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Felicity Castagna, *The Incredible Here and Now*

Artarmon, Giramondo Publishing, Sep 2013, 192pp pbk

ISBN 9781922146366, RRP \$19.95

One of the hardest things I've done as a teacher of English literature in high school is to teach creative writing. One has to overcome entrenched assumptions about talent – that it is innate, cannot be taught and 'there is only one person in the class who has it and it isn't me!' One has to unpick the confusion surrounding that much-used exhortation to 'write what you know'. I fear that it has become such a meaningless cliché that anyone who instructs her class thus without further explanation *deserves* to mark twenty-five stories that begin with 'I woke up, went downstairs and Mum said...'. One has to show students how to write what their senses and their experiences tell them about the world and about other people but to go beyond the tedious. And all while the students themselves are going through a period of such heightened self-involvement that empathy is a very hit-and-miss affair.

One of the biggest challenges in teaching creative writing is the matter of form. In the Australian National Curriculum for English, students are expected to study a range of literary forms and there is a clear (and in some cases stated) expectation that they will study poetry, drama, film, non-fiction, mixed media and extended prose. Other than for the sake of convenience, however, there is little focus on the short story as a form of its own. Short stories are used as examples of prose fiction; they are rarely used as examples of short stories. In the new Prescribed Texts list for the NSW Higher School Certificate 2-Unit English courses, Standard and Advanced, I note that there are only two short story writers included: Henry Lawson in the Standard course (and only a handful of his stories) and James Joyce's *Dubliners* for the Advanced course. Balance that against other options that include eighteen novels, twenty-three poets, eighteen plays, twelve nonfiction texts, eleven films and four mixed-media texts.

And yet in NSW the only piece of creative writing that most of the students sitting the English HSC (that is, those who do not do Extension 1 English) will be required to write is a short story – indeed, a very *short* short story (written in forty minutes in an exam). I will go a

step further and say that the majority of high school students who finish Year 12 in Australia will only ever have written variations on the short short story. It is the only creative form that they will ever be formally assessed on but, by-and-large, it's simply not taught. They are not even exposed to it, or at least not consciously. That's weird, isn't it? Imagine assessing students on calculus or French pronunciation without any classroom exposure.

To counteract the prejudices of length I've exposed my students – as I am sure have many other teachers – to a steady diet of Mansfield, Munro, Carver, Malouf and Winton...but here we hit another snag. It comes back to 'write what you know' (or rather 'write what you gather from external stimuli', which I grant you isn't as catchy). With the exception, perhaps, of Winton, to what extent do these writers tell our young people how to write a story that is authentic and true to their own experiences? While at the same time being very short.

Don't get me wrong – I am not advocating that we should lock students into the straightjacket of familiarity. Please, please, I've told my students many times, use your imagination! But at the same time, students need to see that their world and their experience is worthy of fiction.

All of this is a long preamble to my review, but also the context in which I applaud Felicity Castagna and Giramondo Press for producing a book that offers so much to its readers, young and not so young.

The Incredible Here and Now tells the story of one year in Michael's life when he turns fifteen. He lives in Western Sydney with his parents and, at least at the beginning of the book, his brother Dom, and Castagna portrays his world with vivid unselfconsciousness: there's the sports ground around Parramatta Leagues Club with the swimming pool, McDonald's car park, Prince Alfred Park, Church St and other local landmarks that anchor the narrative in the 'here and now' and also provide unexpected lyricism. Castagna's evocation of Granville relies heavily on sensory imagery and, in its truncated way, tells us a very powerful story of place:

I watch the sun tear over the *Jesus Saves* sign and listen to my stomach grumble. This close to Easter I'm always thinking of chocolate but Granville makes me think of chicken too. Chocolate. Chicken. Pumpkin seeds. Somewhere down the road, underneath the chimneys spilling the smell of roasting chicken there is the sound of some preacher's low voice going on and on and on and a bunch of people yellin' *Amen!*

The focus on food is not surprising. This is the voice, after all, of a fifteen-year-old boy who is trying to make sense of tragedy and grief and loss and the different ways that the people around him deal with the same experience. Michael is an ‘ordinary kid’ but also a terrific narrator because he is alert to the world around him and to its signs. His perception is both completely situated in the real and immediate and also humming with symbolism, as he hangs out at the pool with his best friend Shadi, ‘who looks too much like his mother mated with Roger Rabbit to be threatening’ and falls in love with Mo – one of the resonant female characters in this book, full of curiosity, resolve and intelligence but also subject to the rules of her father. The Romeo and Juliet element to this love story is handled with great restraint; Castagna’s description of Michael sitting beneath Mo’s bedroom window contains the book’s trademark poetry of the ordinary:

In her room, in that space above this world, the light is off in her window. I pull up a milk crate I find outside the shop and I sit there watching the space between us and I listen to the cars in the distance humming down the motorway.

Castagna uses language that is authentic for her characters and readers, but also truthful to the experiences she describes. This is both ‘write what you know’ in sensory, experiential terms and a fine pointer on showing, not telling (another teacher cliché). The reader listens to what Michael hears and sees what he sees – not what the writer tells us. Indeed, listening is a recurring theme in the book, personified in characters like Michael’s Poppy and the wonderful, wise Aunty Leena in her too-high shoes and too-much makeup: ‘Aunty Leena says this is how you take care of people by just listening to whatever they have to say’.

Thus far I have carefully used ‘book’ rather than ‘novel’ because, although it is a continuous narrative that tells a more-or-less chronological story, my interest in the form lies in its discontinuity. Castagna tells her story in vignettes, none of which are longer than three pages and some of which are no more than a paragraph, but each with its own emotional and narrative integrity. These vignettes enable her to build a series of portraits and impressions and to give weight to the unsaid and indescribable – the gaps between the people she portrays and the elements of Michael’s story that he cannot understand, let alone articulate. Castagna’s narrative ellipsis gives us moments of insight into private grief, regret and disbelief while always retaining the dignity and self-containment of her characters. Teachers often tell

students that what they leave out is as important as what they include in their stories, and here the physical breaks between the vignettes represent a sensitive turning away.

The gaps between the vignettes fill gradually with small suggestions of hope, of possibility – a sense of the future. Michael and those around him start to heal and this is where the form that Castagna has chosen really pays off. The healing is not smooth but jerky, in fits and starts, and the resolution is messy but satisfyingly weighted with truth. In the end, Michael realises that it doesn't really matter what happened or why. What is important is learning to live with your experiences in a world whose energy is unstoppable.

Castagna's penultimate paragraph is a wonderful example of 'write what you know'. She relies on what can be gathered by her senses and uses these simple elements to build connection, acceptance and hope which is both universal and anchored in the specificity of the experience of the narrator:

Underneath my arm she falls apart. She is weeping. Like the neighbourhood, she is unstoppable. This place is carrying on like it can't stop it. Girls, they're pouring out of shops in their short dresses and the boys, they're still in the McDonald's parking lot watching the whole world go by, and people are getting up early in the morning, putting on their bests, heading off for their churches, their mosques, their temples. And I can see it, I feel it.

And so does the reader.

Castagna's vignettes offer students as well as general readers a wonderful model for the short short story. She demonstrates compelling economy of narration and restraint in her choices. I also detect the masterful editorial advice of Ivor Indyk. *The Incredible Here and Now* shows us that everywhere we look, there are stories to tell.