

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF

MODERN BRITISH SHORT
STORIES

*Edited with an Introduction by
Malcolm Bradbury*

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INTRODUCTION

In setting out to collect the thirty-four short stories that make up this anthology of new British writing in probably the most difficult of all the prose forms of fiction, I had two main aims in mind. One was to display as well as I could the achievement of some of the best work produced by the strongest of our recent British writers, no easy task in a limited space, and one that tempts simplification and prejudice. The other and rather more difficult aim was to be broadly representative, so that the book might give not only a reasonable idea of the variety, but also the general trends and directions that have been taken by British fiction in the years since 1945.

It so happens that these two somewhat divergent intentions seemed to grow more reconcilable as I read through the many short stories from which this anthology has been collected. The short story has become one of the major forms of modern literary expression – in some ways the most modern of them all. For what we usually mean by the genre is that concentrated form of writing that, breaking away from the classic short tale, became, as it were, the lyric poem of modern fictional prose. The great precursors were Chekhov, Henry James, Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, and Sherwood Anderson. It took on a strong modernist evolution in the work of Hemingway, Faulkner, Babel and Kafka which, in the period after 1940, was followed by a new wave of experiment led by Beckett and Borges, and provided the short story with a repertory of late twentieth-century forms. The modern short story has therefore been distinguished by its break away from anecdote, tale-telling and simple narrative, and for its linguistic and stylistic concentration, its imagistic methods, its symbolic potential. In it some of our greatest modern writers, from Hemingway to Mann to Beckett, have found their finest exactitude and most finished stylistic practice. In fact, for many prose-writers it has come closest to representing the most 'poetic' aspect of their craft.

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But if the short story is a major modern form, and if the above is the kind of thing it is, then it is sometimes argued that the British have not been especially good at it. We have owed as much to the tradition of direct narrative as of poetic narrative, to D. H. Lawrence as to James Joyce. The British short story has often seemed to resist those laws or conventions – about the story as an art of figures rather than adventures, or about the need for it to be committed to the single occasion or the single concentrated image – that have marked a good deal of its development elsewhere. The British have never been noted for respecting aesthetic skills in their authors, and the broad reputation of British writers in the form has been, with some striking exceptions, rather like that of British chefs in the field of *haute cuisine*; we may be able to imitate the practice but not generate great change or artistic originality. This may be one reason why only a few British writers have made the short story their first or only form, and why a good many of our finest short story writers also happen to be our finest novelists.

That fact has a convenience for this anthology, for it does, indeed, mean that many of the authors in this collection are our major writers of prose-fiction in general; hence the volume does display many of the striking directions and tendencies generally visible in British fiction since the War. But it also shows, I believe, that the short story has an importance and originality in the British line far greater than is often supposed. It is true that we have been somewhat short of those great magazines – consider the American tradition from, say, the *Kenyon Review* to the *New Yorker* – which encouraged the flourishing and development of the genre. But there have been moments, specifically during the 1940s when the pressure of wartime experience and the shortage of paper brought us *Penguin New Writing* and *Horizon* and the talents to fill them, when general interest in the short story has enlarged. We seem to be living in another such moment now, with a new wave of interest in short fictional forms. Though only a few recent writers have been short-story writers first, some of them have been of enormous importance. Writers of the thirties and forties like V. S. Pritchett and Elizabeth Bowen had major inheritors, such as William Trevor and Edna O'Brien, and the tradition seems particularly strong among new writers. Ian McEwan and Clive Sinclair, Adam Mars-Jones and Rose Tremain have made special use of the short story, and in a number of cases established their reputations with them, much as Angus Wilson did in the 1940s.

Perhaps it is that link between the novel and the short story that has made its development in Britain seem close to the same spirit of argument that has fed the British novel. To say it crudely, that argument has been one between a notion of prose-fiction as falling into a long-standing tradition of realistic or reportorial narrative, and the notion of it as an art of language, of experimental form and symbol, a notion that has often led in the direction of the strange, the fantastic, the grotesque, the surreal and the mythic. In much post-war fiction these traditions have seemed to collide, producing new kinds of self-questioning and a fresh enquiry into the nature and the proper conditions of a fiction. That range is very obvious in this collection, reaching, as it does, from writers, like Samuel Beckett and Malcolm Lowry, who have been strongly marked by the modernist tradition, but who have taken it further, to writers who have largely practised the story as a social and anecdotal form, like Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe and William Trevor. Equally it ranges from those writers who have stressed the self-questioning awareness of fiction (B. S. Johnson, John Fowles and David Lodge, for example) to those who, like Emma Tennant and Angela Carter, have explored the form's links with fantasy, fairy-tale and legend.

It seemed right to start this anthology at the close of the War, a time when there was indeed a revival of the short story and a marked sense of change in the spirit of writing, which we can sense in the fine, fragile manner of Elizabeth Bowen's story and which somehow seemed peculiarly appropriate to the experience of life during the War. V. S. Pritchett once called the short story 'the glancing form of fiction that seems to me right for the nervousness and restlessness of contemporary life', and his own work managed a reconciliation of form and experience which has been a mark of a good deal of post-war British fiction. It was Angus Wilson's appearance as a short-story writer at the end of the 1940s that suggested the post-war story had a new social experience to attend to, and that succession goes on still. Around the same time Samuel Beckett was developing a new form of experimental short story – exemplified by the difficult, exasperating and remarkable story 'Ping' in this collection; and in the work that followed we can sense not just the division of the modern British story into two traditions, one pre-eminently social and one predominantly experimental, but a sequence of constant attempts at reconciliation.

This, in a sense, is the 'enigma' of John Fowles's short story here, as a social fiction contends with an artistic one. And the extraordinary

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flourish with which the form has developed over the 1970s and 1980s has surely something to do with the relationship between social and historical awareness and a revived fictionalist curiosity. The recent renewal of interest in the short story displays a very wide variety of preoccupations: the grotesque and fantastic modes of the stories of Ian McEwan and Angela Carter, the use of the oral story-telling tradition in Salman Rushdie, the exploitation of Jewish or Japanese inheritance in Clive Sinclair or Kazuo Ishiguro. In the short story as in the novel, it grows harder to suppose that there is a single or clear-cut tradition, just as it does to deny that the short story is serving us as a supremely artful form and a field of fictional experiment. One of the virtues of the story is that it shows us that in every serious work of fiction the writer is saying something crucial about the form he or she is using, as well as treating a subject or distilling an experience. Recent writers have emphasized this greatly and given the short story a remarkable contemporary promise. And so it is appropriate that this volume should not only display, as I think it does, that our major post-war writers have consistently explored the forms of short fiction but that it should give a large part of its space to the achievements of an outstanding young literary generation who are coming to dominate fiction and its future.

The aim of making this collection was to show that in Britain now the short story is an adventurous, inventive, very various and, above all, a discovering form. In creating it I have had great help from my wife Elizabeth, who did much of the collecting and organizing, from Martin Soames of Penguin Books, and from many of the writers included. I should also express my larger debts to others who have helped concentrate my notions of what the form can mean: my former colleagues Angus Wilson and David Lodge; other friends who are often former students, including Rose Tremain, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro and Clive Sinclair, all of whom did much to expand my view of the story; and many present students who are working in the genre and doing exactly the same.

Malcolm Bradbury

Norwich, 1987.

STRANGE COMFORT AFFORDED BY THE PROFESSION

Sigbjørn Wilderness, an American writer in Rome on a Guggenheim Fellowship, paused on the steps above the flower stall and wrote, glancing from time to time at the house before him, in a black notebook:

Il poeta inglese Giovanni Keats mente meravigliosa quanto precoce
mori in questa casa il 24 Febbraio 1821 nel ventisessimo anno dell'età
sua.

Here, in a sudden access of nervousness, glancing now not only at the house, but behind him at the church of Trinità dei Monti, at the woman in the flower stall, the Romans drifting up and down the steps, or passing in the Piazza di Spagna below (for though it was several years after the war he was afraid of being taken for a spy), he drew, as well as he was able, the lyre, similar to the one on the poet's tomb, that appeared on the house between the Italian and its translation:



Then he added swiftly the words below the lyre:

The young English poet, John Keats, died in this house on the 24th of February 1821, aged 26.

This accomplished, he put the notebook and pencil back in his pocket, glanced around him again with a heavier, more penetrating look – that in fact was informed by such a malaise he saw nothing at all but which was intended to say 'I have a perfect right to do this', or 'If you saw me do that, very well then, I *am* some sort of detective, perhaps even some kind of a painter' – descended the remaining steps,

16 looked around wildly once more, and entered, with a sigh of relief like a man going to bed, the comforting darkness of Keats's house.

Here, having climbed the narrow staircase, he was almost instantly confronted by a legend in a glass case which said:

Remnants of aromatic gums used by Trelawny when cremating the body of Shelley.

And these words, for his notebook with which he was already rearmed felt ratified in this place, he also copied down, though he failed to comment on the gums themselves, which largely escaped his notice, as indeed did the house itself – there had been those stairs, there was a balcony, it was dark, there were many pictures, and these glass cases, it was a bit like a library – in which he saw no books of his – these made about the sum of Sigbjørn's unrecorded perceptions. From the aromatic gums he moved to the enshrined marriage licence of the same poet, and Sigbjørn transcribed this document too, writing rapidly as his eyes became more used to the dim light:

Percy Bysshe Shelley of the Parish of Saint Mildred, Bread Street, London, Widower, and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin of the City of Bath, Spinster, a minor, *were married in this Church by Licence with Consent of William Godwin her father this Thirtieth Day of December in the year one thousand eight hundred and sixteen.* By me Mr Heydon, Curate. This marriage was solemnized between us.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT GODWIN

In the presence of:

WILLIAM GODWIN
M. J. GODWIN

Beneath this Sigbjørn added mysteriously:

Nemesis. Marriage of drowned Phoenician sailor. A bit odd here at all. Sad – feel swine to look at such things.

Then he passed on quickly – not so quickly he hadn't time to wonder with a remote twinge why, if there was no reason for any of his own books to be there on the shelves above him, the presence was justified of *In Memoriam*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Green Light*, and the *Field Book of Western Birds* – to another glass case in which appeared a framed and unfinished letter, evidently from Severn, Keats's friend, which Sigbjørn copied down as before: