THE BEST SHORT STORIES OF 1927

AND THE

YEARBOOK OF THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY

EDITED BY

EDWARD J. O'BRIEN

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THE BEST SHORT STORIES OF 1927

BY EDWARD J. O'BRIEN

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THE FORGOTTEN THRESHOLD. (*Dutton.*)
DISTANT MUSIC. (*Dodd, Mead.*)
THE ADVANCE OF THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY. (*Dodd, Mead.*)
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TO
ARTHUR T. VANCE

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I shall be grateful to my readers for corrections, and particularly for suggestions leading to the wider usefulness of these annual volumes. In particular, I shall welcome the receipt from authors, editors and publishers of stories printed during the period between August, 1926, and July, 1927, inclusive, which have qualities of distinction and yet are not printed in periodicals falling under my regular attention.

Communications may be addressed to me *Care of Dodd, Mead and Company,* 443 *Fourth Avenue, New York City.*

E. J. O.

INTRODUCTION

I

I SHOULD like to call attention this year to the use of the physical senses by the short story writer. For some years it has been increasingly evident to me that the American short story in the hands of even its best practitioners is inclined too much to abstraction. This is partly due to a tendency to imitate Poe without realizing that the success of his particular form of abstraction largely depended upon his own peculiarly psychic condition. His hyperesthesia was so strong that it instinctively selected only that which was merely unique and non-human in his own experience.

The American short story writer with his excessive preoccupation with plot is attempting to take Poe's abstraction ready made without the peculiar mental character in Poe, the intensity of which made his own abstractions credible with a certain nervous insistency which of itself carried conviction. Poe neither *saw* nor *heard* apart from the imaginative life and was attentive to his own inner world of phantasy. His phantasy once having dissociated life from reality left to life only a mechanized pattern which he hated, and it is this very mechanical pattern to which an ever-increasing mechanization of life in America tends to respond.

In O. Henry we also find this mechanized pattern which no doubt corresponds adequately enough to the mechanization which surrounded him, but far from realizing the mechanized life itself, O. Henry was content with its surface and was satisfied to escape from it by a trick, the trick of the surprise ending.

In the better work of such men as Ernest Hemingway and Ring W. Lardner, to mention no others, there is a very definite effort at saturation in the physical scene rather than abstraction from it, and this effort is based on a nearly complete alertness of eye and ear. These writers communicate to us with nearly complete disinterestedness as well as personal interest what the senses

of sight and hearing have brought to them in the circles of the world in which they move.

To take sight first, I must point out that there are two kinds of sight, physical outsight and mental insight, and that all mental insight is suspect which is not built upon the previous foundations of physical outsight. By outsight I mean what the eye sees, and by insight that which the mind makes out of what the eye has seen.

The sense of hearing may be equally attentive to the outer voice and the inner voice. The outer voice uses words in an idiom, and the inflections and overtones of these words heard by the ear and interpreted by the eye of the artist recording what the eyes of the speaker tell him, are referred to a mind which discovers therefrom the inner voice of the speaker.

In Mr. Hemingway and Mr. Lardner the results of these two processes are very clear, and the success of these writers is due to a balance held by them between identification with the object and total disinterestedness about the result. The identification must be disinterested, or we should have sterile romanticism. The disinterestedness must identify itself with the characters portrayed or we should have a sterile classicism.

Furthermore, the pattern as woven by the artist must be an impartial one largely determined in its elements by what he has seen and heard, and in its arrangement of these elements by what his insight and hearing of the inner voice of his characters determine. He must have a sense that discriminates between the essentials and the arabesques of his pattern though he need not reject the latter, for they are often one of the best means of revealing the essential pattern.

The other matter which seems to call for a word of discussion this year is the stage of revolt against standardization noticeable among many of the younger writers. A few years ago it was quite clear what they were revolting against. They wished to be men and not machines. Now the question of what they are revolting against tends to become much more cloudy and also much more parochial.

To take the latter point first, the young American writer appears scarcely aware that the standardization against which he is protesting exists in other countries. Being an American he shares

the common American fault and believes that standardization is a purely American product. The form his revolt takes is frequently to emigrate to Paris, and to regard himself as an exile from the land of standardization. Exile is always a romantic attitude, but not necessarily a creative attitude.

One cannot help wondering why the young artist always emigrates to France nowadays. Nothing is more standardized than the Napoleonic code, which is the framework of all modern French life. Furthermore all standardization is due to the worship of machinery, and young post-war France accepts machinery joyfully and even builds an esthetic upon it. It is this young France with its esthetic of machinery with which young America in Paris finds itself most at home. The American artist who rushes to Paris is therefore in the paradoxical position of running away from standardization to embrace the machinery which has caused that standardization.

If the young American writer or painter must leave America, it would be well for him to ponder more closely his reasons for doing so and what he hopes to find on the other side. The sterile inbreeding of American art and letters in Paris at the moment is very like the sterile inbreeding of New England art and letters, which has left Boston and Concord dreaming of the past rather than creating for the future.

II

To repeat what I have said in these pages in previous years, for the benefit of the reader as yet unacquainted with my standards and principles of selection, I shall point out that I have set myself the task of disengaging the essential human qualities in our contemporary fiction, which, when chronicled conscientiously by our literary artists, may fairly be called a criticism of life. I am not at all interested in formulæ, and organized criticism at its best would be nothing more than dead criticism, as all dogmatic interpretation of life is always dead. What has interested me, to the exclusion of other things, is the fresh, living current which flows through the best American work, and the psychological and imaginative reality which American writers have conferred upon it.

No substance is of importance in fiction, unless it is organic substance, that is to say, substance in which the pulse of life is beating. Inorganic fiction has been our curse in the past, and bids fair to remain so, unless we exercise much greater artistic discrimination than we display at present.

The present record covers the period from September, 1926, to July, 1927, inclusive. During this period I have sought to select from the stories published in American magazines those which have rendered life imaginatively in organic substance and artistic form. Substance is something achieved by the artist in every act of creation, rather than something already present, and accordingly a fact or group of facts in a story only attains substantial embodiment when the artist's power of compelling imaginative persuasion transforms them into a living truth. The first test of a short story, therefore, in any qualitative analysis, is to report upon how vitally compelling the writer makes his selected facts or incidents. This test may be conveniently called the test of substance.

But a second test is necessary if the story is to take rank above other stories. The true artist will seek to shape this living substance into the most beautiful and satisfying form by skillful selection and arrangement of his materials, and by the most direct and appealing presentation of it in portrayal and characterization.

The short stories which I have examined in this study, as in previous years, have fallen naturally into four groups. The first consists of those stories which fail, in my opinion, to survive either the test of substance or the test of form. These stories are listed in the yearbook without comment or qualifying asterisk.

The second group consists of those stories which may fairly claim that they survive either the test of substance or the test of form. Each of these stories may claim to possess either distinction of technique alone, or more frequently, I am glad to say, a persuasive sense of life in them to which the reader responds with some part of his own experience. Stories included in this group are indicated in the yearbook index by a single asterisk prefixed to the title.

The third group, which is composed of stories of still greater distinction, includes such narratives as may lay convincing claim

to a second reading, because each of them has survived both tests, the test of substance and the test of form. Stories included in this group are indicated in the yearbook index by two asterisks prefixed to the title.

Finally, I have recorded the names of a small group of stories which possess, I believe, the even finer distinction of uniting genuine substance and artistic form in a closely woven pattern with such sincerity that these stories may fairly claim a position in American literature. If all of these stories by American authors were republished, they would not occupy more space than six or seven novels of average length. My selection of them does not imply the critical belief that they are great stories. A year which produced one great story would be an exceptional one. It is simply to be taken as meaning that I have found the equivalent of six or seven volumes worthy of republication among all the stories published during the period under consideration. These stories are indicated in the yearbook index by three asterisks prefixed to the title, and are listed in the special "Rolls of Honor." In compiling these lists, I have permitted no personal preference or prejudice to influence my judgment consciously. Several stories which I dislike personally are to be found on the "Rolls of Honor." The general and particular results of my study will be found explained and carefully detailed in the supplementary part of this volume.

EDWARD J. O'BRIEN.

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CONTENTS

THE RIGHT HONORABLE THE STRAWBERRIES [1]

By OWEN WISTER

(From *Cosmopolitan*)

AS I look back at his adventure among us, I can count on the fingers of one hand the occasions when his path crossed mine; between whiles, long stretches of it go out of sight—into what windings of darkness not one of the old lot at Drybone has even known to a certainty. Some of those cow-punchers were with me that first morning when he appeared out of the void. I was new to the country, still a butt for their freaks, still credulous and amazed and curious; and that morning they were showing me the graveyard. Thirty years of frontier history could be read there at a glance, and no green leaf or flower or blade of grass grew in the place.

"May my tomb be near something cheerful!" I exclaimed.

"They don't mind," said Chalkeye.

"Their mothers would," said I.

"Not the kind of mothers most of 'em probably had."

I walked off among the hollows and mounds of sand, over the sage-brush shorn by the wind. On that lone hill were headboards upright, and rotted headboards fallen on their faces. Drybone, the living town, itself already half skeleton, lay off a little way, down on the river bank. The bright sun was heating the undulated miles, which melted in more undulations to the verge of sight, and the slow warm air was strong with the spice of the sage-brush. The river below flowed soundlessly through the silence of the land.

They rode with me as I walked and paused to copy here and

there some epitaph of a soldier when Drybone had been Fort Drybone, or of a civilian of the later day when the fort had been abandoned. Killed, most of them; few women there; one quite recent, buried at the end of a dance, where she had swallowed laudanum—so they were telling me, when they stopped to look off, down the river.

Somebody on a horse.

"Give me your glasses," said Chalkeye.

Everybody took a turn through them, while the object approached.

Chalkeye passed my glasses back to me, remarking, "He'll make you look like an old-timer."

I took my turn, and knew what he was at once.

"He's English," I told them.

He now noticed us, and began to trot.

"Hold him on, somebody!" cried Chalkeye.

"No need," said I. "That's not the first horse he has ridden."

"He's bouncing like you done at first," said Post Hole Jack.

They mentioned derisively his boots, his coat, his breeches, his hat. A shotgun gleamed across his saddle, from which some sage-chickens dangled. He had now turned off the stage road and was coming up the hill. He looked as tired as his horse. He was shaven clean and began to smile as we watched him nearing in silence.

"Made in Eton & Oxford—recently," I decided.

I saw that the sun had burned him unsparingly, that his eyes were blue and merry, his hair a sunny yellow; his smile was confiding and direct, and boyhood shone in his face—but boyhood that already knew its way about in life.

"I beg your pardon," he inquired in the light intonations of Mayfair. "I was looking for a place called Drybone. I was rather expecting to put up there. A place called Drybone."

"You've found it," said Chalkeye.

He turned to the cow-puncher with lifted brows. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said you'd found it," responded Chalkeye. "Drybone's right here."

"Oh, really? Oh, thanks!" He glanced at the graves inquiringly, and hesitated. "Oh. Really." He leaned to read the

headboard I had been copying. "'Sacred to the memory of'—but there's more of the place than this, I hope?"

"A little more," said Chalkeye.

"Because they told me I could put up there"—again he glanced at the graves—"and one isn't quite ready."

"Ready?" repeated Chalkeye.

"To meet one's Maker and all that."

At these words, all in the light intonations of Mayfair, a unified, fascinated silence settled on the cow-punchers, and out of this spoke one hoarse whisper:

"What'd he say?"

"Because," the Englishman resumed with his confiding smile, "they do tell one things here. And the things are frightfully absorbing, but they're not always wholly accurate. So one can absolutely put up here without recourse to Abraham's bosom?"

"There's a hotel," I said. "I'm at it. Not ten minutes off."

At my voice he turned quickly. "Only ten minutes? How very jolly! I say, when did you arrive?"

The audience grinned; in spite of my sombrero and spurs and chaps, it was plain to him that I had arrived lately.

"This summer," I admitted with annoyance.

"But you're not English?"

"I'm from Philadelphia."

"I saw the place. Liberty Bell. I say, I could do with a bath. Five mornings now—by Jove, it's six!—with tin basins that were no better than they should be. And every jolly old towel had been trailed in ignominy. And I'm starving for a dreamless sleep. What do you do about the bugs? Well, thanks so very much."

He took the road, but not alone; escorting him trotted a hypnotized company, hanging speechless on his words.

"These," he said to me, touching the sage-chickens. "They vaguely suggest grouse. Edible? Hallo, there go some more running along!"

He was down, the reins flung over his horse's head, his gun ready.

Two birds rose and fell right and left, and he raced gleefully to pick them up. The cow-punchers looked at each other and again fixed their eyes on him.

"I say!" he cried, swinging into the saddle, "what lots of game!