

# The Best American Short Stories 1981

Edited by

Hortense Calisher  
with Shannon Ravenel

# *The Best* AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1981

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Selected from  
U.S. and Canadian Magazines  
by Hortense Calisher  
with Shannon Ravenel

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*With an Introduction by Hortense Calisher*



1981

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## Introduction

IF POETRY has the direct line to the highest laurel — or the noblest life — and the novel is sometimes cock-of-the-walk conversationally, then the short story, somehow frozen or immured between them, is everybody's prize orphan, of whom one speaks tenderly, if not for long. It's the chamber music of literature and has the same kind of devotee. Besides, it doesn't sell. There's often that confusion between the commercial fact and the Parnassian one.

Sometimes I think that the salvation of literature in this country is that we haven't yet got used to it. For while Europe for centuries has regarded the *conte*, the tale, not as a mere bypass to longer works and greater career but as one of the natural paths of a writer's way through the world, it is the United States that for the past fifty or sixty years has most seemed to harbor the short story and to sustain it. Possibly the deepest causes of this aren't literary per se, but political, regional, or financial. We still had great new regions to contend with — in that period, our West and our South — and this always both stirs the urge to recount and gives it new furnishment, as is happening now in South America and also in Canada, as we will see in this volume. We had newer responses to war, to the rise of great cities and their conflict with the provinces, and to rising generally; and we were nouveau riche in the power of print. We still felicitated ourselves on our libraries. Poe and Hawthorne are often regarded as the shapers of the modern short story — in its incarnation as a moment in experience, as against the traditional tale, which rambled in the "folk" or the picaresque consciousness.

Whatever, we've most surely had our story renaissances, and this collection is related, though perhaps deviously, to the latest of them — or to what I heard referred to at the University of East Anglia as "your American Workshope." Without arguing the pros and cons of whether one can make writers by the atelier method, it's fair to observe that in a country huge as ours, where once a writer who wanted confreres or even publication might well have to migrate, the university has willy-nilly become the café, whatever that does or doesn't do for the writer of talent. However, a writer is tied to experience in a special way, though not always a literal one, and certainly a great many are spending a large portion of the most important postgraduate life at school, an enclosure, no matter what one does there. If one teaches and writes there as well, the effect of immersion in talk about "techniques" may also enter in. Subtlest of all influences or hazards for the silent persona of a writer may be the constant verbalization of energies and meditations better saved for the page. Since so much of writing-school study does concentrate on the short story, does the reading of 120 published during a year suggest any conclusions on the above? Of course, but not without examining, as another part of the creative-writing phenomenon, the magazine outlets for the literary story — much decreased in the public sector, but much increased in the government-grant-sustained little magazines, some of the best of which are attached to universities.

There is now an enormous literacy at loose in the land of the short story. Many more people seem able to give fairly well-wrought accounts of experience, and in good language — much as the products of good British schools were often able to do en masse. But what once would have been nonfiction memoir or essay is now attempted as art. I've no doubt that the writing courses, graduate or undergraduate, so many of them focused on the short story, have much to do with this — along with the more general rush of youth into the arts. But the hazards of art remain as usual, as do the effects of coterie. The strong will either make good use of such derivations or escape them. Less so the weak. I can't guess how many of the stories I read emerged from such influences, except now and then where they seemed to me to fail.

There were a goodly number of stories set in academia, often obviously authored by its denizens, or the wives of denizens, who either were or were not themselves professionals. Some stories

betrayed their origins at once, either by the language itself, of a sort not to resist words like *eidolon*, or by that crabbed self-commentary where the critique is more antic than the action. Some ached only from the enclosure itself — an honest enough subject — but suffered too much from the effects of it: I couldn't include one witty, vivid story soured by sheer invidiousness.

Yet there is one story here whose subject is academia bung on, and comes naturally out of the riches possible from any milieu when not theorized over in concert but caught by the singular pen. I was understandably cheered when I saw it, since, some time back, defending the university as milieu and not merely classroom, I'd written: "Fashionably considered, the university is not a part of going 'life' at all, as against the pursuit of homosexuality in Algiers, or strong drink in Connecticut. But I find it impossible to exclude from at least tentative reality any place where so many people are."

When stories are in a sense needed or bespoke by the life around us, writers write them, and readers recognize them, as sharing the same lights and darks. For some time American writers, and readers along with them, have seemed more than usually troubled about the means of narration. I'm not speaking of the real innovators, whose method is almost always innate, but of otherwise conventional stories and novels compelled to excuse their reason for being; the teller is talking to a psychiatrist or a tape, or can't rest until "things are sorted out" — just as in earlier times a man might talk at his club, or to his priest. Nothing new except in the recording devices, but the token use of such interlocutors, or of any, can convey the writer's own unease with "story." There's also a more febrile use of the present tense, as if to make reality more immediate, or — by scrapping flashback — young. Quote marks are dispensed with, in one more effort to rid the writer of that ever-present monkey-on-the-back, typography. All writers, possibly all artists, at times feel an impatience with the physical limitations of their own media. Literature's two classic answers are in opposition: elaborate the page or typeface, as in medieval illumination, Victorian illustration pursued even to the three-dimensional, or Wyndham Lewis-style *BLAST* (which last may have had its influence on comic books); or — scrap everything but ink, down to the last Dada word. Neither answer can be permanent, nor can one ever satisfactorily enlist another art, though I've in the past received desperate manuscripts with disc attached. And we all

know about danced poems. Music, especially, can make a writer jealous of its closeness to the ineffable. We are artists of the effable. There's no cure for that but the daily one: to write what even Beethoven, with all the chromatics pushing heavenward, could not have said.

Among the stories considered, some do seem to have lost confidence in the medium itself, expending their main juice in antic buzzing between "fact" and "fiction," this posed as a dilemma of technique rather than as one of the complex and fruitful obscurities of life. The current fashion is to throw that "dilemma" straight into the lap of the hopefully dissective reader, who may not thank you for it unless he or she has been eating the same dogma as you. Much of twentieth-century art does of course subtly plead "Help me with the technique of this," but in the spirit of play, or intimate connection, or a joint truth-seeking in which the artist asks participation in a discovery — not out of any implication that the pursuit itself is suspect.

There is perhaps a deeper question and dismay. Surely, though fiction has often before nuzzled close to history or journalism or current events, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoi, and legions of others even to today seem not to have worried over the categories, or had any gnawings over whether art can sustain its own tragedy in face of the terrible or absurd facts. Nowadays some writers do. There's no answer to that except the personal one. Writers plug on out of obsession, nerve, exaltation, agog at what happens in the world or what does not, forever entranced at the power of the word to present it.

Here are twenty of those short stories published during 1980. They have been chosen in turn by three successive tastes, the magazine editor or editors having first go. These editors wield the ultimate power — the power of print. Can one be assured that their choice is in all respects right and representative? They would more likely be among the first to say not, making the decisions as they do among the many, and within the terms of available space, special audience, literary preference, and sheer accident. Not all good stories get published, I fear, and many that eventually do must wait beyond their time.

The second taste is that of the *Best American Short Stories* annual editor, Shannon Ravenel, who scanned approximately 1250 stories published within the calendar year by nationally distributed Amer-



ican and Canadian periodicals, then read carefully the 900 stories which merited that. Except in rare and exceptional cases, stories may not be translations, must show evidence of having been written as complete stories, not as excerpts, and authors must be citizens or permanent residents of either the United States or Canada. Of the stories that qualified, the 120 I was sent were garnered from 151 periodicals, of which the selected stories represent 11, the magazine represented by most stories being *The New Yorker* with 9. Shannon Ravenel further reports: "The American short story abounds. Most of those I read are literate and technically adequate. But filling the 120 slots with outstanding stories is not as easy a job as the large numbers above might have us guess. Nevertheless, the overall quality is, I think, high, and I find the state of the American short story in 1980 to be good."

From this group I was asked to choose the top twenty. Several stood out immediately as ones I had previously read and remembered as exceptional. After that the choice was harder, there being at least thirty all told I could wish to single out. There are, I see, ten men and ten women; this was not intentional. About half are from *The New Yorker*, which publishes fifty-two issues per year and a major portion of the country's short fiction, and will naturally get first look at much of the best of it. I have chosen without stricture as to subject, geography, periodical, or indeed author, where that is humanly possible. Where an author is already known and the body of already read work stands behind the specific story, I have considered that. I've also considered my prejudices — those known to me — though without much hope of conversion. I will accept any convention or breakdown of language if it is alive, obviously willed by the author rather than fortuitously dripped, and if it unites with its subject in the extra skin that language can give. The supreme story seems to me one so knitted that we cannot extract its single theme. As in life.

I'll discuss the following in that technique known as the "alphabetical."

Walter Abish's novels are often called avant-garde. They seem to me not to have enough linguistic or other shock for that, perhaps because in these days of *laissez faire* it's harder to be in the rear than in the front. "The Idea of Switzerland" is certainly less formalized than his other work, though it has a faint trace of his rhythmic repetitions, which when less constant seem to add more,

indeed real cogency and movement. Did I choose it in part because it reminded me pleasantly of the European short story? Indeed. It has the reek of history, of politics and of people who sweat out the past in dark brown corners long given over to that. Its worldly taint reminds one how so much of the American short story even now concerns itself with domestic family relations, and how often we still seem to go to foreign fiction for the world view.

Some American writers become hybrid through travel, while others are able to draw on that view while seeming not to leave home. "Inudo was probably the world's tallest Japanese-American," Max Apple's "Small Island Republics" begins. Inudo is also the only "ethnic" in this collection, and since his great-grandfather was born in California he not unsurprisingly spends his time trying to make his Americanism stick. Though this is a story that hops over the years, it has the sprightly brevity of an anecdote. Satire does that to our writers more than to most — unless they write novels, in which case they often overpay their dues. Apple is one of our few real satirists: I can't think of another like him. We have many jokesters. Some bog in heavy literary parody, some in their own plaintive antihero egos; most write for a constituency. The real mark of a satirist is in his or her choice of subject. The initial impulse, as in Swift and Orwell, is often as slender as a gag. The risk is topicality, and Apple's story has perhaps too much for what could be a cleaner scenario. But the choice of subject is a nourishingly eccentric one, and there is wit along the way. There's no telling what Apple, no mere humorist, may do. He should be watched.

Ann Beattie's people lead what used to be called amoral lives, while their whole preoccupation is moral, if narrowly so. Indeed, they are religious fanatics preoccupied with the sin of unhappiness. The guilt of drifting is upon them; though the malaise of drugging is the official symptom, that other unease lies heavy. In her earlier stories the narrative method drifted also, in counterpoint to the characters, as if only interminably unresolved length could uphold their rhythms and no story they inhabited could dare to make up its mind. In "Winter: 1978" this has focused and sharpened. Beattie has ever surer grasp of her world, and of course its conventions have become clearer to us. Her people know the terms of their own appeal — the wastrel glow of an intellectually fashionable hell to which the stupid or the poor need not

apply. Or, until recently, the old. Whether or not their hell is sufficient only to the day, and not yet imperial enough for greedier literary hopes, there have always been people like them, and Beattie's precision fascinates.

Is Robert Coover's "A Working Day" a send-up of the sad and hilarious yet sometimes exquisite repetitiousness of porn, here marvelously united with the perfect stylistic instrument, the ditto, ditto, yet ditto repetitiousness of the once nouvelle *nouvelle vague*? If you have seen Forty-second Street pornshop paperbacks or have read *The Story of O*, you may agree on the porn. If you recall how Robbe-Grillet's cinematic stop-time inches forward and retreats down a page, relentlessly engaging the metronome moment in a battle against too much meaning, you'll see the resemblance. Perhaps Coover, going Robbe-Grillet one better and exceeding his own intention (though I doubt this), has written an extraordinary exercise on the demonstrable connections between sadism and humility, torture and saintliness, authority and helplessness — and on perhaps half a dozen other paradoxes — yet in so doing, he has created, inch by rigorous inch, two characters who have turned, if in bas-relief, into real people, in a bedroom carved by these progressions into forever's brilliant "still."

If Vincent G. Dethier's "The Moth and the Primrose" had left out old Prout and the parson, a human framework whose presence I half resented on behalf of the flora and fauna, we might have had only a fine piece of what we have come to call nature writing, a genre I find too exclusionary for comfort and at the same time too loose in its metaphors. (Can we really trust wind, sea, and stars, plants and rocks, our own soma *and* molecular biology, when they all sing together similarly corybant, though under such diverse orchestrators as Loren Eiseley, Henry Beetle Hough, Lewis Thomas, and Henry David Thoreau?) This story reminds us of how seldom the anti-anthropomorphic emotion enters our serious imaginative work — or our lives? Perhaps we have relegated it to the galaxies, where it is not yet serious. Good to see it grounded, and several evolutionary steps below even James Agee's cows in "A Mother's Tale." The curiously healing pleasure is to find, as I do here, that it is an emotion.

"The Winter Father." Andre Dubus has found a fell phrase. Two stories about the new generation of divorced fathers appear in this collection, culled from among several more. Stories on this

subject were among the most affecting of the domestic tales, perhaps because vulnerable children were usually present. The pain seemed fresher than some, and the men so clumsily lorn. Yet we have had all that before, and in a great story, Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited." It took me a while to identify what was really new. There is a word that used to be applied to delicate feeling delicately responded to. Applied to women, and to modes of writing presumed to come out of the female situation, it came to be a pejorative. I don't use it so. But men are now writing — from the *sensibility*. "The Winter Father" is as masculine as need be. But the sensitively harbored details of an enforced domestic pattern are what you learn to watch.

Remember the "short short"? Some magazines and newspapers still run them; others scorn them as tricks. They are. But when the sleight of hand comes from a master — I believe Tolstoi wrote one once — it can be as satisfying as a final gambit. Mavis Gallant's "The Assembly" is a dialogue short enough to poise on the point of the mythical pin, though it contains no angels. You may have to diagram it for full savor — or even read it aloud with the aid of friends. It doesn't take long. "The Assembly" is like a Simenon too soon read on a long journey. Too short only for us.

Elizabeth Hardwick's "The Bookseller" is privileged reading, of a kind rare now that the journal, which in other times has had many guises — a daily gallery crowded with portraits, a religious meditation, even an art form — is much perceived as mere back-door revelation or psychic relief. She has time for conning the alphabet of sensation, time for recording it, and for here revisiting that happy, scruffy place in which the best books reside and the people have the peculiar durability of the transiently seen. They are presented as having already passed through the narrator's sieve, and we accept that, in the contemplative ease which the good journal provides. We travel the prose as nabobs once toured Europe, in the hands of a sturdy and elegant guide. The very pace of her prose is a reminder not of old times but of the continuous presence of literature in life.

Leroy and Norma Jean in "Shiloh" belong to those inarticulates necessarily distanced from any writer by gaps of education and/or intelligence. The genre's a hard one, its worst hazard being any hint of patronizing. In our generation, Flannery O'Connor bridged the gap best, perhaps because hellfire in one's cosmos

likely equalizes all. Humor helps but is dangerous. Language must synchronize but not be sacrificed. Bobbie Ann Mason does well in a natural, forthright way. I'd read it before. One remembers its small progressions. The ambiguity of the ending? Perhaps somewhat handled. One hopes that it was not edited.

I often think that Joseph McElroy ("The Future") wills his indications toward us as poets do their private metaphors: it's up to us. Here the method very much matches the subject — what a mother and a twelve-year-old son, living together apart from the father, hide from one another. Davey belongs somewhere in that legion of "divorced" children, but is himself, a hypersmart boarding-school kid, almost fatherly. The story is the harder to follow because the pair speak in the *lingua franca* of their own reticences. The "event" — a restaurant robbery at which they are present — is more baldly told, but the complexity is the more seductive side of the story.

Elizabeth McGrath's "Fogbound in Avalon" is a stunner. I use that word because it is how one might describe the narrator, a woman academic breaking with marriage and much else to return to her home town, St. John's, Newfoundland, to wrest with old friends, old house, and old wanderings. Wry, fierce, tough, she at times calls to mind those heroines of Christina Stead who arrive in this or that environs, to start the conquering or begin anew. There is the same bitterly intimate energy in the conversational tone of more than one of these colonials; one mulls its sources, finding it tonic, salutary. Perhaps we were such colonials, once.

I asked for help on Amelia Moseley's "The Mountains Where Cithaeron Is." (Cithaeron is where Oedipus as a babe was exposed to die, with a spike in him, and Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* is destroyed by the women for watching their mystic worship.) I distrust stories, or novels, that depend on preliminary quotes. This one is surely out of many recent isms, from fem to veg, yet it has its own dogged assurance, and, maybe, mandala, along with that commanding strictness in the narration which is always bracing for fantasy. It takes on much, and perhaps the boundaries aren't clear, but as we discussed it we found it more and more discussable, as I hope you will.

Alice Munro is a superb writer. Book after book arrives *live*. Her sagas are smaller than some from writers whom Canada more commonly regards as its major ones; but I've long since thought of

her work as part of world literature. "Wood," one of her best, I admire very much. Use the concrete, yes, but how many can, like this? How plain the language is, and how eventful. On second reading it delighted me more, a story one hopes will widen her American audience. When one has enough "wood," one can do anything.

Joyce Carol Oates's "Presque Isle," as the title indicates, is a story of milieu, one that we feel we almost already know ("the wealthy Scudders," "the camp"), as we also almost know this mother with her alcoholic "queen-bee" confusions, this daughter with her resultant ones, and even the husband, the disaffected James, who from a distance supplies the only "moral" stance the story will get — except from the reader. In this broken-down Sodom the flash of the two gays "going at it" confirms rather than surprises. All the conventions by which the daughter comes to be what she is are now here. Technically the story is almost rushed off its feet by the novelistic wisdom behind it; the economy is almost shorthand. The short stories of novelists are different; the pen becomes farsighted, or bifocal, rather than near. The stance widens, even in a shorter work. In "Presque Isle," if the people are inarticulate in their own way they have none of the winsomeness of the underdeveloped; each is a concept clearly preconceived. What illumines is the author's own romantic spirit, that of the true storyteller whom nothing amazes, to whom everything is new.

"The Shawl" is a long story, profoundly short. In it we walk with three victims of the Holocaust: Rose, who has the nipple and the shawl; Magda, the suckling; and Stella, the fourteen-year-old girl. Many have written of the Holocaust, never quite freeing themselves from reverential agony for the past. Cynthia Ozick invades it with intensity; it is her present. In a most remarkable evocation, it becomes ours.

Poets often keep the prose they write politely quiet, undemonstrative; the poems of a novelist may do the same — as if the real arena is elsewhere. "The St. Anthony Chorale," by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., is written with an "old-fashioned" ambling integrity; early-twentieth-century memoirs of the Lincoln Steffens era come to mind. The mode, of course, is sempiternal, but in these flashy times we don't see much of it. Here the setting — the South — may account for some of the moseying, in fine tune with the subject, a young man's undercurrents of inner change. The story's

lack of posturing is a joy. If the ending epiphany has just a touch of it, well, that's music for you.

"Wissler Remembers" is the teacher's story, anointed, as the best of these are, by love. Yes, the academic life can isolate the educated, the expressive, in a world of peers whose destinies are for the most part so similar and fixed that demiurges often do ply; but Richard Stern's windows are wide open, as Lionel Trilling's were in "Of This Time, Of That Place." He knows that, as R. V. Cassill phrased it, "Larchmoor is not the world." If it is a harder literary task to create interesting good people than bad ones, it is just as hard for the critic to characterize a story in which love outreaches sentiment. Richard Stern will show you how it's done.

Elizabeth Tallent's "Ice" is a story I myself asked to be added to the list sent me, having come upon it in my own reading. It remained in my mind. During that period, a person whose taste I respect — though it often differs from mine — asked, "Did you by any chance read —?" There is a suspending magic about it, which haunted us both.

Perhaps this is a good place to talk about the "typical" *New Yorker* short story, since the proportion of my inclusions from that magazine will give pain to some. There is no typical one, really, but I can describe what people think it is: a story of suburbia or other middle-class to "upper" milieu, which exists to record the delicate observation of the small fauna, terrors, and fatuities of domestic existence, sometimes leveled in with a larger terror — a death, say, or a mortal disease — so that we may respond to the seamlessness of life, and of the recorder's style. To move on casually from these stories, as we often do, is a guilt, since they are as often, if subduedly, about the guilt of moving on. Muted response is the virtue. Never break out. *The New Yorker* does publish such — and beautifully done, some of them are — but never exclusively. "Ice" is not one of them. Rather, it is made of shards stuck together like charms to keep down the violence, to close out the hidden knowledge. And the bear-dance, on what note did that tease me? The sound of the voice in Cocteau's film *Beauty and the Beast*: "*Bête. Bête.*"

John Updike's language seeks commonplace bases as steel filings seek iron. Where does feeling creep in, while one is watching? Gratefully, one can't quite say. A divorced father, his former wife, and their two sons are exercising their disposal rites on the attic

stuff of their former house, now to be sold. The wife's new husband "had been off in his old town, visiting his teen-age twins." The emotions are almost the ordinary ones that attach to objects in most people's lives; we may have had them or be on our way to them. What takes place here, in the small actions and judgments, may be more coherent than we could manage on our lonesome, but the language, however just, never exceeds. It is all arrestedly clear here, recognizable, though the relief may hurt. Art is not disturbing these people. "Still of Some Use" has it, though, in abiding resonance.

"Change" has the fierce humility of a man so close to his feelings he has to be humble about them. The words *shaky*, *shaken*, *shaking* are used over and over again, to disarm maybe us, maybe God, but Larry Woiwode's story centers in, on the neighbors, the narrator's wife, daughter, and newborn son, the city, with power sufficient to each, and a religious grace, shaky too, which will save us all from the lightning, if it can. A beautiful story indeed.

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I should mark what I do not see among the total 120. There are fewer city-focused stories; these have perhaps temporarily disappeared into television sociology. Though fields and barns abound, the husbandry is not always of the highest, though the ethic is. I saw not one story of black life, which in view of black theater, novels, poetry, and open black expression in all the arts, astounds me. I can scarcely believe either that no one is writing them or that none is publishable, so responsibility must rest with the magazines on which this book is built. I see also, as I do in private reading, that the level of respectable communicators all but brims over. As the books press toward the desk, one is stunned at how many people can now construct bright, representative, and coherent studies of life. It is clearly that way now in the story. However, my guess is that, down the ages, the incidence of true artists remains about the same.

These twenty are the real report. The short story marches as writers do — singly. The shape of the short story? There are these shapes. Nothing gives me more heart.

HORTENSE CALISHER



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