Cate Kennedy’s *Dark Roots* is a collection of her award-winning short stories. They are restrained, poignant, often humorous, and emotionally resonant. I met Cate briefly at the Byron Bay Writers’ Festival but caught up with her via email for this interview. *Dark Roots* is published by Scribe (ISBN 9781920769994).

Your stories are mostly intimate character studies, picking out moments of their lives and relating them poignantly. The characters have broad appeal as they vary in age, race, sex and experience. Do you feel the need to express different kinds of voices? How do you “find” your characters? Or does story come first?

I’m really interested in creating an authentic narrative voice — so much so that often once I “nail” a voice I feel happy with, the rest of the story just slips into place. So in a way, the characters find me rather than me finding them — what feels important is listening to how that voice works, how it’s trying to show you, the reader, how things seem from its limited perspective. First person narration often enlivens a story, because of this wonderful limitation — I sometimes feel that the more limited or flawed or unconsciously self-revealing a character’s voice is, the more we’re intrigued by them. I’m fascinated by this in real life too — trying to listen for the rhythms of self-deception, or self-justification as people tell their stories. Human frailty, that’s what interests me most! And that’s such a huge catch-all that I try to find small “frames” to render this down into salient, telling moments.

Some of the stories capture painful moments of illness (“What Thou and I Did Till We Loved”, “Habit”), or the awareness of aging and time slipping by
(“Resize”, “Dark Roots”). Do you think one of the roles of literature is to remind readers of the transience of their existence, to bring spectacular awareness to simple moments?

That’s actually a great phrase to use—“spectacular awareness to simple moments”. Because the most spectacular awareness we’re capable of is that of mortality—such a painful experience of fear, loss and powerlessness that we’d rather do anything than look it squarely in the face. So I guess I like using mortality or unavoidable pain— the transience of existence, as you say—to confront characters with, to see what they’ll do with this uncomfortable, fearful insight. Like all insights, you have to hope that occasionally it’s redemptive—like in both “Resize” and “Dark Roots”, where I hope it’s suggested that the moment has made characters stumble then recover their footing with a sharper new awareness of what’s at stake.

I found the story “Seizure” to be so insightful. I wondered if a male reader would understand the instincts of the story. You seem to express a misunderstood feminine need or desire for a connectedness that seems reasonable, but is uncommon. Is this in part what you are expressing? Have you had any feedback from male readers?

Maybe I’ve just created those interior feminine monologues to my own ends, so that they SEEM reasonable! Seriously, this is a very interesting question, and one that touches on the heart of what I find those female characters in my stories are often yearning for. Connectedness is exactly it. As I was redrafting “Seizure” I was reading one of those “Contemporary Relationship Dilemmas” articles describing how men and women want different things and can never find common ground, etc, etc, and one phrase really struck me. A mediator/counsellor said: “In my experience this country seems full of baffled men and enraged women”. I think that’s especially true of couples surveying the debris of their melted-down relationship. I wanted, in “Seizure”, to try to capture the frustration, seething inchoate anger, guilt and puzzlement of a woman who can barely articulate herself what she wants, but she just suddenly knows that
whatever it is, it’s not this. And I wanted to create the kind of partner who’d be baffled by her leaving, who’d want a proper explanation, logically arrived at. But connectedness or disconnectedness is not so easily categorised, is it? It just seems to grow out of chaos, sometimes. I should say too, that the event described in “Seizure” — where the protagonist witnesses a stranger suffering an epileptic fit on the street and can’t stop thinking about the nameless person who stops to help him — is the kernel of the story that actually happened to me. I couldn’t for the life of me explain logically why I’d developed this sad, yearning sort of crush on an absolute stranger, I just knew on some level I was lacking that kindness and compassion. As for male feedback, it’s generally slightly nervous laughter about the revenge stories I get, since a few of them are black little comic crime stories. Someone told my husband Dave once that my stories must make him a little anxious. He laughed nervously in reply...

"Soundtrack" cleverly captures the rapid motion of modern life in a family space and a memory-based context. Do you see the short story as an essential literary form in these rapid times?

It’s certainly being marketed that way, as the perfect antidote to a time-poor readership with a short attention span, but I think the short story is an essential literary form for any era, in any civilisation! Unless we’re really conscious of setting up some boundaries now, we’re so over-stimulated and busy, so preyed upon by the endless bloody chattering input devices all around us, designed to block off any real “down” time for rumination. That’s the shame of it for me, because ideally I’d like someone to read a short story then go for a long walk or do some gardening or something, and reflect on the story’s implications, think about their own responses. Grabbing a short story collection solely because you’ve got a twenty-minute train ride and you’re desperate for something to fill the yawning moment of non-stimulus is a depressing alternative. It’s non-stimulus that keeps me sane, not to mention allows me to invent ideas and scenarios for fictional stories. We’re so terrified of boredom and loneliness, and yet if we call those things quiet and solitude instead, you’ll have the perfect environment for
creativity and peace. So I guess I love short stories for different reasons, and try to make a conscious effort to not get caught up in too much rapidity, to stop and pay proper attention to the moment instead. If we don’t, I’ve generally found something comes along which makes us do it anyway. Which is probably pretty precisely what “Soundtrack” is really “about”, now I come to think of it!

“The Testosterone Club” is very humorous. In relation to the pickles, how did you come across that bit of information? Do you often have to do research for your stories?

Angela, I made it up! I was thinking on that phrase “revenge is a dish best served cold”, and began ruminating on what a good idea it would be to poison someone with a jar of something your victim ate very, very slowly, long after you’d made your escape. Then that seemed a little callous and cruel, so I changed it to a long, inexplicable loss of libido instead. Then I had to come up with the kinds of people who’d give you sufficient motivation to commit such a sly crime... I tend to research only the significant details I need to make someone talk about something and sound reasonably convincing.

A lot of readers are interested in the process of writing. Every writer has different methods. Can you give us a little insight into yours?

My process is giving myself permission to write one or two really crappy drafts, assuring myself all the while I’ll be able to fix them up later. If I can just get to the end of the draft, no matter how woeful it is, I know I can improve it from then on and work out what I’m actually on about. I try not to plot too much because I find the best plot directions and most plausible details are ones which occur to you while you’re just focussed on writing as quickly and non-critically as you can. So nothing new there from me! I know I’m saying what most writers say — that it’s a two-stage process of inspiration then re-writing. I’ll try to have two things on the boil at the same time so I have something to switch to if I feel really stale with the first one. I’ll promise myself a coffee if I just do another 500 words. I trick and
cajole myself into getting to the end of the crap draft, as if my unconscious is some sort of mutinous toddler who needs bribery just to stay on the task. Or perhaps a better analogy would be a big, undisciplined dog who hates the leash and never comes back when it’s called. You’ve got to try and train a dog like that, but generally it sees you with the leash in your hand and just runs off...

And last of all, when I feel really uninspired, I think: what would you rather be doing? Nobody’s making me do it, after all, so I remember what Raymond Carver said: Don’t complain, don’t explain.

*Which books would you recommend as essential reading and why?*

My recommended reading list would be far too long to reproduce here! I read everything I can get my hands on, I’m a voracious devourer of fiction off all kinds. If you’re interested in narrative voice, though, and creating one that’s memorable, a few books that are essential, in my opinion, are *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, *The Collector* by John Fowles, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* by Ken Kesey, and *Last Orders* by Graham Swift. Sit back and try to soak them up by osmosis!