

REVIEW OCTOBER 3 2020 - 12:00AM

Barry Lee Thompson's short stories are rich with mood and insight

Ian McFarlane

Broken Rules and Other Stories, by Barry Lee Thompson | Transit Lounge \$29.99

The short story has a long and distinguished history, although its contemporary profile carries what might be called a problem of negative perception.

This is partly due to the success of fiction's longer form, the novel, and the popularity of informal essays and memoirs, increasingly driven by fiction techniques, although I suggest a deeper reason has to do with the loss of traditional shape.

Perhaps this is being whimsically nostalgic, but my preferred short story template still favours the "well-crafted" work, usually involving exposition, crisis, and resolution, as exemplified by well-seasoned story-tellers such as Graham Greene or Somerset Maugham.

The 17 stories in this collection are rich with insight, mood, and vividly realised character, but share little of the form defining a crafted short story.

Yes, of course, tastes and fashions change, but the underlying rationale of a time-honoured convention deserves to hold at least some of its ground.

That said, it must be noted that Thompson's stories have won several awards, which would seem to suggest that my preference doesn't cut much ice, although I would like to

think that his stories deserved to win, despite - rather than because of - their lack of shape.

As with most good collections nowadays, Thompson's stories are linked by a common theme: in this instance, the awkward intensity of recognising - and sustaining - a gay sexuality.

The underlying tension is heightened by the edgily balanced awareness of a mother and son relationship, from early childhood to precarious adulthood.

Steven's parents seem to sense his sexual direction without risking acknowledgement, and the emotional interplay of this hesitancy, with its subtle sense of denial, reaches well beyond the few stories in which it occurs.

The final story, "Angel", is the longest - and in my view, the best - displaying a well-captured second-person narrative concerning a lonely man's chance encounter with an oddly named youth on a winter beach in a dreary seaside town.

Angel listens to the searching detail of his older companion's doubts and fears with affecting empathy and patience.

The mood is achingly sad, as life's quiet desperations are spun with insistent detail towards existential overload, but the pace and tone are complicitly controlled, as if to provide a cautionary coda for all the other stories.

Perhaps there is shape here, after all.

- Ian McFarlane is a Canberra writer and reviewer.