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Revenge of the plotted novel

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SYDNEY-BASED artist Barbara Campbell recently completed a marathon performance project lasting two years, nine months and one day. Or, to put it another way, 1001 nights.

At dusk on 1001 consecutive evenings, she performed a live webcast recital of a story -- a different one each time, and none longer than 1001 words -- which was then posted in text on the website. The stories were contributed by dozens of volunteer writers from across the globe, in response to a prompt phrase posted on the site that morning.

As one of the contributing writers, I found myself thinking again about the original story of One Thousand and One Nights, the story of Princess Scheherazade and the way she used narrative to win a stay of execution. Who could kill the teller in the middle of the tale? That depends on the tale, of course, and the teller, but if the art of suspense is effectively worked, there will be no escape for the hearer until the narrative is resolved.

Storytelling is a tradition surely as ancient as human speech and, if our oldest mythologies are anything to go by, suspense is always at the heart of the matter, together with the rhythms of the sun rising and setting, of life and death.

The creation of suspense is an artful process, as Princess Scheherazade demonstrated. It is conscious and calculated, strategic, controlling. There is more than a whiff of danger about it. The intimate relationship between suspense and danger is what makes the story tick, and the ticking has an uncanny relationship with the clock. Time is also of the essence. The listener or reader may be at once oblivious of its passing in the real world and acutely aware of its unfolding in the fictional one. Pages are turned and small hours pass in the night.

In my student years I did a lot of reading in the small hours, Charles Dickens especially, and he must have provided close on the magic 1001 nights of enthrallment. Later I was a bit ashamed of my period of Dickens addiction. Maybe from a literary point of view it was rather unsophisticated. A fiction reader in the late 20th century needed to be more cross-cultural, modernist and postmodernist, so I varied the diet accordingly. And I took to reading the Booker prize novel each year, so I'd know what was in the prevailing wind.

I have to admit, though, that the Bookers just aren't doing it for me any more. The truth is I don't like the writing. It's brilliant, of course, but the better it is, the more I hate it. Sometimes I hate words, words in themselves, words that draw attention to themselves in the vanity of writing, making themselves into phrases like "malignantly agleam", telling you that "the play of her expression hovered between intensity and indifference" or that "bluebottles make crazed tracks through the heavy air". Do they really do that, bluebottles? Am I bothered? I put down the book and switch off the light, or swap the tastefully produced literary novel for a Dickens (addiction now quite unashamedly resumed) or a thriller.

One night, after an especially frustrating encounter with a prizewinning work whose back cover told me it was potent and malty with generous cadences of sorrow and delight, I put it in front of me next to the rival read, a crime thriller by a writer I gravitate to when I badly need a dose of suspense, and wondered what had happened to cause the art of the novel to split in this way.

Although a growing number of writers are trying to straddle the divide, most of them are doing so by splitting their identities, using pseudonyms, as with John Banville-Benjamin Black. If you walk into a bookshop, you can see the apartheid system staked out in front of you, with thrillers and literary fiction segregated in labelled shelving systems. And the two species are treated quite differently in the various arenas for the promotion of writing: the review pages, the festivals, the prize lists.

Literary fiction gets the prizes and the critical attention, and thrillers get the sales. That is how it is supposed to work and many people in the book business devote consistent effort to keeping it that way. It wasn't until Graeme Blundell blew the trumpet over Peter Temple's *The Broken Shore* that people began to realise the guy writes novels on a par with any other calling for serious attention.

What is really going on here? Somehow, a combination of influences has served to almost eradicate the plot from high-end fiction and, along with it, most of the technical apparatus belonging to the art of suspense. At the same time, the plotted novel has been staging its revenge by making a comeback in the form of the popular thriller, especially the crime thriller, mopping up most of the cash flow in the fiction trade.

Awareness is dawning, I suspect, in those exalted regions where the crazed tracks of bluebottles are so admired. On the backs of the prizewinning books these days, allusions to storytelling powers and narrative drive are becoming more frequent.

Plots, though, and the magical ingredient of suspense they harbour, are stories in which the narrative energy comes from more than one direction. Managing these plural energies is something quite other than hack work, as is evident in novels such as Bleak House, Anna Karenina, Pride and Prejudice and Nostromo. It involves a belief in the design of the world, and a vision of how that design plays out, with its ironies, crossed paths, sudden turns and reversals.

As crime novelists understand, it is also a matter of life and death. In this they can lay claim to the heritage of Scheherazade.

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