

Matthew Ward interview

by Ernest Dempsey, 2007

Matt, how long have you been writing?

At primary school (at around age 9, in 1975) I wrote stories for Creative Writing; one story, of the school excursion to Jenolan Caves, Katoomba, made it into the school magazine when I was 12 – I was quite proud to get my first piece into print. Many years later, I started writing poetry in the early '90s when I was at university. I was studying english, among other subjects in my Arts degree, and part of that was poetry. I thought I could write poetry and had a go at it. At first it was more classical, sonnets and the like modelled on John Donne, Shakespeare, even earlier poets like Propertius, Catullus, Ovid, and also later poets like Coleridge, Shelley, Heaney etc... Then, like all things artistic, I developed my own style. In 1995 I wrote several novel-length pieces based on the jazz influenced writing of my then hero of the time, beat writer Jack Kerouac, and then started a love affair with the short story (I came to greatly envy & admire the late Raymond Carver). In 2003 I wrote a couple of screenplays, to throw into the mix.

Is *Her Mouth looked Like a Cat's Bum* your first book?

It is my second book. In 2004 Independence Jones in Sydney (Australia) published a novella of mine called *Jake With a Snarly Smile on His Chops*, a book about a man thinking all he had to do was confess his sins to a priest to be forgiven for his daily, lustful and drunken actions. *Jake* was a cut-down version of a longer, unfinished work called *Dusk*.

What inspired you to write *Cat's Bum* and want it published?

I didn't want another novella published before attempting another novel (I wrote 3 x 100,000 word stories in the 1990s and they went nowhere), and so a collection of my short stories seemed a good idea. A couple of the stories are longish at 3,000 to 4,500

words so (publisher) Mike Strozier suggested a collection of both the longer and also short, short stories a la James Joyce's *Dubliners*. It had been 2 years since *Jake* and I wanted to whet my beak again.

What is the main commonality that binds all or most of the stories in your book?

There isn't anything, really, that binds them all. I didn't think of a theme, or themes. They were written between 1996 and 2006, and the styles do vary a lot, and this goes with themes as well. Reviewers have stated that a lot of the stories deal with revenge, and people getting what's coming to them; also justice, and the chance to right wrongs before tragedy might strike. This is certainly true but I have never really sat down and thought: *Okay I'm going to write a revenge story*, although I do that now with dramatic/serious vs. humorous. The early stories were grown from an idea or the mixing of several. I guess irony is a big theme. They are hardly ever violent. There's never sex as in the act, as that is hard to write and it never reads well. Maybe frustration ('Dentist', 'Bathrobes'), being an outsider and/or voyeur ('Confessional'), addiction ('Whisky Breath' – with alcohol, 'System' – gambling), narcissism ('Going Back To You'), Catholicism ('Moon', 'Piker', 'Confessional', 'Revenge!'), Death ('Moon', 'Only 70'), westies (rough and guts Aussies from the western suburbs, in several stories, 'Torana' for one).

What is Australian about your stories?

My early stories were more universal, so as to suit the understanding of my US friends + potential publishers. UK readers get it more – the jargon etc., as a lot of our language is taken from the English, Irish, Scottish & Welsh. Most of the stories in the book are unabashedly Australian, in terms of language, attitude (most characters have a lot of it). There is mistrust + corruption of authority figures, like in 'City Baby', also a type of acceptance of everyone, which happens every now and then: if a person has a go, tries in life, Australians can respect them for it, regardless of race, creed, sexuality – at least that's the core of every Australian, I like to believe. There is a lot of sarcasm, which Australians are known for. There's mateship – like friendship but different, more primal. The language is not formal a lot of the time, which is very Australian. There's also

intolerance, plus just plain silliness, in plot and in the way characters act.

And what is trans–Australian in your short fiction?

A lot of the stories will translate to those readers who are not Australian. The religious parts, maybe, oppression, the humour, I think. The human condition

Do you consider your book appropriate for all audiences?

Well, children, no. Old people, depends on their outlook on life I guess. There is nothing really licentious, or illicit in the book that I can recall (except maybe ‘Mowing’). There might be a bit of essential crudeness, swearing. God–botherers might not like some bits or the retribution parts, but then again maybe they would...

You’ve also been working as an editor and publisher. Would you please tell a little about your background in these areas?

In 1998 I created, along with a male friend of mine, an all–men’s magazine called ‘Lord’ (later ‘Heist’), trying to recapture the boys own adventure mags of the early to mid 20th Century). ‘

In 1999 I created my first ezine, insomAniac (a term used by Chico Marx in the film ‘At the Circus’), publishing poetry and short stories.

From 2000–2003 I published about a dozen chapbooks of poetry, that were received rather well in the poetic community. The books were designed and put together by me, and sold in local bookshops as well as via the web.

In late 2003 I created Skive Magazine, an online ezine publishing short stories & articles. From late 2003 through to early 2006 it was a monthly, until that got too much for me, then I changed to a printed monthly, and finally a printed quarterly.

I edited and designed a Best of Skive book in 2004; plus 2005, 2006 & 2007 produced books from the Skive Short Story Prize.

I have also worked on several books for other people, designing and laying out their books, and sometimes being an almost–editor (doing most of the editing work but not

getting credit for it).

So how do you weigh creative writing against editing and publishing?

Publishing I see as lazy writing sometimes, at least it is for me. For years I have used publishing as a way of not writing, and that's one of the reasons I cut down on the publishing – my heart wasn't in writing anymore and that saddened me a bit: all these other, talented, writers were getting their tales down and I wasn't. Editing/publishing is rewarding, but writing can be more so than anything in the world. In the midst of that creative world, everything can be fixed, changed, altered, made, destroyed, loved – but that's art, right? It's like the best drug or drink there is.

***Her Mouth looked Like a Cat's Bum* is peppered with some edgy humor. Do you also write solemn or sentimental stories?**

'Moon' is to a degree, '1975' a bit, 'No New Frontiers', based on a dream, 'Going Back to You', 'Sinus Cider'. I think great stories – and I'm not saying mine are great – have both humorous and serious moments. There has to be a balance. When I studied Classics I liked the edgy humour of Greek playwright Aristophanes, and the way his sometimes outrageous humour could be pushed aside to reveal something serious, something tender, heart-provoking: it's like the most amazing conjuring trick when done well, and I have tried to approach that line of attack with stories.

As a publisher, how do you see the status of short fiction in our day's literature?

It's a sleeping giant I think. It suits today's 5 minute fix generation who can't be bothered or never have read a novel, and would rather watch a DVD. But they hate poetry because it always has only 10 words or something on each page and they think: Why would I pay for that, for 12 words on a page, for that person's angst? Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* movie is divided up into snippets, like TV shows he watched when he was younger, and I think short stories are to reading what half hour or hour long TV is to the visual medium.

Do you mean to continue creative writing in the future?

Yes! I have several novels ready to write when I can be bothered. My first 3 novels took only a month to write and the ones in this century (!) should be kicked in the same amount of time, but, instead, published! You see, publishers, even small publishers, yearn to be legitimately published, and admired, and I'm one of those people – I admit it.

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