

The Not So Short Story of :
AILSA COX



In the context of the preparation of the Short Forms Beyond Borders Multiplier Event “Short Forms in the Classroom”, we met Ailsa Cox to discuss her relation to short forms. Ailsa Cox is a Professor Emerita of Short Fiction at the University of Edge Hill (UK) and a short-story writer.

Ailsa Cox ran Edge Hill’s Master’s Degree of Creative Writing. On the advantage of being taught creative writing, she says that it does bring a new perspective to literature. It enables students to have a sense of the form and to be aware of the process behind a text. According to Ailsa Cox, the short story form is particularly well-suited for creative writing. It allows students to think of a way to develop their own writing process through reading and redrafting. She insists on the fact that in literature classes, students need to develop ways of reading and to be aware of what they get out of it. She thinks that maybe the short story is a good form for this because it asks the reader to read between the lines.

What makes a good short story?

“You just know it when you see it.”

When Ailsa was asked what makes a good short story, she told us that it is a feeling you have right from the first lines which makes you feel that you’re in good hands with the

author. It is a voice that speaks and stays with you. Ailsa has always had a special connection with the short story even though she also wrote novels. For Ailsa, there is playfulness in the short story form whereas the novel seems to bear a stronger moral weight and seriousness. Through this playfulness, the writer connects with the reader and manages to share experiences and dilemmas that are important to them. Nonetheless, while mentioning the work of a writer, Ailsa does not hesitate to highlight the importance of the reader in its updating of a literary work. Indeed, interpretations vary from one reader to another. For example, a light can bear a different meaning depending on the reader, while the author did not even want to convey any special symbolism.

The writer's command of and confidence in the form are important to Ailsa. For her, a short story is not just a chopped off bit of novel. It needs to be a story. It could not be anything else. Speaking about the content of a short story, she explained that it is never full of aboutness. This means that there cannot be only one main theme in a story. She says that as a writer, there are things cropping in your stories that are surprising and that you did not plan to be there.

She quotes Elizabeth Bowen: “The thought about for subject gives the story a dead kernel.”

Her own process of writing is not to plan what she is going to say. It is to discover more about something that is bothering her. She thinks about an idea, an image or a thought and she writes a story in a kind of improvisation. She goes from sentence to sentence to get rhythm and tone and voice.

Ailsa Cox also participated in the creation of the Edge Hill Prize in 2006, which highlights and rewards each year British and Irish short story collections. This prize is an opportunity to annually emphasise short forms and praise short story writers. Ailsa underlines the fact that this Prize was created from the assessment of a lack of recognition for the short story form and authors. A great mixture of established names and new names

are indeed coming through the prize. Ailsa insists on the fact that short-story collections are very often published by small, independent presses.

Ailsa Cox will be present at the upcoming Short Forms Beyond Borders Multiplier Event “Short Forms in the Classroom” taking place at the University of Angers on July 10th through 12th, where she will be a lecturer accompanied by the short story writer Ruby Cowling.