Introduction

I do not remember the noise, strangely. Only the light, which erased everything for a moment, then settled to a terrible glow, warm and red. For those of us who approached the wreckage, there was nothing we could do except wait for the sirens and watch the flames reflected on each other’s faces.

Robert L. Greg, Tereza H. Král, Charles Campbell, Jane Davies and William Valance – the authors shortlisted for the 2017 Skrat Prize – were all killed in the crash. They were strangers to each other, brought together on that evening by craftsmanship and love of words only. They met in the hotel bar, shook each other by the hand and exchanged pleasantries. A few may have been on the verge of discussing something of substance, or something intimate, before all were ushered into the waiting car.

The police are calling it a senseless crime, which I find a frightening turn of phrase. When can murder be anything other than senseless I wonder? Perhaps it depends on the quality of the motive or the integrity of the plot. Perhaps if the murderer is a coherent character, then the murder follows. Or perhaps, a murder only makes sense if the person looking in can say – yes, I too would have done that.

I wonder how many murders make sense to the police. I wonder how many murder mysteries make sense to readers. I suppose that is the game (no one reads a murder mystery to find out about the victim – they want to know the killer).

There is a number to call for anyone who knows
anything that might explain this crime, which can be found on
the Skrat Prize homepage, and I would urge readers to step
forward if they can help join the dots. Information can be left
anonymously. I have every confidence that the murderer will
be caught.

Our thoughts, of course, are with the friends and
families of those lost. Beyond this, if we acknowledge the
power of art to transform, to inspire, to comfort and delight
us, as I believe we must, then we are all made sadder and
lonelier by the deaths of these aspiring writers.

And to my Kràl – the late Professor – whose daughter
was among the dead, I dedicate this anthology to you and your
legacy.

*

The bodies have now been committed to the earth.
Painful as it may be, the work of the Skrat Prize must continue.
A winner for 2017 was chosen. The gold envelope containing
that name is locked in a safe in the sponsor’s head office. It will
remain there, unopened.

As Chairman of the Prize Committee, I have taken the
decision to award the Prize jointly to all of the shortlisted
authors. In the circumstances, this was the only honourable
course of action. The sponsors have kindly agreed to divide the
£10,000 prize money equally between their estates.

We could have left it there. That was the first instinct of
the Prize Committee. Shortly after the crash, however, I re-
read the shortlisted novels. How is it possible, I asked myself,
to read one of these novels without thinking of the others? I decided that it was not possible. For better or worse, the violence of the crash had canonised these authors in my mind as a single anthology.

I set to work immediately, selecting the choice passages from each text, re-shaping and re-ordering where necessary until I had created the illusion of a single novel, a strange piece, where characters speak to each other across the void in foreign voices. The effect is a narrative of sorts. Although the details are necessarily jumpy and distorted, my aim has been to give form and body to the shadows that dance under the lines of these fractured stories.

The other members of the Prize Committee were understandably cautious when I first presented the idea of a unified anthology. However, I felt, and the sponsors agreed, that the absence of a winning novel left a gap that should be filled with a monument to the authors; a monument that would continue to promote the best of new fiction (as well to provide the necessary revenue to sustain this burgeoning literary institution for the years to come).

* 

The lay reader will find this sufficient introduction, but despite my better judgement, I cannot ignore the hostile response to this anthology by certain critics and fellow academics. They have called it, insensitively I might add, a car crash of a novel, citing the work of the late Professor Král on the nature of authorship. They say the creative act is sacrosanct.
They say that any expression – such image, this word or that apostrophe – is imbued with the humanity of the person who made it. And they say Professor Kràl would be rolling in his grave if he knew what I have done to his daughter’s work (which they say I have befouled).

I know full well the works of the late Professor, who often used my work as fodder for his sweeping theories, despite the time I spent under his tutelage, and the time he spent under my fiancée (who he later had the nerve to marry). So to these critics I would respond as follows.

From the late 1480s until the overthrow of Ludovico Sforza in 1499, Leonardo Da Vinci ran a workshop in Milan where he worked alongside Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, Marco d’Oggiono and other talented apprentices to create masterpieces like the Madonna Litta. They worked as a unit, like craftsmen under the careful direction of a master architect.

Boltraffio probably completed the embroidered drapery, and possibly composed the Child’s head, leaning back slightly as His Mother gives suck. D’Oggiono, perhaps, completed the body of the Child, whilst the master saved the centre-piece, the face of the Madonna, for his own hand. Perhaps some unknown artist tweaked the corner of Her mouth upwards by a hair’s width, introducing tenderness to Her sublime gaze.

Hundreds of able minds and thousands of man-hours have subsequently been spent trying to discover the authorship of each anatomic fraction of this painting. With each dissertation, a new organ becomes the hallowed work of a
genius, and some line or expression the callous plagiarism of a fake. But does it matter if Leonardo moved this finger thus or that eyebrow hence? We still have the artefact to revere, its self-evident truth – the kind of truth that only art can preserve (the truth that runs deeper than fact).

The legacy is what matters, or at least, that is what matters more than anything for an old man of letters facing erasure. Perhaps that is why there are so many books about dead women fallen victim to feuds between old men.

Dr Michael H.J. Tizard, May 2017
1.

From *The Truth About Me*, by Robert L. Greg

*Part One*

*Ch. 1*

It’s been coming to you, this book. All of us know. It’s been the elephant in the room for two years now. You’re dreading it slightly, worried about the demons I’m going to release, the mud I’m going to sling, the lies you’re going to swallow. But you’ll read it anyway, flick through the pages greedily (I used to be your darling, remember? I know these things), and whether you’re shocked or delighted you’ll pass it on, circulate it. That traitor bitch some of you will say, or, what a shame, she had so much going for her, or, I still would (I can smell you from here shitmunchers). Note to editors, just call me for a headline. The girl with the golden pun. Here I am, under house arrest, not going anywhere. Well, I guess it’s just desserts, what you get for launching a coup.

You want to know how it felt, there, at that moment, in the centre, spinning the greatest scandal of the space age? Of course you do, so here’s my story, and like all the best ones, deep down, it’s a love story.

*Ch. 2*

My name is Kate Hero. I was born on 1 January 2030 in Lower 89th Quadrant, the rough end of the Stack. It was a shark pit, I’ll tell you that for free. Poor men cheated each other in a desperate bid to get ahead. Of who? Each other mostly. Of
why? Because.

My Dad was no different. Trapped by history you could say, or just weak, or just normal. Space made it worse – there’s just too fucking much of it, too much for a fragile ego. So Dad drank his victories dry and beat his losses into my Mum. She always protected me though, especially from the violence, and when Dad’s liver finally caved in I got her out too. I’ve got a lot to be proud of, whatever you might think about how things turned out – I’ll tell you about it later. But for now, just take it as read that success wasn’t an easy journey. In fact most people couldn’t have done it. Most people tried and failed. But I succeeded, and kept on succeeding.

The thing is, before we start properly, you need to get your head around what I am, the effect I have on people. Otherwise, I won’t make sense and this entire story will be a waste of time. Power is just something I was born with. Not a nasty manipulative kind of power (that’s what the media peddles). It’s a sensitive power. People want to submit. They want to believe in it. The reviews aren’t going to talk about this, so reader, I need you to concentrate. Don’t cut me out. Trust me, I’ve done some amazing things, admirable things – you’ll learn to love me.

I’m not being selfish or egotistic in saying this stuff. And to prove it, I’m going to introduce someone else, before my story takes hold completely. See! Most of the time this sort of book is just me, me, me, scandal, rehab, me. Not this one – you have to keep someone else in mind as I wing through. You have to remember the Inventor.
I resent what commentators have done to the Inventor. As the facts started to emerge during my trial, there were cartoons of him as a lamb in freshly brushed school uniform (woollen) enjoying his day out to the abattoir with a chophungry wolf. Was he naïve? Certainly, but so are all visionaries. Before you cast your stones, just remember what he was trying to achieve. He wanted to count, to make himself heard, and don’t we promise that to everyone? Even our geniuses are bloggers at heart these days.

So as my story unfolds I want you to keep the Inventor in the corner of your screen. Imagine him walled up in a dingy basement, hoarding and tinkering, experimenting and pioneering, striving to get the world to listen, just for a moment. Because he is you reader.

~

Ch. 5

The T8 Platform VS, Mk II (Mining and Strategic Operations) – or the Stack, which we all know and love – has come a long way from its days as a mining vessel. My Dad used to tell us, in one of his sober moods, that when he first migrated they still only had one Level. It was all men back then, up and down from the asteroid as the Stack orbited round, working fourteen hour shifts for six months solid, then home to blow their thousands on worldly pleasures. It all looked quite glamorous from Earth, so they built another floor to accommodate all the dropouts hoping to make a quick dollar.
Iron ore was one thing. Soon they struck diamonds and the 21st century gold rush began, only with precious rocks the size of your head. The more money the Stack made the more people wanted in, the more people the more money, and on and on in a spiral. At its peak, they were adding four Levels a year – two on the bottom for people like my Dad, and two on the top for anyone with money. Pedants will say there isn’t a top or bottom to space, but they’re wrong – I’ve seen both. As CEO of SayCo I moved into a brand new penthouse on the 101st floor, 325th Upper, which completed the Stack’s evolution to a near perfect cube.

You might think this is just for the benefit of my Earth readers back in the old world, but I used to get paid good money to talk about how the Stack works – how it really works. Every company on Earth, and plenty of new ones born in space, wanted to understand the Stack, to get inside your average citizen’s head (the politicians too, but that’s for later), and I had a gift for communication. You see, the industry was going through extraordinary change. Communication was ballooning, not just the quantity but the definition, and companies were desperate to grow with it, scrapping with each other take control of the market. With SayCo’s guidance, our choice clients learnt how to reach every Level.

It was all about knowing your Quadrants. For instance, I know the lift shaft from Upper 23rd to the Centre breaks on average once every four days, a nightmare for its population of smart under-25s who moved to the Stack for more money and a good time. Champagne on demand there sold 16 per cent...