PRIZE STORIES 1989

THE O. HENRY AWARDS

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

"One of the most welcome signs of the literary spring is the appearance of the annual O. Henry Awards collection."—*Los Angeles Times*

Prize Stories
1989

THE
O. HENRY AWARDS

Edited and with
an Introduction by

William Abrahams

ANCHOR BOOKS
DOUBLEDAY
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND

AN ANCHOR BOOK
PUBLISHED BY DOUBLEDAY
a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.
666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10103

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Prize stories. 1947–
New York, etc. Doubleday.
v. 22 cm.
Annual.
The O. Henry awards.
None published 1952–53.
Continues: O. Henry memorial award prize stories.
ISSN 0079-5453 = Prize stories
1. Short stories, American—Collected works.
PZ1.011 813'.01'08—dc19 21-9372
MARC-S
Library of Congress [8804r83]rev4

ISBN 0-385-24634-X (pbk.)

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
APRIL 1989

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3

BG

Publisher's Note

This volume is the sixty-ninth in the O. Henry Memorial Award series.

In 1918, the Society of Arts and Sciences met to vote upon a monument to the master of the short story, O. Henry. They decided that this memorial should be in the form of two prizes for the best short stories published by American authors in American magazines during the year 1919. From this beginning, the memorial developed into an annual anthology of outstanding short stories by American authors, published, with the exception of the years 1952 and 1953, by Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Blanche Colton Williams, one of the founders of the awards, was editor from 1919 to 1932; Harry Hansen from 1933 to 1940; Herschel Brickell from 1941 to 1951. The annual collection did not appear in 1952 and 1953, when the continuity of the series was interrupted by the death of Herschel Brickell. Paul Engle was editor from 1954 to 1959 with Hanson Martin co-editor in the years 1954 to 1960; Mary Stegner in 1960; Richard Poirier from 1961 to 1966, with assistance from and co-editorship with William Abrahams from 1964 to 1966. William Abrahams became editor of the series in 1967.

In 1970 Doubleday published under Mr. Abrahams' editorship *Fifty Years of the American Short Story,* and in 1981, *Prize Stories of the Seventies.* Both are collections of stories selected from this series.

The stories chosen for this volume were published in the pe-

riod from the summer of 1987 to the summer of 1988. A list of the magazines consulted appears at the back of the book. The choice of stories and the selection of prize winners are exclusively the responsibility of the editor. Biographical material is based on information provided by the contributors and obtained from standard works of reference.

Introduction

We live in an age of insatiable publicity, when there is hardly an aspect of contemporary life, from politics to popcorn, that is safe from its voracious reach. It is not surprising, therefore, that even the writing of the short story, that private, personal, and idiosyncratic literary achievement, has become "a target of opportunity." The emphasis, predictably, is on the writers themselves—as people, so to speak—and only incidentally on what they actually have written. Indeed, it is startling to realize how little publicity attaches to the particular story itself, even when its author has become, temporarily, "a story," someone to be written about and photographed.

We have had alarming examples of the rite in operation: each season one or two young writers, fresh from university creative writing courses or from comparable strategic venues, are magically seized upon, taken up, thrust into the limelight, and then, having had their moment there, are let go, dropped, making way for the new discovery—and the talent that blazed up in those early stories seems to have burned out. That is sad enough in itself—surely so for the sacrificial victim—but what is even more deplorable is the notion that each season represents a fashion in stories—the year of the Minimum alternating with the year of the Maximum, as it were—and only *those* need to be written (or read) to be in vogue. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Beyond fashion, the truth about the American short story in recent decades—and here, of course, I am generalizing from a

wide-range perspective—is that it has been (and continues to be) accessible to many voices, expressive in many different modes, tones, themes, styles, structures, and concerns. Yet for all their individual differences, these stories do, whether consciously and deliberately or obliquely and with no such overt intention, reflect something of the time, our time, in which they are written and in which we live. That indeed is part of their fascination, for they present aspects of our time to us in ways that we may have only dimly perceived before. And at a great remove from the noisy misperceptions broadcast to us in official stereotypes, condescensions, platitudes, and slogans. A story, making no claims beyond itself, can illuminate experience, rarefied or commonplace, with the sort of truthfulness that doesn't figure in the calculations of communicators.

Certainly this is true of the twenty stories assembled in the present volume. The tradition of the O. Henry series, going back almost seventy years, dictates that three of the stories should be singled out as first, second, and third prizewinners, and that has been done. But I hasten to add that all twenty included here are O. Henry Award stories, and their placement is in no way meant to suggest an order of merit. The arrangement is simply aimed at showing to best advantage the variety in the contemporary American short story. Now and later they are here to be discovered, or as I would prefer to say, to be explored.

We are all, in the matter of short stories, explorers. For readers and writers, each in their own way, the story represents a kind of continuing exploration. One comes to it for its revelation of a truth of its own, however familiar the material out of which it is created may at first seem to be. In fact, if a story were no more than a mirror of ourselves, it would hardly survive a first reading. We would know it all already, and the individual secret would remain out of reach. Even the most dexterous manipulations of the mirror can't conceal stereotyped formulas—from which we may draw a reasonable conclusion: that a manufac-

tured story can be programmed, but a created story, such as those here, cannot.

Reading these twenty stories, one recognizes the double nature of the exploration involved: the writer blazes the trail, the reader is persuaded to follow it. Does the writer, beginning the story, committing himself or herself to a first sentence—that significant blaze!—does the writer know where, ultimately, the trail will lead? Let us acknowledge an element of mystery here, a margin of meaning beyond what a writer may at first consciously have intended (or what a reader may have expected).

Consider, as a single classic example, the story "House Hunting" by Joyce Carol Oates. The title itself evokes a humdrum, or thrilling, or disturbing quasi-universal experience. And the elements of Ms. Oates's story are, on the face of it, quite simple: a young married couple who have recently lost their infant child; a decision in response to this tragedy to move across the country and resettle; the husband going on ahead as a kind of advance party to look for a house where they will resume the ordered pattern of their lives. Thus summed up, how ordinary and predictable the story might seem; yet how unpredictable and extraordinary it proves to be, and not simply because the author, as who does not already know, is so much the master of her art. Very subtly (and I do not propose to go into the details that are so essential a part of it) the hunt for a house moves beyond the boundaries of its announced subject. Yes, the hunt goes on, but something more is being sought. House hunting, we gradually apprehend, becomes a metaphor for life itself, and the house a habitation for the soul. The enigma of creativity accounts for much, and it seems plausible to say that Ms. Oates was exploring the story even as she was writing it.

I am certain, too, that something comparable might be discerned in each of these stories—but I do not mean to indulge in an editor's privilege to scrutinize what ought first to be enjoyed. There remains only to say of all twenty stories that they have been chosen not to illustrate a point or confirm a theme, but

simply for their special, individual excellences. I leave to readers the pleasure of discovering those for themselves.

This year for the first time the biographies of the authors have been gathered together in a special section at the end of the book, along with comments by several of them about how the stories came to be written.

Invaluable assistance in preparing this volume has come from John M. Dean in California, and from Sally Arteseros and Teresa Scala in New York.

WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

Contents

Peacocks

ERNEST J. FINNEY

When he ran he kept his eyes closed as long as he could. The connection between himself and the dirt path that paralleled the orchard was what kept him from running into a tree. The loamy soil was just soft enough to carry his heelprint. Enough to keep the connection. On the other side of the path was the levee that kept the water in the slough away from the orchard. Whenever he felt himself veering up the bank, he forced himself to keep his eyes shut until he was sure he was back on the path by the plum trees his grandfather had planted. He knew them as well as anyone could. He'd been up in every single tree. He was well connected with the orchard and his grandfather.

It was easy keeping his eyes closed because he knew where he was going. He could run forever this way: his feet kept sending his imagination the right direction. But the pain was getting worse, his kidneys were burning red hot. It was hard to breathe, but he made himself keep going. He wanted to make it all the way back to the house for the first time. Grandpa would be sitting on the porch waiting, watching his pets. He tried to outrun it, went faster. He must be almost past the last section, Queen Rosas. When the bile started coming up he remembered what Jesse, his coach, said: it doesn't really hurt until after you stop, so keep going. Then he started vomiting and opened his eyes so he wouldn't get any on his shoes. He leaned forward, his

arms stiff against his knees, spitting, trying to get it all out. Gasping, feeling his whole body hurt. When he could breathe, he stood up and started for the house. He still had another half hour left of his workout.

He could see the roof. The house was just right for the two of them. All on one floor, so his grandfather didn't have to climb steps, like in the main house. Each had his own door off his bedroom into the bathroom. Plenty of privacy for his grandfather, who never came out into the kitchen in the long johns he wore summer and winter. He dressed for his first cup of coffee. The place was small enough to heat easily in the winter and cool with one fan in the summer. He had set up his telescope on a platform outside the attic window. And the porch was perfect for his grandfather, two steps from the ground and his peafowl.

Grandpa was watching him come up. The peafowl were pecking and scratching in the flower bed. The cocks were too young to have any of the big feathers. He got a kick out of how his grandfather treated them. Named the three males after the Three Stooges. The nine females had no names. Had trained Moe to hop up on the porch rail and beg for the cracked corn he kept in his shirt pocket.

He started out first. "Well, how's the stock, are they all fed and watered? Getting ready to roost for the night?" He untied the rope around his waist and started jumping, easy, just lifting the toes of his shoes enough to let the rope pass under.

"Can't say," Grandpa answered. "They're so slow. If they don't hurry up and grow some of those tail feathers I'm ready to give up on them. I won't be responsible. They're just like chickens.

"Now that I'm semiretired and only a consultant in the plum business, I thought I'd raise these birds. I'd seen them in the catalogue for years, but never felt I was ready to buy." Elmo kept jumping, the sound of his grandfather's voice caught up in the rhythm that the rope and his feet were moving to. They both knew they had heard this before. "I thought they were a sign of

prosperity: when a person raised something he wasn't planning on eating and selling, it gave you a certain distinction."

Elmo looked over at his grandfather. He'd changed again. Not just thinner than before, but he seemed like he was shrinking too. He was shorter than the six and a half feet he used to be. Elmo himself still had a foot to go to catch up, but there wasn't the difference there used to be.

When he heard the car, it was too close for him to get away. He kept jumping, faster now, trying not to watch her ease out of the car. Her stomach was so big she had the seat all the way back. She reached inside for the hot dish with a blue towel over the top. Grandpa had stood up, stiff-legged, and he went to meet her. "Well, Greta, you didn't have to go to any trouble, but we appreciate it, of course." She stopped nearly every day with something.

"It's no trouble," she said.

He turned the rope slower, not to miss anything.

Grandpa took the bowl. "I got the others washed up," he said. "I'll get them."

"That would be nice. I forget where they are. I keep looking for them."

"I got a little behind," he said, opening the screen door with his foot, carrying the bowl with both hands.

She turned awkwardly to watch Elmo jump. It looked like she was leaning back so far, to compensate for her stomach, that she would go over backwards. "How have you been, Elmo?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

"We don't see you much any more."

He jumped slow now, barely bringing the slack loop around. "I've been busy," he said. Then he heard the pickup. He didn't turn around, just kept jumping. James stopped right next to him, so he had to bring his arm in to miss tangling the rope on the truck mirror.

"Like old home week," James said. Grandpa came out the

screen door carrying a cardboard box rattling with Pyrex bowls and tin piepans. Elmo kept jumping.

"What I want to know is why don't you two come up and eat with us instead of making her bring the food down to you?"

The rope caught on Elmo's head and he let it hang on his shoulders, breathing hard. "We don't ask her to bring it," he said.

"Well, she can stop, then," James said.

"I don't mind," Greta said. "It's only a couple of miles."

"How did the pruning go?" Grandpa asked James, taking the box over to Greta's car.

"We're half done. Another three weeks, unless we can get the prima donna to help."

Elmo didn't answer; he wasn't going to fall into that trap again. "I do my share" sounded like an admission of guilt when he said it to James. And then James would snicker. The sound made him want to close his eyes.

James got out of the truck, hooked the heel of his boot on the bumper. He had a gut on him now. Almost as big as Greta's. His leather belt cut into the middle of it as if it were separating a couple of sausages. James looked bigger than any two heavyweights Elmo had ever seen. "What exactly have you been doing?" James asked. "Let's hear it; I'm interested."

Elmo saw the look on Grandpa's face, as if he was going to see something awful. Greta was holding her stomach from underneath with both hands. "Ever since we've come back from our honeymoon, you act like you're a guest here. When I can find you. You live down here—that's all right with me—but you're not doing your share. Those plum trees can't take care of themselves. Grandpa can't work any more. Greta can't either. That leaves you and me."

He didn't have to answer; he could just look at James. Infuriate him. His face would turn as red as the bulb on the porch thermometer. James was too easy. "I've been pretty busy," he said. "Going to school." Saying it out loud, he realized he'd been

catching the school bus for eleven years now. It sounded like he needed more, so he added, "I was elected class president. I have to stay for council meetings. And I have sports."

James snickered. "What sports?" He'd been All League in his freshman year, playing football. All State in the shotput.

"I'm on the boxing team."

James laughed out loud. Elmo felt himself start to lose the connection he had with the ground.

"I had to sign a card," Grandpa said. "He's got a punching bag in the shed. I've got four clippings from the school paper too, if you want to see them."

"When are you going to fight next?" James asked.

There was no way out. "Next month at the Elks'."

"I've got to see that," James said, getting back in the truck. "Come on, let's go," he yelled over to Greta.

"That woman can cook," Grandpa said. He'd barely touched the Swiss steak Greta had brought over. Elmo was sopping up the last of the gravy with his fifth piece of bread. "Maybe we ought to go up there for dinner when she invites us. Say on a Sunday."

"You go ahead," Elmo said.

"He's your brother."

"Remember when we went up there?"

"It takes a lot of adjustment when you're first married," Grandpa said. "Two different people."

"Did you ever slap around our grandmother?" Elmo asked. He had to ask; it was worse not to. "I was just wondering," he added.

Grandpa took his time answering. "I was guilty of a lot of things, but not that."

They hadn't seen anything that time. Just heard the yelling, waiting for someone to open the door. Greta had been crying, face pink, eyes floating in tears. They sat down at the table and James started. "I never met anyone so stupid. I tell her to pick

up my boots and get the case of shotgun shells I ordered. She forgets both of them. Drives all the way into town for a hot fudge sundae. Dumb."

"That's not necessary," Grandpa said.

"It is, believe me. She's stupid."

"If anyone is stupid it's you, James," Elmo said. "She graduated from high school; you didn't."

"Well, well," James said, smiling, "look who's speaking up."

"That's enough," Greta said.

"You're not big enough to take seriously," James said to Elmo.

No one said a word the rest of the dinner. He wouldn't go back. He didn't want to be connected with that business.

The next time, he came home from school and Greta was there, her lip cut, her eye swollen almost closed. Grandpa was putting hot cloths on the side of her face. "Do this for me, Elmo; I'm going to talk to James." He had no choice. He squeezed the cloth out, folded it into a rectangle, and put it over her eye. What was the connection between them? Earlier she had been like an older sister to him. No. That's what he made up for his grandfather, after she married James. But she should have married him—that's what he thought at the time. At fourteen. With seven years' difference between them. She should have waited for him. But now the connection between them was much less. He was almost a spectator. Someone who was watching a movie, then went home when it was over. "Oh, Elmo," she said, taking hold of his wrist. He didn't know what to do, how to act. He didn't understand this. How could anyone do something like that if he loved a person? Would he ever do that?

When Grandpa came home, she went back up to the house. "I told him," Grandpa said, "what kind of a man it took to hit a woman. I made him listen. Made it as plain as I could. I explained I wasn't going to have anyone on my place like that. It's not you boys' yet."

It stopped for a couple of months. Then Greta went to the