

## **Goodwill Gone Wrong**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Nathan Mandel

337808109

Adviser: Prof. Evan Fallenberg

Adviser: Ms. Dalia Rosenfeld

13/12/2017

## **כוונות טובות, נעלמו**

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

נתן מנדל

337808109

מנחה: פרופ' אבן פלנברג

מנחה: גב' דליה רוזנפלד

13/12/2017

## **Table of Contents**

Page 2: Aims and General Discussion

Page 3: Conceptual Background

Page 7: Shape of the project

Page 9: Bibliography

## **Aims and General Discussion**

Often, our best intentions go awry and often our truest selves become apparent when attempting to act in someone else's interests. The focus of this project is to exploit the window to the soul that is opened when one person reaches out their hand to the next. The thesis will consist of a series of short stories arranged to display stories with more emotionally intense climaxes closer to the end of the collection. Similar to Dante descending into the depths of hell to finally meet the devil himself, the arrangement should not reduce the emotional intensity of its stories until the end of the collection. The intended effect is to entice the reader into reading further by creating anticipation for the emotional experience to come.

Stories should range from three to fifteen pages. They will be written in a conventional style. This entails the opening and inciting incident coming first, followed by the rising action, crisis point, climax, and falling action respectively.

The theme of the thesis is best intentions gone awry. Each story should include some focus on acts of kindness that fail horribly. The theme will be used to judge the sincerity of the character's intentions and evaluate notions of altruism and hubris.

Farce and magical realism will be used as a style in most stories. Domestic settings juxtaposed with unlikely locations and events will be common to most stories in the collection. Additionally, minimalism will be employed as a writing style to help achieve plot points quickly. Minimalism will also be used to reduce the space between emotional climaxes. This should assist the short story format by creating a tense atmosphere within relatively few pages.

Most stories will be told in first-person and third-person (close) perspectives. This should help advance tension in the story and maintain a format that promotes intimacy with the protagonist of the story.

### **Conceptual Background**

There will be an emphasis on utilizing magical realism and farce as literary techniques. Magical realism as described by Matthew Stretcher in his article *Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki*, defines magical realism as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe."

Farce as defined by Barbara Cannings in her article *Towards a Definition of Farce as a Literary "Genre"* is related as "a 'slice of life' dramatically and comically distorted but still very close to reality. Their [farcical theatrics] characters are few in number, are every day people anchored in daily life... Their scenes are the home, the farm, the open road, the market place. Their subjects are the accidents of humdrum existence—conjugal infidelity, debtors and creditors, petty thieves and swindlers, family quarrels. Their dialogue resumes and intensifies the elements of everyday conversation; its lyrical heights and abusive depths, its asides, tirades, incoherences, songs, tears and laughter." Proceeding forward, when this thesis proposal refers to either 'farce' or 'magical realism' it will be based on the aforementioned definitions.

The theme, 'goodwill gone wrong' complements the style of farce and magical realism because the theme seeks to simultaneously highlight the disparity between expectation and consequence by the characters in the story as well as the disparity between expectation and result in the reader.

Reality and literature are filled with cautionary tales of parents, spouses, and friends inadvertently destroying their relationships from their misapplied good intentions. The theory of this project is that goodwill produces poor results due to hidden intentions accompanying the act. This

project seeks to go to the root of good intentions and examine their connection to one's ego, vanity, or mania through the medium of short fiction.

The works that will influence this thesis range significantly in their presentation and genre but all contribute directly in either style or thematic content.

*The Things They Carried.* Tim O'Brien. Tim O'Brien's work of non-fiction about the Vietnam conflict contains the short story, 'Good Form' in which he writes about his intentional discrepancy in details over what occurred exactly: "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth... What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at... I can be brave. I can make myself feel again. 'Daddy, tell the truth,' Kathleen can say, 'did you ever kill anybody?' And I can say honestly, 'Of course not.' Or I can say, honestly, 'Yes.'"

This philosophy regarding the perception of truth by the audience will serve as the ideological tether between the descriptions of reality and the more magical or farcical elements of the stories throughout the thesis. O'Brien, perhaps inadvertently, provides the basis for why the audience engages with magical realism—that story-truth may indeed be truer or at least true enough to be worth reading.

*Sin City.* Frank Miller. *Sin City* is a graphic novel series written and illustrated by Frank Miller. His writing style champions minimalism. Frequently, his splash pages include only a single character and background set piece. Additionally, dialogue is the bare minimum needed to convey action, moral, and leitmotif oriented dialogues between characters. Three of Miller's short stories within the series, *The Hard Goodbye*, *The Big Fat Kill*, and *A Dame to Kill For*, relate to this project's theme of good intentions gone awry. All three begin with the damsel in distress motif. The stories progress with the protagonist attempting to fulfill the valiant knight archetype. He then fails either physically or morally. The stories generally end with the protagonist being saved by the damsel to deliver a more nuanced interpretation of altruism. This thesis will attempt to absorb both the minimalist style of Miller

regarding dialogue and setting as well as incorporate the thematic elements and plot progression of the series.

*Haunted*. Chuck Palahniuk. Chuck Palahniuk is an ardent proponent of minimalism in writing. His novels read fast and his essays on craft urge the reader to avoid almost all exposition that involves the character ‘thinking.’ Palahniuk’s writing style and essays on writing will influence the selection of stories in this thesis. His principles of eliminating ‘thought’ verbs and creating drama between the characters of the story as soon as possible will be employed as well.

Palahniuk’s braided narrative *Haunted* includes several short stories that echo the theme of the thesis. The short story *Guts* has a braided plot design echoing its parent story and features three different characters who receive advice from loved ones on how to pleasure themselves. This ends with catastrophe and each of their lives are scarred as a result. *Exodus* is another short story in the collection focusing on misdirected good intentions. The protagonist of the story mistakes a sex doll for a real human and worried for its well-being, the protagonist proceeds to destroy her reputation to protect it. The theme of good intentions destroying the personal lives of characters will be imitated in the collection of the thesis.

*The Girl on the Refrigerator*. Etgar Keret. Etgar Keret employs magical realism, farcical plots twists, and a light tone that welcomes the reader into his story world. One story in the collection, *Super Glue*, perfectly encapsulates those qualities. The protagonist, has an argument with his wife, then leaves to go to work. He notices on his way out that she is super-gluing broken appliances in the house. When he returns he finds most of the household appliances to be glued in place and his wife glued by her feet to the ceiling. Upon trying to save her he kisses her on the lips and finds they are super glued together and left hanging blissfully in midair. Keret manages to make tone and genre symphonic. Keret’s short stories employ minimalist style as well. His pieces rarely range beyond three or four pages. He shifts quickly from plot point to plot point inviting the audience to make

inferences as they go along. The thesis will use Keret's seamless portrayal of the aforementioned literary techniques by attempting to crunch plot points where possible and maintaining a light tone by employing farce.

*FL CL [Fooly Cooly]*. Yoji Enokido. The hallmark for Enokido's short television series adaptation of the graphic novel by the same name is the juxtaposition of domestic settings with magical ones. The protagonist in *FL CL* sees nothing unusual in his "quiet little town." At the same time the audience observes absurd vistas ranging from factories shaped like giant clothes irons to guitars the size of buildings. The protagonist is beset by a celestial being who transforms him into a giant robot on occasion, but coincidentally the protagonist frequently proclaims "nothing ever happens here," in a rather dreary tone at the end of every episode. The dissonance the protagonist experiences leads the audience and eventually the protagonist to question his sincerity. Only once the protagonist can come to grips with the very 'unusual' world around him can he mature enough to rise to the occasion and defeat the antagonist of the story. The thesis will focus on the setting as a sort of character in the stories being presented. Enokido's depiction of scene directly echoes the protagonist's inner world allowing his magical realism and farcical realities to be meaningful. The thesis will be inspired to accomplish a similar effect.

## **Shape of the Project**

The stories in this collection will be ordered according to intensity of the climax of each story with the most intense climaxes coming later in the collection. While the stories will be connected thematically there will not necessarily be a narrative connection between one and the next.

In keeping with the presented definitions of magical realism and farce the stories will use commonly felt human emotions and analyze them through a background resembling a more intense situation. The stories will attempt to address various interpersonal situations. Specific instances could include teacher-student relationships, marital and sexual relations, soldier to soldier relations, and business transactions. These situations should be recognizable to the reader as day-to-day activities.

Most stories will be short, not extending ten pages or so. In keeping with minimalism, exposition regarding character and location will be reduced in order to highlight action and character decisions.

Plot lines for stories include:

A girl's father teaches her how to make fraudulent claims to exploit store return policies and defraud insurance companies. She must decide whether he is acting out of genuine concern for her welfare or selfishness.

A man suffering from various sexual difficulties must decide how far he is willing to go in order to overcome them and please his wife. His decision will be between his wife's happiness and his ego.

A hunter in love with a woman must bring back part of a majestic animal in order to impress her. He must decide if his love is based on altruism and therefore worth the animal's life or based on vanity and therefore not worth the animal's life.

A man looking for a date is given the opportunity to go out with a love interest. To gain her approval, he must help her engage in various acts of mischief including the theft and replacement of objects from storefronts with objects from other storefronts in order to make comical displays. While he is doing this for her he must decide whether he can replace his identity as easily as he replaces the objects.

A soldier is ordered to engage in morally ambiguous acts in order finish his patrol safely. He must decide between doing well by his unit thus ensuring their wellbeing or acting morally towards the citizenry where they are patrolling.

A boy and his uncle go shooting. While they are out the boy asks his uncle about his experiences in the Vietnam War. The uncle declines to comment explaining that there is nothing good to know about it. The boy must decide between respecting his uncle's personal space and satisfying his own personal curiosity about the nature of violence.

A girl and her family are tasked with bringing down their herd of cattle from a mountain. A cow in the rear of the herd becomes injured and the girl must decide between beating it to keep pace with the herd or showing empathy, falling behind, and risking the dangers of the cold and wolves.

A young man finds an old rocket ship on his family's land. All his life he wanted to travel throughout space. He must decide between finding a good job and taking responsible measures to ensure his future or fixing the ship and flying away doing right by his dreams.

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