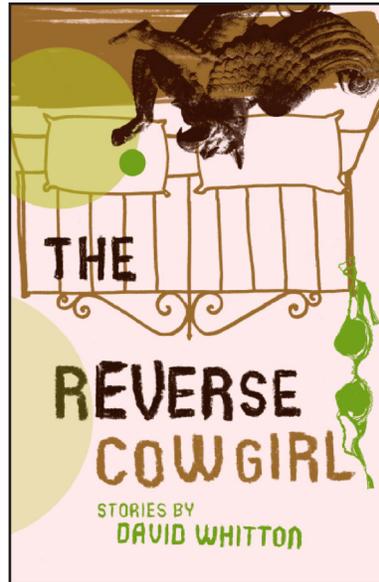




READING GUIDE



The Reverse Cowgirl David Whitton

About the book:

Keen, intense, and darkly comic, the short fictions of David Whitton are full of misfits, oddballs, dropouts, klutzes, and loners. You might dress em up, but it's just a matter of moments till they unravel back into their fallen, and fascinating, selves. Their mistakes and misdeeds, temptations and transgressions thread their way through these stories, stirring up surprises on every corner.

Whitton navigates current life and future worlds, dirty truths and murky fantasies, continually setting up, if only to send up, modern romantic scenarios. In the end, whether the lovers meet online or on acid, at a wedding or in battle, the object of ardour might be in for a rough ride. Maybe they'll stay afloat — tremulous and tentative — or maybe they'll plunge to earth in delightful and refreshing ways.

“Whitton writes the way a master painter paints—just a few well-placed strokes of his brush and he reveals worlds of vast and mesmerizing complexity. He is marvelous in his ability to show the comic in the tragic, and he constantly forced me to question my own ethics, my own place in the world. A truly gifted writer and a truly kick-ass short story collection.”—Suzette Mayr

About the author:

David Whitton lives in Toronto. Visit him at www.dwhitton.com.



Photo: Millie Whitton

Humanity Has Become the Beast: A Conversation with David Whitton

Robyn Read (editor of *The Reverse Cowgirl*): What are three things—people (authors or otherwise), places, or plants—that inspired you to write, or while you were writing, “*Twilight of the Gods*”?

David Whitton: Raymond Carver, *Star Trek*, and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Years ago, I was talking to someone about the most recent installment of the *Star Trek* franchise. I don’t remember if it was *Voyager* or *Enterprise*, but either way: it was evident to both of us that *Trek*, as a mythology, was tapped out. It was silly, overreaching, uninvolved. “What the show needs,” said I, “is to be modestly proportioned and grounded in a reality that we recognize. Like a Raymond Carver story!” I wondered then what it might’ve been like had Raymond Carver written it. Characters wouldn’t be hanging out in holodecks or babbling on about Inverse Tachion Emissions. They’d be worrying about their job security, smoking and drinking too much, and having vicious fights with their spouses. And the thought of this, these astronauts in the far future bringing their trashy, blue collar lives into space, appealed to me a great deal.

Charlie Brown. Anyone who knows me well knows how much I love *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The narrative arc of that perennial holiday favourite is the development and resolution of Charlie

Brown's dilemma: "It's a happy time of year. Other people are happy. I should be happy. Why am I not happy?" And this also happens to be Hans Rasmussen's dilemma in my story. The answer to this question for Charlie Brown was, "you're not happy because you've lost sight of the true meaning of Christmas, i.e., the birth of Christ." The answer to this question for Hans Rasmussen is, of course, something much different.

RR: If one day you encountered beings from another planet, and one of them walked up to you, reading a paperback, and asked, "Hey Dave, what's *science fiction*? Or ... wait (thumbing through pages) what's *speculative fiction*? Are they the same thing?" how would you reply?

DW: They're the same thing. The term "speculative fiction" is an attempt to legitimize or uplift a form that has its roots in comic strips and boys' adventure books. There is no meaning in these categories other than what meaning we assign to them. So the real significance of the "science"/"speculative" divide is the impulse behind its creation. And the impulse behind it, as with so much in life, is about status. Folks who read "speculative" fiction want the form—and, by extension, its readers—to be taken seriously. In some cases, I would guess, this is nothing more than snobbery: I derive enjoyment from it, and I am awesome, therefore the material I consume is awesome too. In other cases, it's just the understandable desire not to be perceived as some goggle-eyed nebbish with zero social skills or muscle mass.

Obviously, categories and subcategories are essential in the sciences, in engineering—in all fields of human endeavour. The human mind wants to organize its experience. And they can be immensely helpful in the marketing, promotion, and critical assessment of the arts. But from a writer's perspective, they can hurt as much as they can help. Life is a swirl of confusion through which we walk for 80-odd years until we collapse from the exhaustion of it—and writers should honour that, and not let categories get in the way. Life is a hybrid form. It would be a shame if I left ping-pong tables out of my story because I decided the genre couldn't support it.

RR: With the heroics, Scandinavian lingo, not to mention the wolf, *Beowulf* comes to mind. Did *Beowulf* in structure, sound, or scope (as elegiac narrative) influence "Twilight of the Gods?" Are the separatists the invincible monster, the Skanderbörg, or is it left purposefully ambivalent what is (can be) considered 'monstrous'?

DW: Much like Sigrid in the story, I'm an ardent (and somewhat radical) animal lover. So any time I read about a human's heroic efforts to rid the earth of a terrible beast, I'm rooting for the terrible beast. The reality is that now, in 2012, we can't have a credulous relationship with an ancient story like that, because it's become clear that humanity has become the beast. Humanity is the virus. Humanity is the nemesis. So a contemporary riff on *Beowulf*—and when I talk about *Beowulf*, I'm talking about Seamus Heaney's brilliant translation from a few years ago—could only be ambivalent. However! I also like to believe that the tiniest bit of ambivalence snuck its way into the original; when the poet-narrator tells us about Grendel's mother's terrible sorrow after *Beowulf* has slaughtered her son:

"... But now his mother
had sallied forth on a savage journey,

grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge.”

If I were a slain sea-brute’s mother, I’d feel exactly the same way. Wouldn’t you?

I can’t say to what degree the *Beowulf* story might have influenced me on a subconscious level—certainly my story is structurally dissimilar; but both stories have a certain degree of lament to them, which I think is probably unavoidable when you’re examining shifts in political power. Where *Beowulf* very consciously influenced me is in its sound and syntax. Seamus Heaney’s version has an alliterative, guttural, Anglo Saxon vibe to it that I find highly compelling:

“But when dawn broke and day crept in
over each empty, blood-spattered bench,
the floor of the mead-hall where they had feasted
would be slick with slaughter.”

It was never my goal to replicate this syntax in any kind of sustained way, but for fun, in later line edits, I dropped in lines like this:

“The seawater, swarming with life, choked with motes, pulse blue, then black, then blue, then black.”

The goal, I guess, was to place the story in a kind of sonic context. I wanted moments of that militaristic, boot-stomping quality you hear so much of in *Beowulf*.

RR: If science fiction can be read as social satire that exaggerates in order to comment, critique, but also foreshadow or warn, did you intend for some elements of “Twilight of the Gods” to be familiar, recognizable to readers? (For example, is trademarking a commentary on the privatization of water?) Moreover, what function do you think the element of the familiar provides in dystopic fiction?

DW: “Trademarking” is indeed a comment on the privatization of water—and of everything else. I wrote “Twilight of the Gods” shortly after reading a *New Yorker* article about a U.S. company that went around to indigenous South American communities, locked up their wells and springs in the name of adding civic infrastructure, and proceeded to sell them their own water at rates they couldn’t afford. Astonishing, I know. Horrible. And also just the beginning. In “Twilight of the Gods,” I pictured a world in which every natural phenomenon, every thought or emotional state was available for trademarking or naming rights. The Johnson & Johnson Jetstream (TM). The Proctor & Gamble Solar Eclipse (TM). When we’re sad, we cry Covergirl LashBlast Tears (TM)—and we’d better not torrent those tears. To a degree, with digital rights management, we’re already at that point. Apple won’t let us listen to a song if we don’t listen to it on an Apple product.

On another level, I just think that the future will resemble the present more than we realize. Progress is iterative. New things are built upon old things. When we read Anton Chekhov, what we’re struck by is not how different everything was in Czarist Russia, with their troikas and samovars, but how uncannily similar everything is. Human nature does not change. The hipsters in Chekhov’s Moscow are exactly the same as the hipsters in Toronto or New York or Calgary in 2012. They have

exactly the same concerns. So, in my version of the future, we're still using ceramic lamps, we're still insecure about our jobs, we're still lusting after people we should avoid, we're still in love with crystal unicorns.

On a practical level, the familiar in dystopic fiction, or in horror fiction or whatever, allows the writer to ground the reader in a world that we can relate to, which makes the speculative element more plausible and frightening. The thing is, as a fiction writer, you're asking your reader to accept something that's not real, that never happened (except maybe in a disguised form). If you add a level of unreality on top of that, like some virtual reality trope where the actions depicted have no bearing on the safety or well-being of your protagonist, you're asking too much. This is why, in a movie like *The Matrix*, where things are happening virtually, we're given a consequence for the "real life" dude with his head plugged into the computer. If things go kablooeey in the virtual world, things go kablooeey for poor old Keanu.

RR: Is "Twilight of the Gods" set in a future, or an(other) version of our present?

DW: Hundreds of years in the future. Enough time for nations we haven't conceived of to rise, do great and gruesome things, and collapse. It's a fantasy about how the world we see now might possibly evolve.

RR: What's up with Vikings? What do Vikings mean to you?

DW: The Viking bit was a high-five to myself. I'm part-Danish on my mother's side. My grandfather's name was Hans Rasmussen. His father's name was Soren Rasmussen. His father's father's name was Rasmus Sorensen. And so I'm always annoying my friends by half-joking that I'm a Viking.

When we think about Denmark, we think about a peaceful, progressive, eco-friendly country with a minuscule population. We think about really beautiful furniture design. Maybe we think about Lars Von Triers. But the Danes are also aggressively defending their claims to the melting Arctic, and have been in prolonged disputes with Canada, Russia, and the United States over it. So it just amused me, the thought of Denmark, tiny, peace-loving Denmark, reverting to its glorious martial past and conquering the world. The unlikeliest country, you know? I love improbable success stories.

Calgary, Alberta. March 8, 2012.

"Twilight of the Gods" has most recently appeared in *The Reverse Cowgirl* (Calgary: Freehand Books, Fall 2011)

Robyn Read was the editor of *The Reverse Cowgirl*, and Acquiring Editor for Freehand Books from 2009-2011.