in a financial loss - broke down by the 1980s. Agents, rather than editors, emerged as the figures to whom authors owed long-term allegiances. In return, agents pushed publishers hard for the best deals for authors. Commissioning editors working for "literary" imprints increasingly under the ownership of international conglomerates - organisations for which the bottom line was king - understandably demanded works from authors that maximised the possibility of selling well. Short stories and novellas did not make bestsellers.

McEwan's career neatly maps this altered landscape of Anglosphere publishing. After two well-received short-story collections in the mid-70s, at the fag end of the older publishing model, the author shifted to novels under the modern, corporate regime, where he has remained almost until the present. It is an indication of his hard-won eminence that he was able to write a novella in 2007 and have it published. Lesser-known authors would have found it difficult to have a work such as *On Chesil Beach* brought out by a mainstream publisher, irrespective of its literary merit.

In the five years since, however, things have changed markedly. The digital revolution has subverted this long-established publishing paradigm. After decades during which a group of international publishing conglomerates offered ever-higher payments for exponentially hefty novels, the digital asteroid hit.

In the explosion's wake, a new breed of publishing mammals cautiously left their borrows and tree-tops to walk the earth.

The re-emergence of the novella is tied intimately to these changes. As anyone who digs into this year's Man Booker Prize shortlist will know, it is the newer, smaller, more avowedly experimental independent publishers that are increasingly responsible for today's surprise bestsellers and *succes d'estime*. Three of this year's six shortlisted titles were produced by independent presses. Each of these specialises in literary

fiction and short stories of the kind that doesn't fit the usual categories. Buckinghamshire-based And Other Stories published Deborah Levy's critically lauded *Swimming Home*. The same firm also published Juan Pablo Villalobos's *Down the Rabbit Hole*, a scant, 70-page novella translated from the Spanish and concerned with the child of a drug lord locked away in a compound who likes hats and yearns for a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus. It has been widely reviewed and universally praised, and Farrar Straus and Giroux has just published Rosalind Harvey's English translation in the US.

Indeed, similar outliers have first appeared in the US. Paul Harding's debut novel from 2009, *Tinkers*, was published by the Bellevue Literary Press, a non-profit dedicated to publishing books at the intersection of the arts and sciences so tiny it operates out of a single office in the famed Manhattan mental hospital. Ignored by mainstream publications, *Tinkers* gathered a following via word of mouth and the enthusiasm of book bloggers. In 2010, Harding's complex, elegiac meditation on the last days of a dying watchmaker won a Pulitzer prize for fiction. It is a little more than 40,000 words long.

Yet it is in Australia that some of the most dramatic shifts towards long-short fiction have occurred. Both the upstart literary magazine *Seizure* and the establishment journal *Griffith Review* have embarked on novella prizes in recent months. The latest *Griffith Review*, edited by Julianne Schultz, contains a half-dozen novellas chosen by a panel of judges from hundreds of submissions. The quality of works by authors such as Ed Wright, Lyndel Caffrey and Christine Kearney is gratifyingly high, and the subject matter of their contributions thrillingly wide-ranging. It is as if the shift in length permits a concomitant freedom of approach, a liberation from the novel's long-established dogmas.

The most developed local effort to bring the novella (and shorter nonfiction monographs) to public prominence has been undertaken by Giramondo, an independent publisher based at the University of Western Sydney. Giramondo Shorts is a new imprint for the firm, devoted to a series of brief works. Again it is the kind of project that relies on the economies of scale permitted by short-run printing to produce relatively cheap runs of niche titles. In the months since the imprint's inception Giramondo has published Evelyn Juers's *The Recluse*, a multi-stranded account of 19th-century Sydney eccentric Eliza Donnithorne, who perhaps provided the model for Charles Dickens's *Miss Havisham*; Chris Andrews's translation of Varamo, a brief work by Argentinian writer Cesar Aira; and *Street to Street*, Brian Castro's foray into the novella.

It is this last work that best indicates the ways in which the novella tends to undermine the settled hierarchies of the novel. In his New Yorker piece, McEwan made a point of celebrating Joyce's *The Dead* as the great novella. Yet, as US critic David Ulin noted in response: "This is the sort of hierarchical thinking the novella stands against. It seems self-defeating ... to rank a category that is itself underappreciated, that we come to, when at all, on its own terms."

Castro takes this notion and runs with it in *Street to Street*, which traces the later life of a failed poet, teacher and husband named Brendan Costa, whose endlessly delayed project on the life and work of Sydney poet, raconteur, alcoholic and academic Christopher Brennan grows into a melancholy essay on artistic disappointment. For Costa, whose decade of research into Brennan has been stymied and whose dreams of poetic greatness have drunkenly receded alongside those of his drunken, century-old hero, it is only by becoming a connoisseur of failure that he can properly honour his subject.

The story of the efforts characters undertake to make a place for themselves in the world has been, for much of its history, the stuff from which novels are made. Castro's painful and fragmentary approach - 150 small-format pages - speaks eloquently of lives for whom the world makes no such accommodation.

It is this sense of modesty in proportion combined with eccentricity of subject matter that is the real pleasure of the novella. Its condensed architecture concentrates the virtues of the form in unexpected ways. Indeed, it is the clarity and swiftness with which such stories are obliged to unfold that offers the final and most persuasive reason for the novella's return.

In recent years, the contemporary novel's increasingly gargantuan sprawl has felt like a rearguard action. Fiction has sought to compete with the vast tranches of data held and disseminated by the digital, much as lumberjack Paul Bunyan set out with an axe in competition with the steam-powered saw, with similarly exhausting and ultimately hopeless results.

What has become increasingly clear is that the novel, however expansive its scope or well-informed its controlling intelligence, cannot hope to compete with the world wide web.

One of the primary objectives of the novel - to transmit useful information about the world - has been overwhelmed by a more effective medium.

The web also offers something very different from the analog-era reading experience typified by the novel. Novels require time and concentration; their communication is narrowband, sustained between one mind and another across days, weeks or months. Our browser windows, by contrast, are designed to lead us ever sideways, not deeper in. We read online with a slight attentiveness, one that slides lightly across multiple pages just as an insect skates across the surface tension of a pond.

Whether it is the satirical pessimism of Voltaire's *Candide*, which first appeared in 1759, or the urbane philosophical dialogue of Australian author David Brooks's *The Conversation*, just published by the University of Queensland Press, the novella has thrived on brevity. For a time-starved generation, glutted on content but starved for coherent narrative, these narratives offer a rare breather. After the endless, anonymous cocktail party of the web they are a bottle of wine shared with an old friend: intimate, engaged and precious in their distinctiveness from the daily chatter of our workplaces and social networks.

"The novel is too capacious, inclusive, unruly, and personal for perfection," McEwan wrote. But the novella can and does aspire to a total vision, one where the heart and head act in ideal consort, where form and content are held in a tension closer to poetry than prose. Their renaissance suggests literature has not been swallowed by the internet but, rather, revealed anew in a different and welcome guise.

Geordie Williamson is The Australian's chief literary critic.