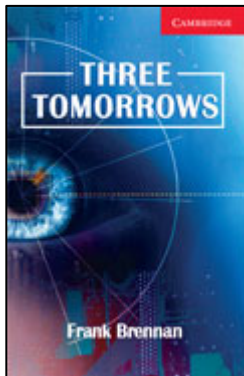


Short stories: a window on the world

Frank Brennan



Frank Brennan is the author of five collections of short stories in the *Cambridge English Readers* series: *Three Tomorrows*, *Circle Games*, *Tales of the Supernatural*, *The Fruitcake Special* and *Windows of the Mind*.

Q: What attracted you to the genre of the short story when writing for the *Cambridge English Readers* series?

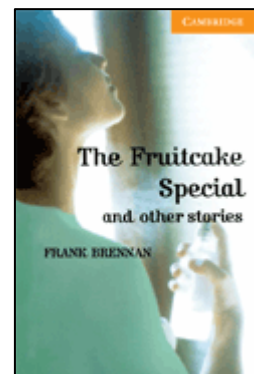
Frank Brennan: I like the way that a collection of stories is completed in stages as each story is finished. That way of working happens to suit me at the moment. I wanted, also, to write a collection of stories on a particular theme – such as 'discovery' in the *Fruitcake* collection – so that I could present a variety of ways of looking at that theme. This allowed me to write humorous stories like *The Fruitcake Special* alongside 'spooky' stories like *Finders Keepers* while still sticking with the theme of discovery.

Q: Have you written short stories for audiences other than language learners?

FB: Not yet, though I hope to do that sometime.

Q: Do you think short stories are a particularly accessible genre for language learners because of their length?

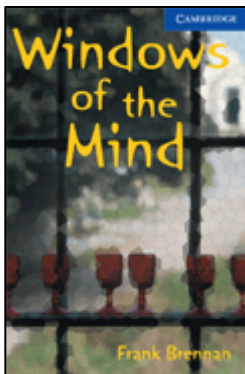
FB: I do. They are short enough to be read or heard in one sitting while offering many ideas for further discussion. I set out writing my stories with the intention of entertaining the reader and also providing a good basis for discussion afterwards. For example, did Aunt Molly really change or did the hypnotist just bring out her potential? Do you think Maxwell Marvel's tape would have made any difference? Would it be right to play it back to her? There are no right or wrong answers here, it's the talking about it that's important.



Q: Within a short story there is little time to spend on character development, yet you manage to convey very vivid pictures of your main protagonists. Do you use a special technique to achieve this?

FB: I approach characters in the same way that an artist or caricaturist might draw a quick sketch of somebody: I use a few broad strokes that suggest certain characteristics and let the reader's imagination do the rest. Justin in *A Fine Wine* or Maxwell Marvel in *The Real Aunt Molly* aren't described in detail but their characters are quite distinct. With the main protagonists I do this too but I emphasise the particular aspects of their character that make them suitable for the story, such as Jamie Russell's wish for power in *A Gentle Touch* or Chester's vanity in *The Book of Thoughts*.

Q: Do you find that you are writing within a well-established tradition of the short story, incorporating elements of surprise, the supernatural, the twist in the plot, and the question mark at the end of the story?

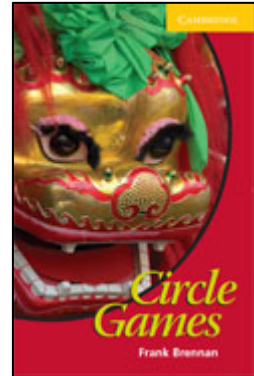


FB: I think all of those elements are important and I try to use them all. Short stories have to make a strong impression if they are to interest the reader, especially those who are not reading in their first language. I try to get the reader hooked in the first few lines, if I can. For example, in the opening of *Brains* a monkey can complete a 100 piece jigsaw, while in the opening of *Finders Keepers*, a respectable-looking teacher is soon revealed as being a thief. I also try a variety of approaches – humour, the supernatural and so on.

Q: It is noticeable that in some of your stories there are sinister people in positions of power, (David Amos in *The Fruitcake Special*, Mr Dimitri in *Brains*, Justin in *A Fine Wine*, Eva De Cruz in *Arlo's War*) and they are often prepared to abuse this power in order to protect their own interests. Is this something you have experienced directly?

FB: There's nothing like a good bad guy to get the reader interested. Villains are often the most fascinating characters and, in a short story, can be used to introduce the darker aspects of human nature. My own experience of real villains has more to do with looking through the pages of a history book or a good newspaper than anything else. I think most of us have read or heard about sinister people such as corrupt politicians or businessmen – after all, they do exist. I'm interested, too in the less than admirable characters that we might well come across in our everyday lives, not just the larger than life villains. For example, the snobbish Justin, the ambitious Gina Capaldi and the jealous Mr Shaw are all types of people we can recognise and, indeed, might have met in some form.

Q: Counterbalancing this, there seems to be a strong sense of justice and people getting their 'come-uppance' running through the stories (*A Fine Wine, A Nose for a Story, Arlo's War, Finders Keepers*). Did you set out with the deliberate intention of showing how something positive can come out of an apparently negative situation?



FB: I think that there is probably something of the moral fable about my stories. You can have people receiving their just deserts in literature even if it might not always be the case in the real world. I suppose there is a sense of karma in the stories because people get their 'come-uppance' as a direct result of their negative qualities, for example, Daniel Appleby's greedy arrogance or Harry Chen's dishonesty. It gives the stories a certain completeness that rounds them off, I think. Mind you, future stories might well take a different turn.

Q: At times, I noticed an element of black humour in the stories (*A Nose for a Story, The Fruitcake Special*). Is this a particular style of humour that you enjoy?

FB: I enjoy humour. You can get across some quite serious ideas with humour, too. In *A Nose For A Story* the cess-pit image is an appropriate metaphor for the kind of journalism that Desiree Malpen practises. She gets a taste of her own medicine. In *The Fruitcake Special* the humour is more light-hearted and the scene in the restaurant has a lot of the slapstick about it. So yes, there is black humour but it comes in other shades, too.



Q: What gave you the idea of basing the five stories in *Windows of the Mind* on the five senses?

FB: As I said, I like to think of a link or theme for my stories, so what could be more universal than the five senses? After all, that's how we perceive the world. It's simple and five stories is a good number to work with - not too many, not too few. My old teacher at school always told us to write descriptions using all of our senses and not just our sight and I remembered him when I was thinking of themes to use. Thank you, Mr Higgins!

Q: Finally, did you enjoy writing these stories?

FB: I enjoyed writing all of them. It was great to be able to dip into so many different characters and situations, something that may not have been so easy with a single story of comparable length. But that's not to say I won't give it a try in the future.

If you've already enjoyed reading Frank Brennan's stories, try another collection of short stories in the *Cambridge English Readers* series, *Frozen Pizza and other slices of life* by Antoinette Moses.

