

THE BEST AMERICAN SERIES™

2002

THE BEST
AMERICAN
SHORT
STORIES®

SUE MILLER

EDITED BY

KATRINA KENISON

SERIES EDITOR

The Best
AMERICAN
SHORT
STORIES®
2002

Selected from
U.S. and Canadian Magazines
by SUE MILLER
with KATRINA KENISON

With an Introduction by Sue Miller



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Foreword

ALTHOUGH I READ short stories all year long, trying to keep abreast of the journals and literary magazines that course across my desk, I don't usually hunker down and get serious until right around Labor Day. As the days shorten and the weather turns, the annual reading deadline looms on the horizon, and I set aside all other tasks and get down to the business of reading. This year, of course, the end of summer was swiftly followed by the end of our national innocence. All of us who returned to work in the days and weeks that followed September 11 had to grapple with the changes the events of that day had wrought in our lives and endeavors. Projects that had seemed urgent just weeks before took a back seat to new priorities; work that had been fully engaging suddenly seemed less than compelling; it was hard to concentrate, harder still to figure out just what we should be doing. Instead of reading stories, I found myself drawn to the phone, to e-mail exchanges with distant friends, to snuggles with my husband and my kids, to long, heartfelt chats with my neighbor in the driveway. The human urge for connection seemed at odds with the stacks of magazines piled up in my office. For a while I couldn't even sit still, let alone give the short stories before me the careful attention they deserved. Friends reported, "I can read the newspaper, but I can't seem to read anything else." I knew exactly what they meant. Preoccupied with the unfathomable changes in our world at large, it was almost impossible to focus on the details of a smaller picture.

And then one fall day I came upon Michael Chabon's story "Along the Frontage Road." As I reached the end of this brief,

bittersweet account of a father and son's expedition to choose a pumpkin from a roadside stand, I suddenly realized that I was holding my breath; not only that, I was praying for these characters, hoping with all my heart that each of them would receive grace, survive their losses, find love and understanding. The door back into stories had swung open. With that, I came to see that the kind of connection I'd been seeking was actually right in front of me, in stories that remind us that whatever happens, we aren't alone in the world, that our own fears and concerns are universal, that the details of our ordinary everyday lives do matter.

Throughout the weeks and months that followed, as old routines reasserted themselves and the numbness and shock many of us felt gave way to a new kind of heightened awareness, I was struck by the sheer depth and breadth of human experience portrayed in the stories I read each day. All of them had been written well before September 11, and yet often I found it hard to believe that this could be the case; the truths they spoke seemed so timely, so necessary now. Other times I was astonished by a story's timelessness, by a realization that an author's insights into the human condition were no less urgent in 2001 than they would be in any other decade, any other situation. Reading on, choosing stories that still seemed important, that still seemed necessary, or that were simply great fun to read, I came to see in some of these works nothing less than an antidote to terror. As James McKinley, the editor of *New Letters*, wrote to his readers, "We deceive ourselves if we believe that what's euphemistically called 'the tragic events of September 11' limn this nation any more than the coincident attack on the Pentagon or the anthrax onslaught define us. Ultimately, we are defined by what we create, not by what others destroy."

Here, then, are the stories of 2001, offered in the faith that we will continue to connect at the deepest levels through art, and that literature will remain as beneficial to the human community as any ideology, machine, or technological advance.

This year Sue Miller put aside her own fiction writing in order to read well over a hundred stories and compile this volume. She tackled the job with an open heart and an open mind, with the authors' names blacked out and no preconceptions about what kinds of stories she intended to choose. As she reveals in her introduction, she wondered if the stamp of her personality would be evident in her

choices for this collection. "In fact," she writes, "I even looked forward to that possibility, with pleasure at the notion of discovering something about myself by those choices." With no agenda beyond finding the choicest works of fiction of 2001, Sue Miller did indeed bring a generous spirit and an astute judgment to her task: she has given us a richly varied, vigorous, highly readable collection, twenty stories that reaffirm the health of this quintessentially American form. We are grateful for her efforts, and for a volume that is much more than the sum of its parts.

The stories chosen for this anthology were originally published between January 2001 and January 2002. The qualifications for selection are (1) original publication in nationally distributed American or Canadian periodicals; (2) publication in English by writers who are American or Canadian, or who have made the United States or Canada their home; (3) original publication as short stories (excerpts of novels are not knowingly considered). A list of magazines consulted for this volume appears at the back of the book. Editors who wish their short fiction to be considered for next year's edition should send their publications to Katrina Kenison, c/o The Best American Short Stories, Houghton Mifflin Company, 222 Berkeley Street, Boston, MA 02116.

K.K.

Introduction

I WAS FORCED to write short stories by the exigencies of my life at a certain moment. Of course, that's not true; it's just how I felt. For one thing, I didn't have to write a word if I didn't want to. No one was either asking to read what I wrote or offering to pay me for it, and the choice to write — which I was barely aware of making — was my own. I wound up writing short stories because I didn't feel I had the time or the imaginative energy left to me — after being a mother, having a job, and running a house — to undertake the longer kind of work, the work of the novel, to which I felt more suited. Almost arbitrarily felt more suited, I would have to say. In any case, I wrote short stories for a number of years of my life, and when I was almost finished doing that — though I'm not sure even now that I'm shut of the form — I was lucky enough to have a collection of them published.

I had occasion recently to reread that book (I was trying to decide on a story to read aloud in front of an audience), and what struck me about the stories after all these years was what an odd collection, in fact, they make. How different they are, one from another — in tone, in subject matter, in structure, even in length. Motley.

This may not be how the collection would be received by others now, of course; and actually, it wasn't received that way when it was published, by and large. The reviewer in the *Sunday Times Book Review*, I recall, saw the stories as unitary. They were, she wrote, too much about sex and too little about love. (Ouch. This was only my second book, and it was hard to feel so keenly that the reviewer

didn't care for my work. But I consoled myself that if ever a negative remark might help sell a book, "too much about sex" might be just that remark.)

Still, I do think that writers often come around, willy-nilly, to doing, recognizably, what they do, even when they're struggling hardest to do something new and fresh. This has happened to me sometimes with the novels I've written. After several years' work I'll produce something that feels like a bold step off into new terrain; there's the long wait, it gets published, and the reviews say, essentially, "Oh, here she comes, doing that again."

I wondered, then, if the same stamp of personality would be evident in my choices for this collection. In fact, I even looked forward to that possibility, with pleasure at the notion of discovering something about myself by those choices. It was a small part of my motivation in saying yes to the job of editor — the first part being simply delight in having been asked, and the second being the notion that I might learn something about where the American short story was, what was going on with it at this moment in its history and in ours. But the third, yes, had to do with the idea that I might in some way meet myself through the stories I had chosen.

And after all, there must be some measure of hope in the editors who put this book together annually at Houghton Mifflin that such a mark, such an aesthetic or moral stamp, will be palpable — or why choose a different writer every year? Why choose a writer at all, except to have the book shaped somehow by what his taste is, what his standards are? (Of course, the book is shaped too by what is Out There this year, and that's pure chance, combined in some measure, I suppose, with the pressures of the zeitgeist and the power, or lack of it, of some prevailing aesthetic of and for the short story.)

As I've looked over past volumes of this collection, though, it strikes me that they don't evenly wear the impress of their editor's sensibility. Or at least not apparently so. And it further strikes me that the volumes I admire most wear it least; that the stories in these collections — the ones I like best — only seem excellent, each in its quite distinctive way, and not to have been chosen with any particular demands being placed on them except that: excellence. It seems reasonable to me that this should be so — that range and excellence should be available without a recognizable editorial imprimatur. After all, most of what a writer is likely to ad-

mire in others' work is what she herself is unable to do, and this always encompasses a wider range of kinds of writing than what she is able to do.

And so, after I'd made my decisions, it was, oddly, with some relief that I discovered I could learn exactly nothing about my aesthetic-in-the-short-story by reading through all the stories I'd chosen. In the aggregate they had no voice, they didn't speak; separately, they certainly did — but each was a perfect representative only of its own instance.

For example, I chose two stories about a deal that gets made and then goes awry. Both involve treacherous behavior. But what could be more different tonally than Leonard Michaels's bemused, almost rueful account of Nachman's foot-dragging and largely unconscious inability to keep the deal he's made in "Nachman from Los Angeles," and the story of John Henderson's agonized alteration of the terms of his bargain and then the terrible price he exacts for that generosity in Karl Iagnemma's "Zilkowski's Theorem"?

Or, to move further to the ends of another spectrum, what could you say about Melissa Hardy's "The Heifer," so full of horrific events endured and indeed created by her otherwise stoic, even silent characters, that you could also say about Michael Chabon's "Along the Frontage Road," which slowly and elliptically reveals some measure of the human feeling underlying its seemingly ordinary behavior: the choosing of a Halloween pumpkin by a boy and his father, and their simple exchanges as they make this decision — except that both stories are wonderfully done?

There are two dog stories (and this may say more about me as a person, if not a reader, than any other choices I made), but Richard Ford's "Puppy," an account of a marriage revealed through the tale of what a couple does with a dog abandoned to their care, drew me because of the meandering, Peter Taylor-ish unreliability of the narrator; whereas what drew me to Arthur Miller's story, "Bulldog," was the funny and unexpected and completely exhilarating account of the birth of creative impulse that ends it.

Alice Munro is always utterly distinctive in the tone and fluid structure of her stories (I had a teacher once who referred to that quality as the Munro doctrine — he disapproved), and "Family

Furnishings" is no exception, landing as it does at its conclusion on a moment that would have been midway in the chronology of the story but that aptly captures what we know only by then to be simultaneously false and utterly true of the narrator's assumptions about the meaning and aims of her life to come.

But distinctive too is Jim Shepard's astonishing "Love and Hydrogen," the story of an illicit love affair set in the fantastic, enclosed, and doomed universe aboard the *Hindenburg* in 1937, or Tom McNeal's "Watermelon Days," which takes us to the Dust Bowl era in South Dakota to depict the beautiful and unexpected momentary reprieve of a difficult marriage, or Carolyn Cooke's "The Sugar-Tit," set on Beacon Hill in impoverished gentility, an account of another complicated marriage told in brilliant language (a tenor rising above "the rest of the men's voices, in the quivery way of oil on water") — an account that ends with an act of the bitterest fidelity.

Three of the stories speak of love and the immigrant experience, but with emphases so different as to make you forget the thematic connection — from Jhumpa Lahiri's young graduate students wounding and exposing each other within their almost hermetically sealed-off universe of part-time jobs and study and improvised meals, to Edwidge Danticat's Haitian lovers, reunited after a separation of seven years, alternating between their pleasure in being together again and the powerful sense of things unspoken and perhaps unspeakable between them, to the sense Beth Lordan gives us in "Digging" of the generations of hidden and lost hopes and sorrows that lie under the lives of the Irish American couple whose meeting and marriage she describes.

I found Jill McCorkle's story "Billy Goats" remarkable for the unusual choice of narrative voice — it's told mostly in the first-person plural; and for describing not so much a unique action, which usually gives shape to a story, as a pattern of habitual actions which make up the ordinary life of an ordinary place; and for the blessing pronounced on that ordinary life by the story's ending. And I found E. L. Doctorow's "A House on the Plains" remarkable for almost exactly the opposite qualities — its quite particular narrator, its long and intricate plot, the pace of its withholding and its revealing, and the sense of a simultaneously admirable and repugnant fidelity running under the dark and complicated events.

There's "The Red Ant House," by Ann Cummins, remarkable for being told in the quirky and slightly stylized voice of a child, about two girls trying to take control of their disordered lives by exposing themselves to the local bachelor (yes!); and Alice Mattison's elegant and very funny story about a woman finding a kind of grace in giving up control of her life, "In Case We're Separated." And there's "Surrounded by Sleep," by Akhil Sharma, an at once amusing and sad story about a boy slowly understanding the small consolations possible within what he's also slowly comprehending as the horrific callousness of a world that has dealt catastrophe to his family. There's a nearly plotless meditation on the necessary and painful evanescence of memory, set lovingly in the shifting world just after the Second World War in Japan — "Aftermath," by Mary Yukari Waters — and a neatly plotted tale of loss and the need for yearning in human life — "The Rug," by Meg Mullins — which ends with one of the most indelible images in the collection.

They are fine, these powerful and distinctive stories, and my only fear in invoking what seems to me unique or startling about each one is that I may have been reductive. If that's the case, I apologize to the writers of these stories, which I admire for so much more than the qualities that make them so markedly different one from another.

But different they are, as they should be. Mongrel (that dog again!), nearly polyglot in its variety of style, this collection says nothing clear about the American short story today except that it's healthy and strong and still exploring its realist roots (there were almost no experimental works in the 150 or so stories Katrina Kenison sent on to me). That it's being written by every ethnic version of American there is, about every ethnic version of the American experience there is. That it's being enthusiastically embraced by young writers and reclaimed by older ones. That it's being written by men and women in almost equal numbers, and that it's being written equally about the present and the near past and the long ago. Perhaps the stories written next year or in the few years following will reflect more about what we are thinking of at this moment as our changed world — or perhaps we'll find the world changed less than we thought. In any case, these stories, whose creation preceded that change, seem to belong less intensely than those imaginary stories-to-be to a particular time. Indeed, it almost

seems that none of these stories needed this particular moment in history to be born.

Far less, I'd argue, did they need this particular editor to notice them. There may be one or two you wouldn't have chosen, had you been editing; there may be one or two I would have chosen differently if the circumstances under which I chose had been different — if I'd read certain stories in some other order or in some other room or mood. If I'd read them all at 5 P.M. on a sunny day, for example. Well, yes. But since I've come to the end of this process with these twenty on my list, it seems to me that they were the inevitable twenty. And having now reread them several times over as a collection, I've confirmed that, for myself anyway.

And confirmed something else. These stories arrived in my life at an odd time. I'd been working for six months on a nonfiction book, my first ever; then, seconds after I turned that in, I was sent on the road to flog the novel I'd finished months earlier. By the end of the tour I hadn't written fiction in almost a year, and sometimes I thought that if one more sweetly inquisitive aspiring writer asked me where I got my ideas from, I'd cry out, "Oh God, I don't know. How would I know?" and exit stage left. I didn't do that. I hope I wouldn't do that; but it felt as though these stories arrived in the nick of time to make me believe again in that place — the place where ideas come from — and to teach me once more what we read fiction for. I'm grateful.

SUE MILLER