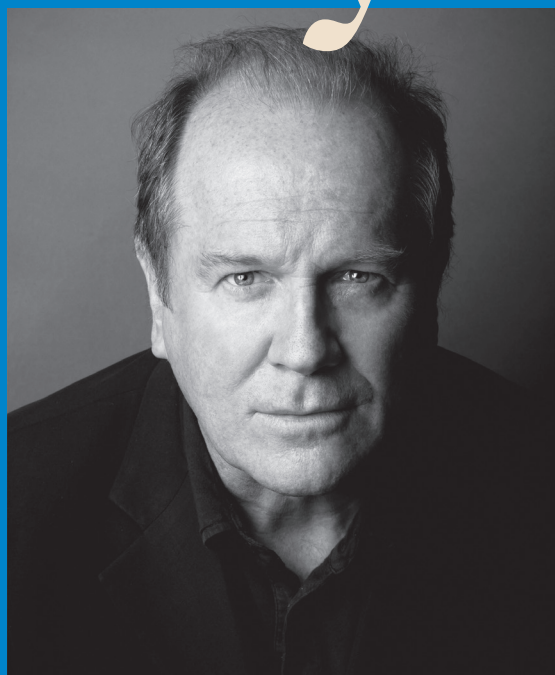


The Mirror  
and the Road  
Conversations with

# William Boyd



'One of Britain's most  
celebrated contemporary  
novelists'  
*Sunday Times*

Edited by  
**Alistair Owen**



The Mirror and the Road:  
Conversations with William Boyd

**Copyrighted Material**

*By William Boyd*

NOVELS

A Good Man in Africa

An Ice-Cream War

Stars and Bars

The New Confessions

Brazzaville Beach

The Blue Afternoon

Armadillo

Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928–1960

Any Human Heart

Restless

Ordinary Thunderstorms

Waiting for Sunrise

Solo

Sweet Caress

Love is Blind

Trio

The Romantic

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

On the Yankee Station

The Destiny of Nathalie 'X'

Fascination

The Dream Lover

The Dreams of Bethany Mellmoth

PLAYS

School Ties

Six Parties

Longing

The Argument

NON-FICTION

Copyrighted Material  
Bamboo

*By Alistair Owen*

NON-FICTION

Smoking in Bed: Conversations with Bruce Robinson  
Story and Character: Interviews with British Screenwriters  
Hampton on Hampton  
The Art of Screen Adaptation:  
Top Writers Reveal Their Craft

FICTION

The Vetting Officer

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

# The Mirror and the Road

*Conversations with William Boyd*

EDITED BY ALISTAIR OWEN



PENGUIN BOOKS  
**Copyrighted Material**

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia  
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published 2023

001

Copyright © 2023 William Boyd & Alistair Owen

The moral right of the copyright holders has been asserted

Set in 12.5/14.75pt Garamond MT Std  
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-98733-9

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

**Copyrighted Material**

Un roman est un miroir qui se promène  
sur une grande route

Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*

**Copyrighted Material**

# Contents

## Introduction

I

## One

### Fiction 1

*A Good Man in Africa* (1981) – *On the Yankee Station* (1981)

*An Ice-Cream War* (1982) – *Stars and Bars* (1984)

*The New Confessions* (1987)

5

## Two

### Screenplays 1

*Good and Bad at Games* (1983) – *Dutch Girls* (1985) – *Scoop* (1987)

78

## Three

### Fiction 2

*Brazzaville Beach* (1990) – *The Blue Afternoon* (1993)

*The Destiny of Nathalie 'X'* (1995) – *Armadillo* (1998)

99

## Four

### Screenplays 2

*Mister Johnson* (1990) – *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1990)

*Chaplin* (1992) – *The Trench* (1999)

138

**Copyrighted Material**

ix

**Five**  
**Fiction 3**

*Any Human Heart* (2002) – *Fascination* (2004)  
*Restless* (2006) – *Ordinary Thunderstorms* (2009)  
*Waiting for Sunrise* (2012)

166

**Six**  
**Screenplays 3**

*Sword of Honour* (2001) – *Man to Man* (2005)  
*A Waste of Shame* (2005) – *Spy City* (2020)

222

**Seven**  
**Fiction 4**

*Solo* (2013) – *Sweet Caress* (2015)  
*The Dreams of Bethany Mellmoth* (2017)  
*Love is Blind* (2018) – *Trio* (2020)

241

**Eight**  
**Stage Plays**

*Six Parties* (2009) – *Longing* (2013) – *The Argument* (2016)

298

**Nine**  
**Fiction 5**

*The Romantic* (2022)

315

**Copyrighted Material**

Acknowledgements

331

Credits

333

Index

339

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

# Introduction

The final draft manuscript of William Boyd's novel *The Romantic* arrived in my inbox twenty-one years to the day after we sat down to talk for my book *Story and Character: Interviews with British Screenwriters*. When we met for that interview, I was using a microcassette dictaphone and he had recently finished his ninth novel, *Any Human Heart*. By the time I clicked 'record' again, we were videoconferencing and he had just published his sixteenth novel, *Trio*. In between, *Any Human Heart* had become, and remains, one of my favourite novels. I still own the first paperback edition with its striking, multicoloured jacket (which, like all good book covers, became part of the reading experience in some indefinable way) and I revisit the novel at intervals, my reading of it subtly changing with age: the eighty-five-year life of its literary protagonist, Logan Mountstuart, throwing a shifting light on my own life as the decades pass.

We originally planned for this book to coincide with Boyd's seventieth birthday in 2022, but the pandemic intervened. Now it feels fitting that these interviews follow another of his trademark 'whole life' novels, since our conversations ranged across his entire writing career and touched on most of his published and produced work – taking me on imaginative journeys to Europe, Africa and the Americas; across the nineteenth, twentieth

**Copyrighted Material**

and twenty-first centuries; up in the air, down in the trenches and over school playing fields; always returning to the neat, smart streets of his patch of contemporary London, where all our meetings have taken place over the years.

Interview books, on the other hand, occupy a sort of hinterland – an uncategorized space somewhere between biography and autobiography – and editing them can be akin to doing a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle without having the box as a guide. In assembling this picture of William Boyd, I've done my best not to leave out any vital pieces, but there are a few deliberate omissions.

The first omission is journalism, which has played a big part in Boyd's writing life. A collection of non-fiction, *Bamboo*, anthologized his essays and criticism from 1978 to 2004, and *More Bamboo*, non-fiction from 2005 to date, is being prepared for publication in 2025. Boyd occasionally refers to these pieces in our interviews, but I've tried, where possible, not to go over the same ground. The chapter titles of *Bamboo* are worth noting, though, since they encompass several of the subjects explored in this book: Life, Literature, Art, Africa, Film, Television and People and Places.

The second omission is Boyd's fake biography *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928–1960*. Published in 1998 by David Bowie's company 21 Publishing, the book brought together themes and techniques from some of Boyd's previous novels – a whole life, the art world, fiction posing as fact – and combined them into a portrait miniature that prefigured the epic canvas of *Any Human Heart* four years later. The new Penguin edition of *Nat Tate* contains an

**Copyrighted Material**

afterword by Boyd about the celebrated art hoax, and Bowie's role in it, which surrounded the book's publication – so, again, I chose not to discuss it in depth here.

The third omission is unproduced screenplays. Most screenwriting careers are like icebergs, largely underwater, and Boyd's CV is a case in point: forty-nine unproduced and three uncredited screenplays, many of which are listed at the back of the book. I intended to include them all, but in the end there wasn't room. Some of his unproduced plays are covered, and any unmade adaptations of his novels or short stories. A handful of other unproduced screenplays are mentioned in passing, but more detail on, for example, *The Galapagos Affair* (based on the book by John Treherne), can be found in our interview from *Story and Character*, reprinted in *Bamboo* as 'Making Movies'.

We did, however, talk about seventeen novels, five collections of short stories, twelve films, five television series and three stage plays – a total of thirty-three hours of interviews, conducted between November 2020 and April 2022, followed by additional questions and clarifications via email. The resulting Q&A is organized broadly by decade, the chapters alternating between fiction and screenplays – until the penultimate chapter, focusing on Boyd's stage work. Alongside the interviews, he was busy planning and writing *The Romantic*, so I decided to devote the last chapter to that novel, a structure which will hopefully give the reader glimpses of his progress as our conversations unfold.

One further omission is plot synopses of Boyd's fiction, screenplays and stage plays. Firstly because they're

**Copyrighted Material**

readily googled. Secondly because I've tried to indicate the plots in my questions. Thirdly because I've assumed that a fair number of readers will be familiar with a fair amount of his output. And finally because it's an incentive to make the same journey I made through the Boyd oeuvre – one of the pleasures of any book about a writer's work.

Before that journey began, in late February 2020, we met for a pre-interview lunch at our usual venue, the Chelsea Arts Club. After lunch, as I walked back to the Tube and joined the crowds heading underground, I remember thinking, 'I wonder if this Covid thing will amount to anything?' Three weeks later, the country was in lockdown. I'd conducted the interviews for my previous books in person, and had never imagined doing these any other way. But, in the end, I didn't feel that that my conversations with William Boyd suffered for taking place on Zoom. It allowed us to talk when he was at his house in France, sitting in another study, with a different set of bookshelves behind him. And, looking back, one compensation of all the online interactions in that disconnected time was seeing how books of every kind still provide a reassuring backdrop to so many people's lives.

Alistair Owen  
January 2023

**Copyrighted Material**

# One

## Fiction 1

*A Good Man in Africa* (1981) – *On the Yankee Station* (1981)

*An Ice-Cream War* (1982) – *Stars and Bars* (1984)

*The New Confessions* (1987)

### **When did you first know that you wanted to be a writer?**

That's a good question. When I was seventeen or eighteen, thinking of my life ahead of me as an adult, I thought I wanted to be an artist; that was all I had in my head. I didn't know any artists, but there was a subliminal acknowledgement that I wouldn't be any good at a proper job, that somehow I wanted the freedom of an artistic life – whatever I perceived that to be. I did A-level art a year early and my teacher said I should go to art school. I ran this past my father and got a kind of 'Dream on, mate,' so I abandoned that idea and switched to literature. I was good at English, I ran the Literature Society at school and I thought, 'If I can't be a painter, I'll be a writer.' I'd been at Gordonstoun for nearly ten years by the time I left, and I had a gap year before gap years were invented. After a decade of penal servitude at this boarding school in the north of Scotland, I said to my father, 'I can't go to university right now,' and he said, 'You can have a year off as

**Copyrighted Material**

long as you do something useful.' So I went to the University of Nice because they offered courses for foreigners, and it was in Nice that I started to write; not so much fiction but little vignettes, observations of the life I was leading, and letters home to my parents in Africa. I was eighteen or nineteen, and those were the first stirrings of writerly ambition.

**In fact, your first ever short story, 'Reveries of an Early Morning Riser', several stories in your first two collections, and your first unpublished novel, *Is That All There Is?*, all sprang from that year.**

My time in Nice was hugely formative. I realized that my education had served me well in one or two areas but in the area of being a human being it was a disaster, so I threw out almost everything that boarding school had instilled in me and became a different person as a result. I had a fascinating circle of non-British, European friends; I had a love affair; I hitch-hiked the length of the Côte d'Azur; I met a guy who was supplying the Rolling Stones with all their drugs; I went to the 1971 Cannes Film Festival and have a memory of seeing John Lennon on the terrace at the Majestic; I went to a talk at Nice university given by Dalton Trumbo, who had come over for the festival, and saw his film *Johnny Got His Gun* and shook his hand. Even though I was callow I was taking notes, and I was able to turn all that into something more concrete in what I later wrote. And the good thing was, I got the autobiographical first novel, *Is That All There Is?*, out of my system.

**Copyrighted Material**

## **And into your bottom drawer.**

Where it remains to this day.

## **So, that novel and those stories aside, you wouldn't describe yourself as an autobiographical writer?**

I think it's a temperamental thing. There comes a point in a writer's life where this division occurs: you're either a writer who uses your own life as raw material or you're not, and if you're not then you use your imagination – and having used up my own life in those stories and that novel, I realized that I wasn't an autobiographical writer. Evelyn Waugh was a very autobiographical writer – even his most outlandish comedies have close links with his own experiences – but that's not the case with me at all. Of course, there's a lot of you in your fiction, and I can point to bits of my novels or stories that have their starting points in my own life or in characters I know, but I very quickly make them into imaginary people rather than real people. The central character of *Is That All There Is?*, Henry Rush, was a thinly disguised version of me, but the Nice stories feature this character called Edward Scully, and although a lot of the things that happen to him are things that happened to me, he's a much nastier person than I was – or am. He's like my evil twin. So even those first stories I wrote about Nice were a sign of the writer I wanted to become. It's just something in your nature that all writers discover, and I discovered that I'd rather make things up than turn my own life into a sort of, quote unquote, fiction.

**Copyrighted Material**

**'Reveries of an Early Morning Riser' won first prize in a short story competition at the University of Glasgow, where you studied for an MA in English Literature and Philosophy. There were also two writers in residence during your time there, poet George Bruce and novelist William Price Turner. How important was that moment, and that period, for you?**

It was very important. When you're a young writer just starting out you have dreams and fantasies about your talent, and winning a prize or seeing your name in print somehow means you've passed the test and you're not fooling yourself. More than anything else, winning that prize gave me the confidence to continue. I wrote that first novel, I wrote a play, I wrote other short stories, I wrote journalism. And for somebody who didn't know a single writer or publisher or editor or agent, meeting two real writers inadvertently opened a door for me. So, although my time in Oxford, where I next moved to do my DPhil, seems more significant to my writing career, what I did at Glasgow was very important in my development as a writer, particularly the journalism. I became arts editor for the university newspaper, I appointed myself theatre and film critic, I reviewed every play that appeared and went to see all the new movies – and I met the stars who came up to Scotland to promote them. I also met my wife, Susan, at Glasgow, so my personal life was very settled and secure. We'd been together for two years by the time we moved to Oxford, and we got married in order to get a student flat, and being a married man in my early twenties changed everything – in an

**Copyrighted Material**

extremely good way. I had a grant from the Scottish Education Department to pay for my DPhil studies and Susan had a good job with the Oxford University Press, so there was a benign and reassuring sense that the domestic foundations of my life were already well established and settled.

**You've dedicated every book you've written to Susan. Is she your first reader?**

Absolutely. She has been from day one. We have very similar tastes, we have the same sense of humour; the things we notice in life, we notice together. She's also a very honest person: she's not going to flatter me or let me off the hook easily, and if she thinks something is amiss she doesn't hesitate to tell me. So she's the ideal first reader. It's important for any writer to have a touchstone who will be honest with you and say, 'This bit isn't funny,' or, 'The ending is really boring.' I know writers, contemporaries of mine, who have nobody telling them these things any more, and it's not good for the finished article. But fortunately for me I still have that stringent, gimlet-eyed first reader at my shoulder. I'm an incredibly lucky man – and novelist.

**You wrote your second unpublished novel, *Against the Day*, after you moved to Oxford. What was the inspiration for that?**

*Against the Day* was set against the background of the Biafran War, which I'd lived through in Nigeria and had a profound effect on me. Again, I was a callow youth and I

**Copyrighted Material**

took things on board without really thinking about them, but when I look back I see how extraordinary these experiences were. Watching hideous pictures of people being shot and chopped down with machetes on the news every night. Seeing fighter jets parked alongside civilian airliners, and tanks and armoured cars everywhere you went. Being stopped at a roadblock in the middle of the bush and ordered out of the car by six drunken troops with AK-47s. Getting strip-searched at Lagos airport by two soldiers who thought I was running drugs or currency. Now I think, ‘How could I have been so calm?’ but at the time you don’t see the bigger picture, you just do as you’re told. My experiences in Nigeria in 1968–70 were as important as my experiences in Nice in 1971. They had a massive effect on my thinking and a knock-on effect in my fiction.

**In your introduction to *The Dream Lover* you describe *Against the Day* as ‘self-consciously experimental’. Is that why it was never published?**

It was a comprehensible novel, it wasn’t completely baffling, but I probably was going through a short-lived pretentious phase. That was at the time of my doctoral thesis, so maybe I’d been infected by literary theory. My memory of the novel is of a modernistic collage – letters, journals, first-person testimony, fictitious newspaper reports – and it might have worked better as an orthodox novel. But it was quite an exciting story, and some people who read it enjoyed it, so that was the one I started sending out.

**Copyrighted Material**

**And one of those people was your first mentor, Alan Ross.**

That's right. By that time I'd had a short story published in *London Magazine*, which was edited by Alan, and he became a crucial figure in my literary development. I felt I'd arrived, in a modest way: published in a highly regarded literary magazine, having lunch with the editor, being given free hardbacks and getting paid to review them. It seemed like the literary life to me. I told him I'd written this novel and he asked to see it, because he was a reader for various publishers, and he couldn't understand why it wasn't picked up. I used his recommendation to get a literary agent, Anthea Morton-Saner, but she couldn't get the novel published either, and we parted ways amicably. I started getting a bit desperate, so I wrote a novel called *Truelove at 29*, about a poet who inadvertently gets involved with a drug cartel. He wins a prize in Mexico and goes over to collect the award but in the plinth of the cup are two kilos of cocaine. Then he realizes that all traces of him are being erased: his books being removed from libraries and never returned, photographs of him being taken down off walls, until he becomes a non-person. It was a sort of thriller about an innocent being sucked into this perilous narco-plot.

**Your second and third novels, although unpublished, carry echoes of the ones that followed: *Against the Day* a story of conflict in the mould of *An Ice-Cream War*, *Truelove at 29* a fish-out-of-water story like *Stars and Bars*.**

**Copyrighted Material**

It's true that I've pillaged those novels to a certain extent, particularly *Against the Day*. A lot of that novel went into *An Ice-Cream War*, and, in fact, the moment in *Solo* where Bond is awoken by the muzzle of a rifle against his forehead and sees six heavily armed mercenaries in the room came straight from *Against the Day*, as well. Nothing is wasted. Everything can be recycled. And you're right that a lot of your apprentice work foreshadows the kind of writer you're going to be. I'm sure that's true of a painter or a composer as well. Your first stab at a string quartet may manifest itself in the symphony you write twenty years later. I never actually sent *Truelove at 29* to anybody, because I suddenly thought I could do better by getting a short story collection published. By now – 1979 – I'd had eight stories published or broadcast, and in those days collections of short stories were still a good route to having your first book published.

**Which it was in your case, albeit a circuitous route.**

Yes. The short story that Alan Ross took off the slush pile was my first story about this dissolute character Morgan Leafy – a minor British diplomat in a fictitious West African country – which I called 'Patience at Spinoza's', Patience being the name of a prostitute and Spinoza's being the name of a brothel. Alan said, 'I'm sorry, you can't have that title, nobody will know what you're talking about.' So I called it 'Next Boat from Douala' and that was the first story of mine that was properly published. There was a second Morgan Leafy story, 'The Coup', in the collection I sent simultaneously to Jonathan Cape and

**Copyrighted Material**

Hamish Hamilton, and something made me put a PS in my letter to both of them: ‘By the way, I’ve written a novel featuring this character, Morgan Leafy.’ And Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson at Hamish Hamilton replied – a great day, I remember it vividly – saying, ‘I want to publish your short story collection, but I want to publish the novel first.’ The problem was, I actually hadn’t written the novel; it was a white lie. So I told another white lie and said, ‘The manuscript’s in a shocking condition and I need to retype it. Give me a few weeks and I’ll get it back to you.’ I got a grant from the Arts Council, I borrowed some money from my mother, I gave up the teaching I was doing to make ends meet and I wrote *A Good Man in Africa* in about three months flat. Christopher received it, and accepted it, in September 1979 and said he wasn’t going to publish it until January 1981, so I had a long wait for my first novel to appear. But he really liked it, so I was off and running.

**Since you wrote the stories first, I’d like to talk about them first. In the introduction to *The Dream Lover* you say that ‘different mental gears are engaged, different pleasures experienced’ writing a short story than when writing a novel. How different *are* those mental gears, those pleasures?**

Angus Wilson, who made his name as a short story writer, was asked to define the short story, and he said it’s something you can write over a weekend. He was working at the British Museum as a curator, and on Saturday and Sunday, when he wasn’t at work, he could write a short story. That’s partly what appeals to me, that

**Copyrighted Material**

it's something you can do very quickly. There's another good definition, it might be Edgar Allan Poe's, that a short story is a work of fiction that can be read at one sitting. There's something contained about a short story, so its effect is different from a novel, more akin to a lyric poem as opposed to an epic poem. You don't read *Paradise Lost* in the same way as you read 'The Whitsun Weddings', for example. A short story is a very different thing to write as well. In those ten or twenty pages you can distil something that can stand on its own and deliver an aesthetic charge that's different from the aesthetic charge that a novel delivers. So I do think that the two forms are quite distinct. I also think – because I have this slightly nerdy tendency to classify things – that there are basically seven types of short story.

**Which you identify in an article that was reprinted in *Bamboo*: Event-Plot, Chekhovian, 'Modernist', Cryptic/Ludic, Mini-Novel, Poetic/Mythic and Biographical. Do you consider the category of story you're writing as you're writing it, or does that only reveal itself when you've finished?**

There's always the wisdom of hindsight, but usually if I have an idea for a short story I very quickly realize what kind it's going to be. As we speak, I've got a short story being broadcast on Radio 4, 'The McFeggan Offensive' – read by my friend John Sessions, who tragically died only last week. It's only about 2,000 words, but I can see it's a mini-novel short story: very realistic, with a distinct setting. I still don't think there's another variation of the

**Copyrighted Material**

short story that I'd add to that list. It encompasses virtually every story that's ever been written.

**In that article you also wrote, 'The Chekhovian point of view is to look at life in all its banality and all its tragicomedy and refuse to make a judgement,' and the same could be said of your own fiction.**

That's probably true of all modern fiction. Victorian novelists judged all the time, and pointed out good behaviour and bad behaviour and what was admirable and what was reprehensible. But Chekhov made a virtue of not condemning his sinful characters, because he was a shrewd and worldly enough man to realize that wasn't the fiction writer's place or mandate. Serious fiction, literary fiction, doesn't judge or condemn, or its condemnation is implicit rather than moralistic. And I think that's Chekhov's abiding influence, particularly on twentieth-century English literature, because his point of view is very amenable to the British psyche: everything is inherently funny or stupid, and people's behaviour is odd and absurd. His short stories were revolutionary, with a tone of voice so modern that they're timeless, and it's hard to write a literary novel today without being influenced by his example, even unconsciously.

**What other short story writers inspired you, then and now?**

I started reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's short stories at school, and that may have stirred a literary ambition in me. I have this theory that as an adolescent your best

**Copyrighted Material**

introduction to literature is through empathy, reading something that somehow chimes with your own life, and Fitzgerald's series of autobiographical short stories about a young boy called Basil Duke Lee were the very first time I clicked like that with a great writer. Then, in Nice, I remember reading Ernest Hemingway's short story collection, *In Our Time*. A lot of them are war stories or post-war stories, but there are little italicized interstices between them which were an influence on the vignettes I was writing in Nice. I was bowled over by his stories, and now I'd cite him along with Chekhov as one of the one of the greats in short fiction. I can't get on with his novels, but his early stories had a huge influence on my writing.

**The first story in *On the Yankee Station*, 'Killing Lizards', prefigures the second story in *Fascination*, 'Varengeville': the setting is completely different, but they're both about a boy's first glimpse of the adult world via his observations of his mother's affair. Had that ever struck you?**

I think that's true, although the impulse to write from the point of view of the child was different in each case. In 'Varengeville' I wanted to write about the artist Georges Braque, who makes a brief appearance in *Nat Tate*, and I thought I'd do it through the eyes of a child. It's an old device: the innocent who can't see the significance of events but the reader can. But I wasn't thinking of 'Killing Lizards' when I wrote that. 'Killing Lizards' is a very early story, and a far more sinister one than 'Varengeville'.

**Copyrighted Material**

**It also prefigures some of the elements you'd use in your first novel: not just the African setting but the university campus. So, again, there's an autobiographical element.**

It's the university campus in Ibadan, Western Nigeria, where my family lived, and I'm deeply ashamed today to say that I and my two friends must have killed hundreds of these lizards with our catapults without a qualm. It was a blood sport. So that was drawing on my own background, but the boy's need to get his mother's love, exclusively, and dreaming of his father and sister dying in a car crash, is all invented.

**Sex features to one degree or another in almost all of the stories – and its connection to death and violence and even insanity. Presumably you were aware of that?**

A short story collection is slightly misleading because the stories could have been written years apart, and it's only when they're collected that you can see the same themes keep cropping up, as if I'd been sitting there thinking about them all the time. Also, I later expanded that collection: there were more stories in the paperback edition. Sex and death are the great themes of art, so it's hardly unlikely that as a young writer I'd be exploring those concepts – and as the motor-drive for a narrative you can't beat them – but no, it wasn't something I was aware of. Failure is more of a theme in them, it seems to me. An early reviewer of my stories said that I seemed to be 'preoccupied with human unsuccess', and I do feel

**Copyrighted Material**

that disappointment and unrequited love are interesting areas to explore. But there's no doubt that there are facets of the human condition that interest you more than others, and you inevitably find yourself returning to them even if you told yourself not to. At the same time, I think it's important as a writer not to be too self-analytical; to have a degree of ignorance about why you write about certain things, and an area of instinct where your unconscious mind can operate.

**Thinking about the two strands of 'Killing Lizards' – the boy engaged in this wholesale slaughter and trying to get the love of his mother – is it important for a short story to reach a thematic conclusion?**

You have to have a sense of closure or catharsis, however mild. Going back to the lyric poem analogy, when you read a six-line poem there's a satisfaction about that form. The event-plot story, with all the knots neatly tied, was the dominant story form before Chekhov, but he showed that the open-ended story is truer to life, and I often leave the endings of my stories and novels open because life is not all neat and tidy. What you need for a short story is a distillation of experience, and somehow the satisfaction, the sense of closure, is provided in that distillation, even though the story may end with you not knowing what happened. That feeling of catharsis is very important in novels as well as stories, but you haven't got as much time to generate it in a story, so your last line is often very important to establish the tone and mood. You're looking for a poetic conclusion rather than a narrative one.

**Copyrighted Material**

## Can you get away with more, in terms of form, in a short story than in a novel?

I think so. Again, Chekhov could write a deeply satisfying short story where nothing seemed resolved – and Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Katherine Mansfield, for example, all learned from what he did and took it a step further. Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' – a very short short story – is utterly baffling until you decode it. The text is almost banal – two people at a railway station and one of them is waiting to leave – but once you analyse the subtext you realize that the woman has had an abortion and their relationship is falling apart. It's all implicit and doesn't end with a narrative thud, but it's very cleverly done and shows you the freedoms you have in a short story that you wouldn't have in a novel. There's a very weird story in *On the Yankee Station* called 'Extracts from the Journal of Flying Officer J.' that I wrote for an anthology. All the stories had to have some bearing on a Shakespeare play, and mine was an elaborate rewriting of *As You Like It* in the tone of W. H. Auden's long poem *The Orators*, and Flying Officer J. was Jacques. I stuck illustrations in it as well, Rorschach blot images – a device that prefigured some of my later fiction, incidentally. I'd never attempt something so oblique and arcane at novel length, but with a short story you do have more licence. I've also learned lessons from writing short stories that have been fantastically useful when I've come to write novels. A lot of the structural stuff in *Brazzaville Beach* I'd explored in short story form. Another story in *Yankee Station*, 'Love Hurts', is written in the form of a diary, so I was trying that out as a narrative device decades before

**Copyrighted Material**

I wrote *Any Human Heart*. And splitting the narrative between different voices, seeing how they interact and interconnect, as I did in *Ordinary Thunderstorms*, I'd already done in short stories. Short stories are like a laboratory for me. You wouldn't want to spend three years writing a novel and finding out that something didn't work. So I'd say it is inherently a more experimental form.

**Several of the stories in *On the Yankee Station* are set in California, which you also wrote about in later collections, and in your novels *The New Confessions* and *The Blue Afternoon*. It rarely seems to be a happy place in your fiction: a neo-noir landscape of sex, violence, obsession and self-deception.**

I've often written about places I've never been to, and there are three cities in particular – Los Angeles, Berlin and Lisbon – that I wrote about before I ever went to them. The Los Angeles stories were inspired by my love of movies; by an English writer I really like, Gavin Lambert, who wrote a series of short stories set in Los Angeles called *The Slide Area*; and also by the Pat Hobby stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald. I was fascinated by the myths of Los Angeles, and I wanted to see if I could inhabit the place vicariously through my imagination.

**Well, if you're preoccupied with human unsuccess, what better place to explore that preoccupation than the home of Hollywood?**

Exactly. The film industry is fertile ground for that kind of story. I read a lot of American fiction when I was a

**Copyrighted Material**

young writer, and the American imagination was more congenial to me than the British imagination. It was a long time before I set a novel in Britain, because it didn't seem that interesting. My African life was so vivid and colourful, and British life didn't provide the same charge.

**I hadn't noticed that until you pointed it out. Even the stories in *On the Yankee Station* reflect that. Only one of them takes place in Britain. The rest are set in Africa, America, France and Scotland.**

And on a US aircraft carrier off the coast of Vietnam.

**The Yankee Station of the title, and the longest story in the collection. Did the collection coalesce around it, or did you make it the title story because it stood out in terms of its setting and scope?**

I just liked the title. Titles are hugely important to me. I was very interested in the Vietnam War – which also features in *Sweet Caress* – and in my reading about it I learned there was this area in the South China Sea called the Yankee Station where all the US aircraft were based on aircraft carriers, and I thought Yankee Station had a great ring to it. It's the same with my other short story collections: *Fascination*, *The Destiny of Nathalie 'X'*, *The Dreams of Bethany Mellmoth*. They seemed like good titles to me. You want people who don't know your name to be drawn to your book in a bookshop or library, so it's very important to have an intriguing or arresting title, it seems to me. That's true of everything I've written, from short stories to novels to screenplays: I take a lot of care over the title,

**Copyrighted Material**

and I won't publish it or send it out until I've got a title that's bang on.

**The story reminded me of Graham Greene's Vietnam novel *The Quiet American*, another story of male and colonial oppression in their various forms.**

I think you're right. It's also about bullying and persecution, about being a dweeb, as they'd say, among these horrible macho fighter pilots. My first film, *Good and Bad at Games*, is very similar, about a boy being savagely bullied at school and the consequences of that – and the story that's being broadcast today, 'The McFeggan Offensive', is also about bullying, so it's gone full circle. It's quite a funny story, but at its heart is a boy whose life is utterly miserable. I wasn't bullied at all at school, and neither was I a bully, but I saw shockingly bad bullying going on, and it's obvious from what I've written that it had an effect on me.

**Were there any other influences on this particular story?**

I'm trying to remember what films or stories might have influenced me. I've read a lot of literature about the Vietnam War, and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* had recently come out when I wrote it. And I've always loved planes and aviation – because I've been flying all my life, from the age of six months, from Africa to Europe and back again – which is why I thought of an aircraft carrier. I have this definition of a novel, that it's the sum of all the things the novelist was interested in at the time of writing. That's certainly true of my novels. Because the novel form is so

**Copyrighted Material**

generous and capacious – ‘large, loose, baggy monsters’ as Henry James described them – you can factor in stuff you’re intrigued by that might seem inimical to your narrative, like primatology, or anaesthesia, or early powered flight, or the philosophy of insurance. And it’s the same with the short stories. If something intrigued me, I could write a story about it. There’s an annual funfair in Oxford, the St Giles’ Fair, and one year there was a stall called ‘Bat-Girl!’ which, of course, was irresistible: I had to go in and see what the hell that was all about. And it was exactly as described in the story: a very bored girl and a semi-comatose bat – that was your twenty-pence worth. It was funny and absurd, and I thought, ‘There’s a short story there,’ and off I went.

**‘Bat-Girl!’ is the only story in the collection written from a first person female point of view. Was it also the first piece of fiction you wrote from a woman’s viewpoint?**

Yes, it was. And I didn’t do it again until *Brazzaville Beach* – although I did write third person female point of view for Liesl and Charis in *An Ice-Cream War*. I’ve now done it many times, and I think I know how to do it well, and women readers have confirmed that. But it’s a risk. And it’s a risk the other way around, too: for women to write from the point of view of men. When I came to write *Brazzaville Beach*, I was far more conscious of the pitfalls ahead. When I wrote ‘Bat-Girl!’, I didn’t think twice about it. I just did it unreflectingly, with the brash confidence of the young writer. It seemed the obvious way to tell the

**Copyrighted Material**

story, from the point of view of the girl in the cage. Also, one of the pleasures of writing from the point of view of a woman is that you get to look at male behaviour from that angle and see the frustrations, stupidities and irritations of it.

***On the Yankee Station* also includes your first treatment of a subject you would later return to in fiction, non-fiction and on film: boarding school. You originally planned to devote an entire collection to the subject, didn't you, of which the story 'Hardly Ever' is the only one you wrote?**

That's right. Of all British institutions, the one that has been most ignored in film and literature is the boarding school. Every other institution – the law, the Church, the army, you name it – has been analysed with gritty realism, but most depictions of boarding school life are utter fantasy. Where are the great novels about boarding school? Where are the great movies? You can almost count them on the fingers of one hand. There's a novel by David Benedictus, *The Fourth of June*, which is about Eton. There's a TV film by Frederic Raphael called *School Play*, where the boys are played by adults, that is absolutely on-the-nail real. Otherwise you're in Harry Potter land. Without doubt the best book I've ever read on the boarding school experience is non-fiction: *The Hothouse Society* by Royston Lambert, which came out in the late '60s and I read when I was still at school. Lambert was a trained sociologist who went to lots of schools and spoke to both boys and girls on the condition of anonymity, and the accounts that

**Copyrighted Material**

these adolescents gave of boarding school life rang 100 per cent true to me, much more than any fiction I'd read. These institutions have a massively disproportionate influence on British society, but it's as if there's some code of *omertà*, that once you leave you're not allowed to tell anybody what it was really like. I was going to attempt to rectify that by writing a series of stories set in boarding school that would be as uncompromising as Lambert's book; but having written that one story I was then commissioned to write two TV films – *Good and Bad at Games* and *Dutch Girls* – and, when they were made, I realized that my anthropological ambition to expose this little-known tribe and their strange customs had been achieved.

### **Would all the short stories have featured the same characters?**

I can't remember, to be honest. The collection was so embryonic that I hadn't really figured it out. One of the characters in 'Hardly Ever', Quentin Niles, is the main character in *Good and Bad at Games*, so he was probably going to be my running alter ego figure – although he's evolved a bit in the film; he's less of a sportsman in the story.

### **And more of a storyteller: he discovers a talent for fiction by inventing tales of his sexual exploits.**

Which was also true: the most brazen lying went on about people's sex lives. We were all satyrs in our imaginations. When I wrote that story I must have been in my late twenties, so my memories of school were still very vivid. I

**Copyrighted Material**