

THE WHIP HAND

MIHAELA NICOLESCU & NADINE BROWNE

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Whip Hand introduces two exciting new Western Australian writers, Mihaela Nicolescu and Nadine Browne.

Nicolescu's stories, collected as *The Returning*, range from the reflective and poignant to the wickedly funny. All illuminate the complexity that dwells in the everyday.

Browne's stories, collected as *Playing Dead*, explore female characters who exist on the fringes of society with a gritty realism that is as compelling as it is confronting.

Gripping and thought-provoking, *The Whip Hand* raises questions about the way control is gained, lost or reclaimed.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mihaela Nicolescu was born in Romania, brought up in Sweden, and then spent thirteen years in London, where she completed her MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck College, University of London. She now lives in Perth, Western Australia. Mihaela's short stories have been published in *Mslexia*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *Aesthetica Magazine* and *The New Writer*, and her plays have been produced by Parrabola and Total Beast Theatre, and as part of London's Off Cut Festival. She was guest editor for three issues of the World Arts Platform publication *Write from the Heart*, celebrating the work of writers who use English as a second language. Mihaela's stories were shortlisted for the 2014 City of Fremantle T.A.G. Hungerford Award.

Nadine Browne was raised as a born-again Christian and wound up an agnostic studying theology at Monash University. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *Westerly* and *Antipodes*. She has also been featured on the ABC's *Conversations with Richard Fidler*, *The Moth* (Los Angeles) and *Porchlight* (San Francisco). In her spare time she attends and facilitates a group at the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in the Perth hills. She lives in Perth with her partner Krzysztof and a Pomeranian named Bob.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think this collection is called *The Whip Hand*?
2. How would you describe each of these collections – *The Returning* and *Playing Dead*?
3. What themes are explored in the work of Nicolescu and Browne?
4. What concerns do the two authors have in common?
5. What types of loss do we encounter in these stories?
6. How are families and parent–child relationships depicted?
7. What role does memory play in Nicolescu’s stories?
8. Browne’s stories deal with poverty, domestic violence, sexual abuse and drug addiction. What is revealed about these social issues?
9. Choose a few stories from *The Whip Hand* and consider the characters’ power dynamics within them. Who holds the power? How and when does power shift?
10. In what ways are characters in *The Whip Hand* ‘living on the edge’? How does each story illuminate their situation?
11. To what degree do Nicolescu and Browne use humour in their writing?
12. Which story do you find most memorable, and why?
13. Based on this collection, how would you define the elements of a short story?
14. What is the role of a short story collection when it comes to offering variations on a theme? How might the stories in a collection ‘speak’ to each other? How might the stories between two authors deepen the reader’s experience by having them side by side?

INTERVIEW WITH MIHAELA NICOLESCU

Are these stories pure fiction or do they contain biographical elements of your own life?

I don’t know if there can be such a thing as pure fiction. The writer’s experiences and subjective experiences will influence even the craziest, sci-fi, horror bio epic.

Also, even when we think we are being factual about an experience, odds are we are amending ‘the truth’. After all, this elusive truth is subject to interpretation, memory, and an observer’s subjectivity (which is why eyewitnesses are notoriously unreliable in court).

This definitely applies to my stories – while they are works of fiction, my own experiences have coloured both plot elements and characters. This is a pretty subtle thing, and I don’t know if I would be able to draw a clear line between where the non-fiction ends and the fiction begins.

Mainly, I think writers take real emotions that they have experienced and transfer them into a fictional story. Both as a reader and as a writer I value this kind of emotional truth that comes from the writer’s experience. As a writer I do not attempt to tell a story as it really was, but to invite the readers to share in a feeling (hopefully, a feeling that resonates with them).

Which was your favourite of these short stories to write and why?

I have different favourites for different reasons. I enjoyed writing ‘Gone Baby Gone’ and ‘866’ because I felt that these stories connected with the emotional truth I discuss above. I hope that readers can relate to the feelings of love, sacrifice, isolation, and hope. I also enjoyed writing ‘Fig’, mostly because it kept me amused.

Your stories hint at possible outcomes as they progress – ‘signposts’. Is this a deliberate technique you use to get the reader thinking, or a style you have naturally developed?

I think a bit of both. My intention is to guide a reader, and I try to include many subtle details and signposts that some readers might miss and others will notice. I think this is a more satisfying experience than being spoon-fed exposition and information. I also aim to encourage readers to think about, and consider, possible

outcomes without providing 'the right answer'. Mainly this is because I do not believe there is a right answer, and the most satisfying relationship between a writer and a reader is when the reader takes the story and adds their own, personal interpretation.

What do you enjoy about the short form, and what are its challenges?

The most enjoyable part of writing short fiction is that it keeps you, as a writer, focused. You have a certain amount of space to create a world and take a reader on a journey, and achieving this is very satisfying. The main challenge is that some stories take more effort than others to whip into shape. There is no room for mistakes in short fiction and you have to be very clear about what you are trying to achieve.

Some of your characters are children who have to deal with some pretty confronting things. During or after writing, have you thought about what might have happened to these characters after the story's end point?

I leave the future of my characters to the imagination of the reader. To me, as the writer, my characters exist only within the context of the story.

What are you working on now?

I have been writing a lot of non-fiction, mainly philosophical/political ramblings. I am also a few short thousand words away from completing a romance novel. This was my first venture in genre fiction, and I started the work as an experiment to give it a go. It has been great fun writing!

INTERVIEW WITH NADINE BROWNE

Are all these stories pure fiction, or do they contain biographical elements of your own life?

They all contain pilfered material from my life and other people's. I sometimes like to tell myself I've come up with something *brand* new. But when I look back at my thinking process I realise I've got the idea for a plot, a character or a setting from something I've picked up.

The themes or central questions in my stories are always biographical. Always they are themes and/or problems that I'm struggling with or that I've dealt with in the past, or perhaps, not dealt with very well and I want to explore why. What if you have to do something immoral to help someone or yourself out? Like in the stories 'Clean' and 'Playing Dead'. Does it matter if everyone around you believes something you don't? The same might be said for the story 'Drowning'.

I got angry about all the developments around Midland cutting down the trees and I started ranting to my friend, 'I'm just gonna start planting trees, everywhere! Like some crazy vigilante.' We started laughing about this and from this came the story 'The Jerry Can'. The house next door to mine had burnt down so that came into it as well, and I remembered this elderly lady, when I was growing up, who was slightly agoraphobic and she became the narrator.

'The Ascension' came about because I was feeling judgmental about someone I knew of, who was really convinced the apocalypse was upon us. I wanted to explore how quick I was to dismiss it all as 'crazy'. I was really grappling with what behaviour is considered normal and how this idea is always subjective and always changing. How, under all sort of fathomless 'thoughts' and 'beliefs', it is good to remember there is still a human being there.

It is said that an author puts themselves in their writing whether it is intentional or not. Are there any characters from *The Whip Hand* that you associate most with?

All of the characters feel quite close to me. All have elements of me in them, and many of them express thoughts I've had or still have. The character in 'The Tower' brings up that moment of sexual awareness, of realising you are a sexual being; I guess we all come through that at some point, it's universal. I feel like the two oldest stories in the collection, 'Strange Fruit' and 'Preparation', are closest to my personal voice. In the time since then I have become more skilled at inhabiting characters that are further from 'the real me'.

Most of your stories end with the character making a choice that positively affects their life, or at a crossroad where they are ready to better themselves. Does this positivity, or hopefulness, reflect your own outlook on life?

I definitely think people change, and identity is so ephemeral, and that's always hopeful to me. What I believed ten years ago – about myself, about the world, my belief system in general – has totally transformed. I've unpicked a lot of what I was taught to believe, I've come through all sorts of fears, anxieties and rigid thinking. I'm amazed by what others have been able to pull themselves through – addictions, abuse, all sorts of life-altering trauma. On my writing desk I have Romans 12:2: 'Be not conformed to the world, but transformed by the constant renewal of the mind ...' I think humans are resilient and trying to do the best they can, all things considered. I try to show this in my stories.

Which was your favourite of these short stories to write and why?

I have to say 'Drowning'. It came out of a dream and took me about an hour to write! That's a definite record, seeing as most of my stories take months, if not years, of editing, rewriting and angsty over. I also enjoyed writing 'The Jerry Can'. I just thought it was such an amusing vision: this elderly lady planting trees all night as an act of rebellion. Trying to piece together all the elements into a narrative was a lot of fun.

What do you enjoy about the short form, and what are its challenges?

I enjoy bringing together concepts and themes into something original, juxtaposing different images, ideas or characters that you wouldn't initially think of putting together. I like that short stories allow me a space to explore my own thinking and turn ideas over – what do I think being responsible means? What does forgiveness mean to me? What do I consider moral or immoral behaviour? I like that they are short enough that I can't rant on or go off on too many tangents, that I have to make myself be succinct and really boil something down to: *What is this really about?* I like that the editing process is small enough to not be overwhelming and that my thinking has to become clearer along with the story making it to final draft stage.

The challenge to writing short stories is always holding my interest, or having the impetus to make it work. For every one story I finish, I have about ten that are aborted missions.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a novel about a female drug dealer who is addicted to self-help books and for various (mostly feminist) reasons decides to get revenge on the local bikie gang. I was trying to create a female Tony Soprano and I'm pretty excited by the narrator's voice, plus the whole idea of a feminist revenge tale set in Midland.



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