



**One City One Story:(The Boston Book Festival Publishing)  
"The Whore's Child" by Richard Russo**

*Review by: Samille Taylor*

The short story "The Whore's Child" that Richard Russo has created is one that I shall never forget. With only seventeen pages Russo takes readers on a journey, that of Sister Ursula, a Belgian nun, in a college fiction writing class. The narrator of this story is the professor. The entire concept is absolutely brilliant, an extremely old nun in a writing class, full of young, emerging writers. At first I thought that this short story would be very comical and not at all serious. However, the journey was so much deeper than I first anticipated. By creating a story within a story the reader is submerged into the world of not only the professor who is reading Sister Ursula's story, but also, the world, of Sister Ursula herself.

In this fiction writing class Sister Ursula lets the professor into her non-fiction story; that of her life-- a life the class thinks is purely fictional. At this point the story is a quick read simply because once started each page turns itself.

As the professor reads each of Sister Ursula's submissions, I impatiently read for the page that described, in great detail, her next submission.

The first installment weighed in at a robust twenty-five pages, which detailed the suffering of a young girl taken to live in a Belgian convent school where the treatment of the children was determined by the social and financial status of the parents who had abandoned them there. As a charity case and the daughter of a prostitute, young Sister Ursula (there could be no doubt that she was the first-person narrator) found herself at the very bottom of the ecclesiastical food chain (Russo 7).

The fact that the students in the class do not know that Sister Ursula's story was non-fiction makes what Russo has created even more intriguing. Here is a scene in the classroom where the students do a dissection of the sister's life:

"I would like to see more of the mother, though," one young woman conceded. "It was a major cop-out for her to die before they could get to the hospital."

"You wanted a deathbed scene?" said another. "Wouldn't that be sort of melodramatic?"

Here the discussion faltered. Melodrama was a bad thing, almost as bad a misogyny.

"Why was the daughter sent for?" wondered someone else. "If the mother didn't love her, why send for her" (Russo 17)?

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Their criticism of her story frustrated me because she can't just change the story; it's non-fiction, it's her life. However, as stated before, I enjoyed the fact that the students did not know this. When I finished reading I didn't want the short story to be over; I wanted more from Russo, the professor and Sister Ursula.

One of the most enjoyable moments of the short story, for me, were the final pages:

"This was her first college course, she explained, and she wanted the other students to know that she had enjoyed meeting them and reading their stories, and thanked them for helping her with hers" (Russo 18).

In this section it became clear to me that Sister Ursula did not take the class to learn how to write but, rather, to learn how to tell her story; a story that had never been listened to. Through Richard Russo's short story "The Whore's Child" readers are left with the lesson: you may be able to revise fiction but one can never revise one's past.



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