



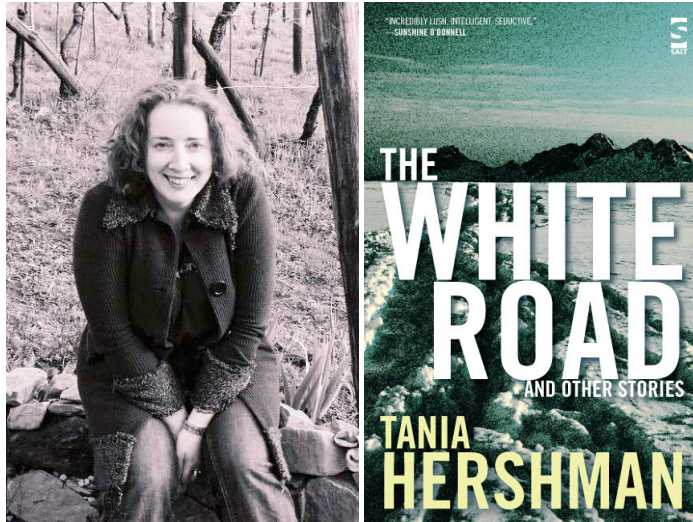
Good Morning! It's Thursday on December 01, 2011.

Literature for everyone in the South West

**Home**  
**Community**  
**Grassroots**  
**literature**  
**Book of**  
**the month**  
**SW Writer profile**  
**About us**  
**Read SW**  
**Our patron**  
**Interview**  
**Publishers**  
**Fundraising**  
**Links**



## Tania Hershman



A former science journalist turned fiction writer, Tania Hershman's first book, *The White Road and Other Stories*, (Salt Modern Fiction, 2008), includes many short stories inspired by science articles. The book was commended in the 2009 Orange Award for New Writers, and included in New Scientist's Best Books of 2008. Tania is Grand Prize Winner of the 2009 Binnacle Ultra-Short Contest, and European winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Broadcasting Association's Short Story competition. Her stories are published or forthcoming in, among others, Smokelong Quarterly, Elimae, the London Magazine, Riptide, BRAND, Dogzplot, Eyeshot, Electric Velocipede and Nature, and a week of her flash fiction was recently broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Tania is currently writer-in-residence in Bristol University's Science Faculty and has been awarded an Arts Council England grant to work on a collection of biology-inspired short fiction. She blogs about writing at TaniaWrites. Find out more about Tania by visiting her website.

### Cyprus Well caught up with Tania:

You've had a lot of positive responses to *The White Road and Other Stories*. Can you tell us a bit about how the collection came together?

I was amazed, and still continue to be amazed, at the wonderful responses the book has had. You never expect that. I expected my mother and a handful of friends would read it. It's good to have low expectations, right?! Well, it was never really written with a collection in mind. I was studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University in 2003, and wanted to only work on short stories. Most people were writing novels and the tutors said to me, a little wearily(!), Well, if you insist on writing short stories, could they at least have a theme? I'd long had in mind trying to take inspiration from New Scientist magazine – I have a background in physics and maths and love reading about science, so much of what New Scientist reports on seems quite wacky and it's hard to believe this is fact not fiction. So I decided to try and write a number of stories for my final manuscript all inspired in some way by New Scientist articles. I write very short stories – so was desperately trying to have "enough" material to reach the minimum word count for my final manuscript, I was definitely not thinking about a book. That was a wild, far-off dream.

My big break came through the MA, when a radio production company, Sweet Talk, sent a

“

Flint, flaked quartz, a cache of axes. These crinkled eggs shaped us. They glint and roll in the flooding gravel.

”

From 'Axes, Devon Sequence'  
 Checkpoint,  
 Exeter Poetry Festival  
 Ronald Tamplin

### Calendar

South West  
 What's On



### Literature Clips

Our patron, Helen Dunmore  
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letter around asking for submissions for a week of short stories by writers new to radio for BBC Radio 4's Afternoon Reading. My short story, *The White Road*, was accepted, which was a big shock and delightful surprise, and that made me feel like a real writer for the first time. Hearing it – having your short story, the characters in your head, brought to life so beautifully, is a magical experience, as well as being a huge career boost to any new writer. The Afternoon Reading at that time was 5 days a week and now, sadly, is being slashed to one weekday and a Sunday evening, which is a great shame – you lose any concept of themed sets of stories – and also, frankly, very disappointing for not just writers but for the actors who read them and the hundreds of thousands of listeners. (Over 6000 people have signed a petition to protest this move; we are all still hoping that the plan, to replace the Afternoon Reading with an extension of the news programme, will be re-thought).

The book came about a few years later. I had been introduced to an agent by Jeremy Osbourne, my producer at Sweet Talk, a fantastic advocate of short stories and new writers who has become a friend, but after a few years it seemed that the agent, who was lovely, was having no luck persuading any publishers to look at my work since it wasn't a novel. Salt Publishing, well known for poetry and then, in 2007, moving towards short fiction, was calling for submissions directly from writers. I sent 3 stories, then a few months later Salt asked for everything... and in June 2007 I received the email that sent me spinning, in which Jen Hamilton-Emery asked if I would "be okay" with them publishing my book! Okay? Well, yes, sure, that would be fine. (Fall on floor.) It was almost every story I'd written, 27 stories, half of which are longer stories inspired by *New Scientist* articles and the other half are very short flash stories. It came out in September 2008, another amazing day in my life!

**How long have you been writing short stories and flash fiction? Was it something you always wanted to do? Can you see yourself writing longer fiction in the future?**

It's always been short stories for me, ever since reading Roald Dahl's *Tales of the Unexpected*. The short story can do something nothing else can, that short sharp shock. I'm addicted to reading them – and love to write them. Flash fiction is even more intense, even sharper of a shock, and I relish the challenge of doing that, of telling a story in a page, a paragraph. I am now moving towards poetry, I believe that short stories and novels shouldn't be mentioned in the same breath – but short stories and poetry, they are far more closely related.

**What are you working on at the moment, and how's it going?**

I am working on a new collection, with very welcome Arts Council England funding, of stories inspired both by the year I spent as writer-in-residence in the Science Faculty at Bristol University, hanging out in Paul Martin and Kate Nobes' biochemistry lab, learning how science is done on a daily basis – and also by a 1917 science text, *On Growth and Form*, by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, a groundbreaking work of scientific literature which has been great inspiration to artists and architects. I have never consciously worked on a book-length collection, so that's quite a different experience, a little stressful, to be honest! I've also never taken inspiration from real people in front of me or a historical text, so it's all an experiment... It's great fun, though, and my new stories, flash fiction, and prose poems are often very far from these sources, going off on tangents and spiralling away, which is great.

**Are there writers who have particularly inspired you, and the way you write? Are there any new writers you admire?**

Ali Smith was an early influence – after Roald Dahl, her stories showed me what else the short story can be. I love her stories which have an "I" talking to "you", it's as if the reader is in the middle of this intimate space. Quiet stories, without huge twists, but with immense power. I also love Janice Galloway, AL Kennedy, Grace Paley, their stories are very inspirational, and Alan Lightman's book, *Einstein's Dreams*, a beautiful work of science-inspired fiction, had a big influence on me. Roy Kesey's first collection, *All Over*, had a profound effect on my writing: it was my first experience of minimalism and it inspired me to strip back my stories, to make the reader do some of the work.

I review short story collections for my journal, the *Short Review*, and try to ask for books I wouldn't normally read. This way I find many new favourite writers – recent ones include Carol Emshwiller, Georges-Olivier Chateaufort and Anthony Doerr, amazing writers. My fellow Salt authors Vanessa Gebbie, Elizabeth Baines, Carys Davies, David Gaffney, Tom Fowler, Nuala Ní Chonchúir and others are a great inspiration to me, their styles are so varied. I could go on and on... I read an enormous amount – short stories, poetry, novels, science books – and it is all inspiring. Right now, Simon Armitage, James Tate and Anthony Carelli are opening my eyes to poetry of a kind I've never seen before. I am loving it all.

**There seems to be a slight resurgence in the short story collections at the moment – what draws you to the form?**

I don't know about any resurgence, to be honest. The short story world has always flourished and continues to flourish – the issue is with the publishing world beyond the short story's borders, which, puzzlingly, continues to resist short story collections. What I love is that the short story can be so many different things – limited only by a notional maximum length that no-one can really agree on, but no minimum. Short stories can be literary, science fiction, erotica, humour, crime... or combinations of all these things, undefinable! I am a short story addict, when I am feeling low reading a short story, even if that story is far from cheerful, instantly makes me feel better. If I could, I would prescribe them medicinally.

**Can you describe your writing environment and practice – do you have a particular place where you write, or time of day, number of words, for example?**

I finally have a writing shed, something I've been hankering after for years and years. It's only now, in the last 6 months, that I really have a dedicated writing space! But actually, I also love to write in cafes, I like the white noise. I have no routine, no times of day, no word counts. That's the beauty of short stories, for me at least. You don't have to insist on 1000 words a day, nothing like that. I spend a lot of time wandering around with stories in my head, working on them before they get put down on paper or the screen.

**When you have a germ of an idea for a piece of writing, how do you begin to plan for the writing stage. Do you map events in advance, for example, or do you simply begin?**

No, there is no planning, no mapping. I note things down in a notebook: ideas, first lines. Then, when I am writing, I will start and then I will get to a certain point and stop and have to wait until I find out what happens next. It happens mainly in my head, as I mentioned. I can't rush that waiting, if I push it, the writing suffers. I believe we all have an inbuilt "story sense", some kind of intuition for narrative, for what makes a great story. I am learning to trust this!

I often write a flash story, under 1000 words or so, in one sitting. My online writing group has regular 24-hour flash writing blasts where someone organises for a set of prompts to be posted every hour for 24 hours, and you sit and write as much as possible and post up your first drafts. I've generated a lot of short short stories and prose poems that way, it's a real buzz! I don't believe that quality is necessarily proportional to time spent.

**Do you have any advice for our readers who may wish to see their work published?**

The best advice I can give is to write - and write a lot. Creativity is like a muscle, it becomes more and more flexible. And my second most important piece of advice is – listen to yourself and write the stories you want to write, not the ones anyone else tells you you "should" write. Yes, writing groups can be wonderful but they are not a democracy, only you know if the story is how you wanted it to be. Trust yourself. Read everything you can just to open yourself up to possibilities – and always read literary magazines before you submit to them. It's a mistake I made, I would send something entirely unsuitable to a magazine thinking that my brilliance would clearly persuade them to change their requirements! These days there are so many magazines looking for short stories of every stripe and shape – places like Duotrope.com will help you find them. It's hard in the UK to buy these magazines, but hunt them down. Don't worry too much about publishing a book, it's good to build up your writing CV first. Thankfully there are many many fantastic small presses who make it their mission to publish those of us who aren't attractive to the mainstream publishers, they are the short story's cheerleaders and we should be theirs!

**At Cyprus Well, we are keeping an eye on developments in the digitizing of books, iPads, Kindles etc. As an author, how do you view these developments?**

Well, I don't have a Kindle or an iPad and I am such a lover of physical books that I can't imagine making the transition myself to leaving book objects behind. But I see how people seem to be reading more because of the Kindle and other ereaders and I certainly applaud that. I also see short story writers taking the initiative to publish single stories or small sets of stories direct to Kindle, which is also great! We are in interesting times, very interesting times. Of course, I wish that short story writers were the new rock stars, the ones every publisher was clamouring for, but perhaps the short story should be something that one needs to seek out, needs to do a little work to find, because the rewards will be even greater, even sweeter.

**Thank you Tania!**

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September 2010: Sarah Duncan  
October 2010: Simon Hall  
November 2010: Lee Weeks  
December 2010: Matt Lynn  
January 2011: Damian Furniss  
February 2011: Jill Mansell  
March 2011: Tim Weaver  
April 2011: Adrian Tinniswood  
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