

# *British Short Stories of Today*

Edited by Esmor Jones

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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**PENGUIN BOOKS**

**BRITISH SHORT STORIES OF TODAY**



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## *Introduction*

The short stories in this collection have mostly been written very recently – a few in 1985. They have all been previously published, however, in collections or in magazines. The authors themselves come from all over Great Britain – northern and southern England, Scotland and Wales. Many are professional writers with much published work to their credit. A few are amateurs, in the best sense, with writing as an enthralling hobby. Others are at the beginning, they hope, of a life in writing.

If the authors are a mixed bunch, so are the stories. Whether serious or sad, suspenseful or comic, set in the past, present or future, these stories all offer, as short stories must, insights into character. We see how people react to situations or happenings; and the people are of all ages and backgrounds. Occasionally the central figure is not human at all – see Arthur C. Clarke's warning tale 'The Curse', where the 'character' is a river, perhaps England itself.

Not so long ago, it was often said that the short story was a dying art. Well, here is plenty of evidence to the contrary. The short story is alive and very well!

ESMOR JONES





# The Poets and the Housewife

A FABLE

*Martin Armstrong*

Martin Armstrong died in 1974 at the age of ninety-two. He wrote both novels and histories, but is, perhaps, best known for his short stories.

'The Poets and the Housewife' makes use of an old way of telling stories to make very much a modern point. Appearances do deceive! So does the language. It looks like old English (it is a fable) but there are surprises.

The story was written before Britain adopted a decimal currency. Roughly, a shilling is five pence.

Once upon a time, on a summer's day, two poets, having shut up shop, went out into the country to collect copy, for their stock of this commodity was exhausted.

And they were careful to dress themselves carelessly: one put on a black collar and black-and-white checked trousers, and the other a cravat of raging scarlet, 'for' they thought (though they did not say so) 'we must dress the part'. And their hats were wide and reckless and the hair beneath their hats was like the thatch upon a broad-eaved barn.

And as they journeyed, poking about with their walking sticks after the precious substance of their quest, there gathered over their heads the devil of a storm.

And at the proper moment the storm burst and the rain came down and the poets left off seeking for copy and huddled under a hawthorn tree. And they appeared as two proud exotic birds, lighted down from the Lord knows where.

And there was a lodge near the hawthorn tree, and the lodge-keeper's wife looked out and, seeing the two, she exclaimed: 'Lord, look what the wet brings out!' And the rain increased fearfully.

And after a while she looked out again and the poets were changed, for their bloom was impaired, the rain had clotted their

hair, and the scarlet cravat of the one had become crimson from saturation. And rain dripped from all their extremities.

And the lodgekeeper's wife was grieved for them and called out: 'Young men, will you not come in? Why play the heron who stands lugubrious with his feet in cold water when it is open to you to become as sparrows twittering with gladness beneath the eaves?'

But they bowed politely and replied: 'Thanks awfully, ma'am, but we are poets and we like it.'

And the lodgekeeper's wife was riled and sneered at them, remarking: 'They have certainly had a drop too much.' But they, smiling deprecatingly upon her, responded: 'Madam you are pleased to be dry.' 'And you,' quoth she, 'are pleased to be wet.' And she slammed to the window, casting up her eyes and inquiring rhetorically, 'Did you ever?' and 'What next?'

And the rain came down like hell, leaping a foot high and sousing all things.

And after another while, the lodgekeeper's wife looked out again, and the two had gathered closer about the trunk of the hawthorn-tree, and they were as two old crows, for their shoulders were up and their beaks were down and they were unbelievably dishevelled.

And she shouted to them again, for she was a charitable woman, saying: 'O miserable gentlemen, in the name of civilization and commonsense, come inside.'

But they dared not turn their faces to her, lest the water should run down their necks: so, revolving themselves all of a piece, they replied: 'Renewed thanks, ma'am, but we are very well, for we are acquiring copy.' And they cowered under the deluge with great earnestness of purpose.

But the lodgekeeper's wife did not understand the word *copy*, so that she was amazed beyond measure and the power of comment was taken from her.

And the storm, having stormed itself out, abated: and the place was bathed in delicious smells of breathing leaves, and the warm sweetness of hawthorn perfumed the air.

And the lodgekeeper's wife looked out from the window a fourth and last time, and the poets were in the act of departure. And the tragedy of their appearance was beyond all comparing. For the scarlet of the cravat of one had run down into the bosom of his shirt, so

that he was, as it were, a robin-redbreast. And both were soaked to the uttermost.

And when those poets were returned home, the one found that he had lost a shirt and the other that he had gained a cold. Therefore the one went out and bought a new shirt at seven and six and dear at that, and the other got himself a shilling bottle of Ammoniated Quinine which was tolerably cheap considering.

And the one wrote an ode called *Midsummer Storm* for which he obtained five guineas, so that (deducting fourpence for stamps and seven and six for the shirt) his net profit was four pounds seventeen and twopence.

But the other could only manage a one-guinea sonnet called *Rain Among Leaves*, so that (deducting fourpence for stamps and a shilling for the quinine) his net profit was nineteen and eightpence.

Thus the two acquired great store of copy (more, indeed, than they bargained for) and the sum of five pounds sixteen shillings and tenpence thrown in.

But the wife of the lodgekeeper knew nothing of all this, so that she still believes, like many another ill-informed person, that poets are nothing more than unpractical dreamers.

*Ammoniated Quinine*: an old-fashioned remedy for colds and fevers  
*guinea*: in old money one pound and one shilling. It used to be a gold coin. In other  
words, £1.05p not allowing for inflation! There were twelve pence in a shilling and  
twenty shillings in a pound

# Dingo

*F. Bennett*

This is a tale of the Australian outback – that is, the ranching country inland from the cities. 'Dingo' is written from experience. F. Bennett is English and lives in Hastings, but spent many years working with sheep and cattle on Australian ranches or 'stations'. It is a lonely life and it has a language of its own.

From all the dogs roaming the world, unwanted, unloved, I had to give my affection to a half-bred dingo, the wild dog of the Australian outback. This bitch that became mine, gradually digging her way into my heart with her natural skill and loving ways, was no beauty, except in my eyes. She was lop-eared, long-legged, her fur hard, yellow from her dingo and kelpie forebears, this last breed being the sheep dog reared on so many sheep stations for their working strain. Her golden eyes were her one redeeming feature; their shining depth showed a fine intelligence. As a pup she displayed no sign of the killer instinct of the dingo, the reason they are hated, hunted, trapped and poisoned on the big cattle and sheep stations. One dingo will, in a night, wound many sheep in its desperate chase through a herd, seeking a victim; or a pack of those wild dogs will hunt down a cow with a new-born calf, separate them from a mob of cattle, and worry the weakened cow until they can part her from her offspring, when they rush in for the kill. Call a man a dingo down under and he'll feel wounded for life; it's considered the most deadly insult.

Boundary riding in the Georgina country, bordering the Northern Territory, the far north-west cattle country of Australia, I came upon this pup. Mine was a lonely job but a good one, that is if you find enjoyment in the wide open spaces of outback Aussie, which I did. I got to know and love every tree: the Coolibar, Gum, Box, even the vast, dry, empty paddocks and acres of Spinnifex; tufts of thorny growth that seem to exist without water, for it was drought

country, often missed by the yearly monsoonal rains. Flowers would not survive the scorching heat of those vast plains, but flocks of birds, budgerigars, green in undulating flight, huge white cockatoos, vivid parrots, gave colour and life as they flew around or rested like gorgeous blooms on the trees.

Happily I rode the paddocks, repairing broken fences; reporting to the station manager movement of cattle; herding small mobs back to the paddock from whence they had strayed. They say a cow or bull will go through any fence, if it has a mind to do so, and I have often seen them skilfully easing their way through the fencing, built as it is outback with stout posts run through with several rows of wiring.

I carried my tucker in the saddle bag, bread, meat, tea, and at noon, after a hard morning's riding, boiled my quart pot over a bushman's fire, a few dry leaves and twigs, soon ignited, enjoying a brief respite from the blazing heat around me.

My home was a hut, not too badly furnished with all the necessities for living, situated ten miles from the station homestead, from whence I rode out six days a week, happy in the freedom of my life, the continual blue skies, the peacefulness of it all.

I'd settled down to enjoy my break, a quick meal and brief shut-eye, when I spotted this pup. There was movement amongst some nearby lignum bushes, and a small bundle of fur, all yellow, golden eyes, came wagging through the bush. Apart from birds and cattle, animal life in that vast countryside was rare; a stray 'roo, a rabbit or so was all you would expect to see, and in the heat of high noon nothing ever stirs in the stillness and silence of outback Australia. I called her to me and after a while she came and let me stroke her. I fed her cooled tea, diluted from a nearby billabong, which seemed to go down a treat. She might have been abandoned by Abos gone walkabout; there were signs of a deserted camp, bag humpy and bower shed, old bones and the leavings of a big camp fire. 'You're lucky,' I told her, 'you wouldn't have survived long in this heat.'

So Lucky she became. I propped her upon the pommel of my saddle, steadied my bay gelding while I mounted, and rode for home. It was Saturday, the heat was past bearing.

'roo: kangaroo

billabong: branch of a river or pool

Abos gone walkabout: this refers to the custom of Aborigine boys going out alone into the wild for a period to mark their becoming men

bag humpy: a rough temporary hut of the kind the Aborigines build

I became the devoted slave of my Lucky; I lavished upon her round yellow body all the love of a lonely man, and watched her grow from a hard ball of fur to a lean young bitch. I loved the look of her: golden eyes, slim muscular body, white-tipped tail, held erect like a pennant in movement.

Early morning, when I rode out on the night horse to round up my small string of working horses, yarding them to select my mount for the day, she would run beside me, leaping high, somersaulting with the sheer joy of living; and when it was necessary to check a straying animal she was there, young as she was, heeling them, wheeling them; she was all a cattle dog should be, which was strange considering her lineage, but that's the way it turns out sometimes.

She was always by my side when I rode out on my inspection of the fences, and when she became tired, being not yet fully grown, I would mount her on the pommel, and we rode together in close, happy companionship. My horse made no objection; a boundary rider's horses are dependable animals, quiet, steady, sometimes half-draft; a frisky mount, liable to pull away, is the last thing you need, riding the outback fences.

I fed her the best, plenty of raw meat and big bones. Daily, with small tweezers, I removed from her body, the corners of those golden eyes, deep inside her ears, the ghastly ticks that plague station dogs; little spider-like creatures fat with blood, that cling to and feed on certain animals. It was a nauseating job, grabbing them and pulling them free, killing them, but I was dead sure my Lucky would not be plagued by them. She repaid me with her devotion; my shadow by day, sleeping beside me at night. Hurt beyond measure if I ever reprimanded her, her golden eyes would regard me with unbelieving sorrow as she cringed to the ground, bewildered and tortured by the absence of my usual affection.

She was only ten months old when the boss drove out early one morning to my hut. This was unusual, he always contacted me by the station phone every evening after I'd returned from my daily round of inspecting and repairing. Perhaps the lines were down; there'd been a quick, scurrying storm the previous evening, fierce winds, thunder to rock you backwards, early monsoonal rain, heavy, hurtling straight down from the heavens. Lucky had been a

*down under*: English term for Australia. Look at a globe to see why!

*outback*: country beyond the populated coastal areas

little scared and sheltered under the kitchen table; now she growled at this intruder as he stood framed in the doorway.

The boss eyed my pet with distaste as we chatted for a few minutes about the work in hand and then 'get those cleanskins in Adelaide paddock,' he instructed me, 'and drown that flaming dingo.' Aussies are like that, especially in the great outback; downright, forthright. Station life is hard, serious, there's no time for mucking about. If the boss gives an order it is carried out at once.

I should have known my dingo pup would never be tolerated on that cattle station; I had known and had ignored the inevitable issue; now I had to face and come to grips with the result of my foolishness.

As I saddled up and prepared for my ride, hurt and irresolute, I found my eyes continually straying to my beloved Lucky as she sat before me, erect, eyes on mine. With the infallible sixth sense that animals of all species possess, she knew, she was waiting for my verdict.

Of course I couldn't do it; I could no more hurt her, drown her, shoot her, than jump off Sydney Bridge; my whole recent life had been geared to her care and protection. She was everything to me and a great help too in my daily work. The boss, I told myself, was being very unreasonable. I climbed slowly into the saddle and rode for Adelaide paddock. Lucky ran beside me, leaping, somersaulting, coming to heel when I whistled.

The cleanskins grazed happily in Adelaide paddock; I approached them cautiously, Lucky at heel; one false move and they'd be gone with the wind. It had been a long hard ride, an early start and now, at full noon, the sun blazed, scorching down. After the big muster, these were the ones missed, unbranded; they had to be rounded up, brought into the stockyard for branding.

I was excited, elated; in that vast country you were not always lucky enough to ride upon them. I cantered towards them, cows, calves, young steers; they bellowed at my approach, left their grazing and moved onwards.

I had them on the go, cantering I moved them homewards. I looked for Lucky, couldn't see her; she was still a pup, it had been a long hard grind, I was expecting too much from her. My work must come first; it was exhilarating, rewarding to be herding home those cleanskins.

*cleanskins*: cattle not yet branded with the brand of the station



But continually my eyes searched the far paddocks as I wheeled and herded the stragglers; I looked for movement, any sign of my pup. Now that the herd was on the go I'd have galloped to her, let her ride on the pommel as so often before.

The paddock was starkly bare, just browned acres of grassland, no bush or tree to hide her from me. My Lucky never returned. When I'd yarded the cleanskins, I rode out to find her, searching the paddocks, longing for a sight of her. I searched until the sudden southern night wiped away all light; she was not to be found; she was half dingo; I could only hope that her natural savage inheritance of self-preservation would protect her. I felt weakened by my physical effort and drained of all life's meaning. Sadly I rode the trail to my lonely hut.

Life went on; station work is demanding, the constant care of animals, fences, equipment. My days were busy; it was the long nights when I felt so lost, lonely, hurt by the absence of my beloved pup. I missed her so much it was torture sitting there, trying to read by my carbide light. I'd find jobs, mend things, but the hours to bedtime were still so long, so empty. Station dogs are always housed in the home paddock adjacent to the night horse or the big garages; their life is severe, forever chained, small kennels, meagre food; they are bred to work, this being the only time they are unleashed and allowed to run. My Lucky had broken all rules, enjoying the home comforts of my hut, sharing my life; she'd been my constant shadow; I missed her at every turn.

I was trailing the station milkers, a small mob of Jerseys and Friesians. For reasons of their own they'd gone through the home paddock fences and I'd been sent to find them.

They'd gone through all fences, I found, heading for that vast wilderness of far west Australia. I tracked them, not easy in that drought country, and after a hard ride had come upon them, still heading westwards.

Being domestic animals they were easy to handle and at sight of me they turned and headed for home. I was fond of them, big lumbering cows, gentle as babies; I knew them all by name and was urging them onwards when I became aware of the yellow shadows skulking behind the stragglers; a pack of dingos who looked lean and hungry enough to attack; there would be little food for them in that bare country.

At a distance they circled now; this was something I'd never