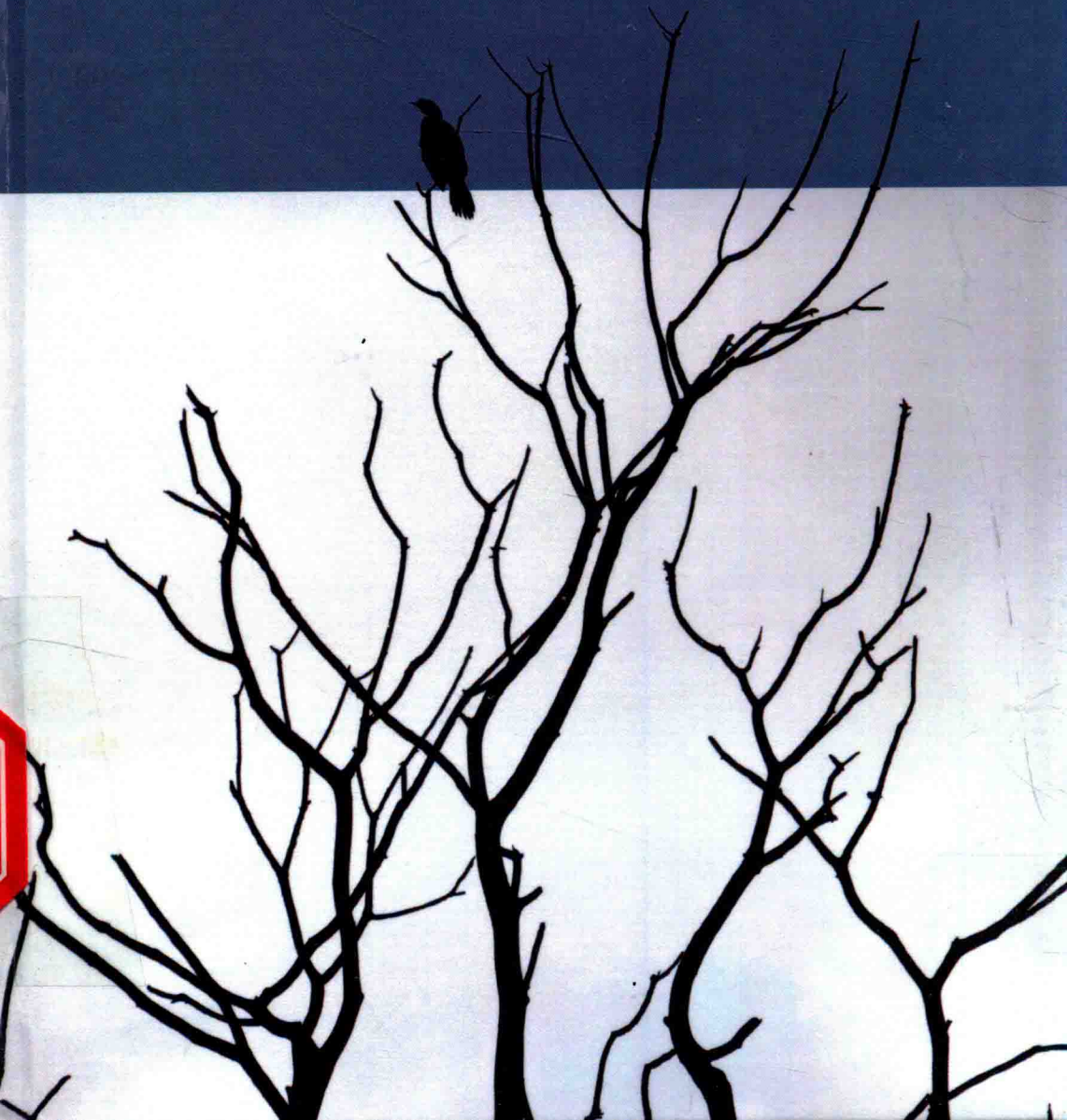
CRITICAL INSIGHTS

American Short Story

Edited by Michael Cocchiarale *and* Scott D. Emmert



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American Short Story

About This Volume

Michael Cocchiarale & Scott D. Emmert

When writing a short story, an author confronts—and must eventually "answer"—a dizzying array of questions. Where to begin? Where to end? Whose story is this, and what is the best point of view from which to tell it? Is this character or scene or image really needed? What is the right word to use here and here and here? One wrong choice—one "incorrect answer"—and the story, though it may be strong in so many other respects, could very well fail.

Fortunately, far less anxiety attends the construction of a scholarly collection about the short story genre. For one thing, the burden of storytelling falls upon—and has been expertly shouldered by—our fourteen wonderful contributors. For another, this collection—like all volumes in the Critical Insights series—follows a time-tested format. It opens with four special chapters: a cultural/historical context chapter on the development of the short story genre; a critical reception essay that reviews the influential scholarship; a critical lens chapter that examines a representative text from a specific scholarly perspective; and a comparison/contrast chapter that conducts a comparative analysis of two significant works. Following these four special chapters are ten chapters on various writers and works that span the history of the short story genre.

Although we benefited from an established outline and a roster of insightful scholars, we still had to consider how to best tell the long and complicated story of the American short story in just fourteen chapters. We quickly realized that this volume, whatever its final shape, could never come close to telling the whole story. No single book ever could. We believe, though, that this collection provides thoughtful, accessible essays that, taken together, provide a firm sense of the range of thematic, stylistic, and formal developments of the American short story over the past two hundred years. We are confident that readers may profitably begin or continue their

exploration of the short story in America with these essays, learning from them—as we did—a great deal.

After our general introduction, the volume continues with Jennifer J. Smith's "The Short Story Cycle in American Fiction," which provides necessary cultural/historical context for the genre. In an overview that moves from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Junot Diaz, Smith shows how the history of the American short story can be understood by studying book-length collections of interrelated stories. In the next chapter, "The Mystery of Existence: The American Short Story in Criticism and Theory," Nicholas Birns provides a useful, comprehensive overview of two centuries' worth of scholarship on the American short story. In "Postcolonial Literature Post-Proulx: How a Border-Crossing Short Story Writer Reconditions the Category," Hannah Jocelyn examines the short stories of Annie Proulx through the surprising lens of postcolonial criticism and, in the process, establishes new ways of thinking about this contemporary virtuoso. In "The Metafiction of Tim O'Brien and Richard Russo," Stacy Esch defines metafiction as a story that "draws attention to its own creation" and illustrates how it works in short stories by Russo and O'Brien, two of our most lauded contemporary writers.

Next, the volume turns to ten essays that take a variety of approaches. Some revisit often-studied works and writers, others bring attention to forgotten or neglected stories and writers, and still others develop insights on significant contemporary authors. The first two of these essays focus on canonical late-nineteenth-century writers. In "Knowledge and Power in Henry James' 'In the Cage,'" Linda Simon examines a lesser-known work by the master. The story, as Simon demonstrates, seems on the surface to be about the ordinary daydreams of a young working-class woman (a telegraph operator) but, when examined further, reveals a complicated exploration of "class, power, and knowledge." In the next essay, "'The Blue Hotel' and Stephen Crane's American Violence," Marc Dziak reconsiders Crane's often-anthologized work to delineate Old West masculine expectations and connect them to the naturalist theme of determinism.

The next five chapters take up the aesthetic achievements of short story writers in the early to mid-twentieth century. Three of these essays examine lesser- or little-known work by both canonical and obscure writers. In "'A Study in Pain': Musical Variations and Ernest Hemingway's 'The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio,'" Nicole J. Camastra analyzes one of Hemingway's often overlooked stories to demonstrate how "tempered optimism" emerges through the writer's artful "appropriation of the musical genre of variations." Robert C. Evans' chapter, "'The Country in the Woman': 'Voice' in a 'New' Story by Zora Neale Hurston and the Revival of Formalist Criticism," studies a newly discovered work by the African American writer. Through close, careful reading, Evans shows how specific language choices (in dialogue and imagery) and structural strategies (narration, juxtaposition) make this story one that could very well surge to the top of the list of Hurston favorites. In the following essay, "The 'Vanishing American': Remembering Weldon Kees' Short Fiction," Ola Madhour examines the work of an under-appreciated short story writer who gave up the genre for poetry. Although Kees was, according to Madhour, "a misfit and a late modernist, a man burdened by . . . a dark, brooding personality with a pessimistic view of the world," he deserves more scholarly attention for his unique contribution to the American short story.

The other two chapters on mid-twentieth-century American short fiction focus on more familiar works and writers. Richard Wright is the subject of McKinley E. Melton's essay, "Famine in the Cabin: Reading the Hungry in Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*." Melton reveals how imagery of hunger and thirst highlight racial injustice, while lending formal cohesion to Wright's story cycle. Rounding out this section is "Girls in Search of a Viable Identity in Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples*," Imola Bulgozdi's essay on the Southern writer's famous short story cycle and the gender roles key characters either assume or transgress.

The three final essays in the volume explore the thematic and generic diversity richly represented in short stories by contemporary American authors. In "Identity and Globalization in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth,'" Rossitsa Terzieva-Artemis

considers a short story by the highly lauded Lahiri through the lens of postcolonial criticism. Terzieva-Artemis looks carefully at the story's protagonist—a woman caught between the traditional world of her Indian relations and the fast-paced lifestyle of contemporary America. Next, Tara E. Friedman, in "Sherman Alexie's Defiant Brand of Humor in *Blasphemy*," interprets old and new stories in order to define the writer's distinctive—and frequently outrageous—brand of humor. In the volume's final chapter, "Reading Short Short Stories, Seriously," Randall Brown writes about the often-read, though seldom-studied, sub-genre of micro fiction. In this lively and accessible essay, Brown proves, through careful readings of representative texts by noted short short writers, that every word counts in numerous, delightful ways.

This collection covers much important ground; however, as previously mentioned, it would take many volumes to tell the whole story of the short story in all its depth and complexity. Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Kate Chopin, Charles Chesnutt, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, Grace Paley, and so many others who have been crucial to the development of the American short story over the last two hundred years garner little (if any) consideration in these essays (though as the reader of other, similar collections will quickly find out, these writers do not suffer from lack of attention). Nonetheless, this volume tells a compelling story—one that deepens our understanding of America's own literary genre and offers subtle interpretations for students and teachers to consider. What is more, these essays point out where further discussion could continue the always unfolding tale of the American short story.

On the American Short Story

Michael Cocchiarale & Scott D. Emmert

The American short story has its own richly fascinating story, one that had its start nearly two hundred years ago. But rather than tell this narrative from the beginning, we will start (as short fiction so often does) *in medias res*—"in the middle of things"—with a scene of palpable tension. For the last several years, two seemingly contradictory assertions have been made about the short story. On the one hand, the genre is understood as being in the midst of a glorious rebirth. On the other hand, the short story is seen as gravely ill, if not on its deathbed. Each of these sharply conflicting narratives contains more than a seed of truth about the short story in our time and its history in America.

Powerful evidence of the genre's good health appeared in 2013, when Canadian writer Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize for Literature for her achievement as a "master of the contemporary short story" ("Nobel"). The *New York Times* report on the award noted that "Ms. Munro's honor [may show] that the short story [is] entering a golden age; most Nobel winners tend to focus on novels or poems" (Bosman). The recognition of Munro's achievements might well be read as an emphatic indication that the world is finally acknowledging the vibrancy of the short story.

But one need not look to major awards to make the argument that the short story, especially in North America, is bubbling with life. Over the past fifty years or more, many wonderful and enduring stories have been produced. Many writers—Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Ha Jin, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to name just some of the most notable—honed their skills in MFA programs. These programs, which seem to grow in number by the day, have traditionally emphasized the composition of short fiction instead of novels. Short stories also enjoy support in the literary marketplace in which respected and well-paying popular magazines, like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, and a great number

of so-called little magazines and online journals (such as *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, and *Narrative*) regularly publish high-quality short fiction. Seen in this light, Munro's Nobel Prize for short fiction is not a bolt out of the blue; rather, it is belated recognition that the story is (and has for a long time been) alive and well.

Others, however, tell the tale not of the short story's robust health, but of its impending demise. As guest editor of *The Best American Short Stories* in 2007, Stephen King found much short fiction to admire, yet he could not keep from saying then what many might argue still seems true in 2015: "Once," he writes, "in the days of the old *Saturday Evening Post*, short fiction was a stadium act; now it can barely fill a coffeehouse and often performs in the company of nothing more than an acoustic guitar and a mouth organ." His conclusion?: "So—American short story alive? Check. American short story well? Sorry, no, can't say so." King believes, in short, that the short story has fallen on hard times—that is, it has been reduced to an inconsequential art practiced by few and read by even fewer. A. O. Scott, in a *New York Times* piece from 2009, succinctly sums up this disheartening perspective:

> To call an American writer a master of the short story can be taken at best as faint praise, or at worst as an insult . . . . The short story often looks like a minor or even vestigial literary form, redolent of M.F.A.-mill make-work and artistic caution. A good story may survive as classroom fodder or be appreciated as an interesting exercise, an étude rather than a sonata or a symphony.

In the early twenty-first century, the short story seems to exist at the intersection of these two narratives. The short story is a crucial component of our national aesthetic, commanding the increasing respect of its devotees. At the same time, the story's audience continues to shrink. Fewer national magazine markets exist that pay story writers what they deserve for their work. Fewer and fewer major publishing houses are willing to take a chance on story collections for the simple, yet all-important fact that (with a few notable exceptions) they don't make money. Those rare writers fortunate enough to sell a collection typically move on to the more

critically respected and, they hope, financially lucrative world of novel-writing. In short, at this point in American literary history, the short story maintains a curious, contradictory existence: it is both dying and thriving.

* * *

The short story is the most recent of literary genres, great-grandchild of the epic poem and younger sibling of the novel. The fables of Aesop, the stories spun by Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights*, the verse narratives of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*—these are just some of the most noteworthy forebears of the short story we know today. Nevertheless, the genre is, as Alfred Bendixen asserts, "an American invention" (3), one that begins with Washington Irving and *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819), a volume that features "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." Although heavily indebted to German sources, these two tales were distinctly American in content, setting, and theme. Irving became enormously popular after the publication of the *Sketch Book*, and both "Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle" continue to be enjoyed today for their sly wit and social insight. Joining Irving as an early innovator in American short fiction is Nathaniel Hawthorne. Perhaps best known to students as the author of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1851), Hawthorne began his career as a writer of fantastical stories such as "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), "The Birthmark" (1843), and "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844). His "tales" of distant times and places (not all of them American) often suggest the simple allegorical alliance of detail with idea; however, beneath the surface works an almost brooding imagination that refuses to oversimplify human emotions and motives. Irving and Hawthorne demonstrated that there was a rich American landscape—historical, geographical, and psychological—that short fiction could map both quickly and deeply.

As important as Irving and Hawthorne are to the genre's early development, Edgar Allan Poe was the writer who first described what he thought a story should do. In his second, May 1842 review

of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe offers his famous "unity of effect" thesis:

> A skilful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain single effect to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, and discusses them in such a tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very first sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then in the very first step he has committed a blunder. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (647)

By showing how the writing of short stories is akin to a science, Poe desires to distinguish the entertainer from the serious artist. This "single effect" aesthetic has influenced many writers of literary short fiction for over 150 years, though ironically in a later essay, "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), Poe further developed his aesthetic theory by referring most often not to fiction but to his own poem, "The Raven." For all of his thinking about the composition of short stories, Poe saw poetry as, at least somewhat, superior to fiction. Furthermore, in his first review of *Twice-Told Tales* in April 1842, Poe laments that, with few exceptions, "we have had no American tales of high merit" (643). In antebellum America, he echoes current-day claims about the short story: in its literary promise, it is an exciting genre that should appeal to dedicated artists, but in its seemingly easy-to-write appearance, it is a temptation for hacks: "Of twattle called tale-writing we have had, perhaps, more than enough" (643). Even for Poe, it seems, the short story could be both vibrant and moribund.

By the mid-nineteenth century, and especially with the expansion of the publishing industry and the literary marketplace before and after the Civil War, the American short story came to maturity, with realistic dramas of the burgeoning American scene. Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), for example, is a realistic story set in contemporary times. It features a lowly character—a copyist in a law office—who one day quite mysteriously

decides not to do the mundane work that is required of him. Unlike Hawthorne's stories, which deal with far away times and magical worlds, Melville's piece focuses on the Wall Street of the mid-nineteenth century and its dehumanizing effects on the individual. In a similar vein, Rebecca Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) presents a grim account of a poor, dehumanized mill worker, whose artistic ambitions are thwarted because of his wage-slave status. This groundbreaking piece, which bridges the gap between the romantic writing of the earlier generation and the realism and naturalism to come, provides readers with a searing critique of the injustices of mid-nineteenth-century American life.

Two prominent realist writers, Henry James and Mark Twain, further developed the short story in America with the praise and support of William Dean Howells, their friend as well as a leading literary critic of the day. Yet, early in his career, and despite becoming an accomplished writer of short stories himself, Howells was ambivalent about the genre. On the one hand, he trumpeted the "American excellence in short stories," enthusing: "We should, upon the whole, be disposed to rank American short stories only below those of such Russian writers we have read" (Howells 67). On the other hand, he viewed short story writing as apprentice work in that the "novelette," or short story, "may come from youth and the first acquaintance with life, but the novel is of years and experience" (65). Near the end of his life, however, he unabashedly praised the work of the writers whose stories he collected in *The Great Modern American Short Stories: An Anthology* (1921). But even as he steadily gained appreciation for the American short story, Howells at times suggested—as many do today—that the novel should be taken more seriously. This conflicted view was shared by others in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Michael Lund, for example, explains that a number of critics in this period found short stories lacking in "'seriousness'" (115) and depending for appeal on the truncated attention spans of an increasingly hurried American populace.

Although some critics questioned the literary standing of short fiction, others praised developments in the genre as America's

unique contribution to world literature in that stories appearing in the country's booming number of magazines and newspapers reflected "'the American temperament'" (Lund 115). What is more, these critics took note of new voices the short story allowed into the nation's literature. Female regionalist writers in particular dramatized changes in the lives of America's women and the distinctive places they inhabited. Stories by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman—to name the most notable—were not only positively reviewed at the time, but have also become important contributions to the canon. What is more, the voices of ethnic and racial minorities spoke out loudly and clearly during this time in short fiction by Charles Chesnutt, who, to borrow a subtitle from one of his collections, wrote "stories of the color line"; Abraham Cahan, who depicted the experiences of Jewish immigrants; and Sui Sin Far, who penned tales about Chinese Americans.

Alongside developments in literary regionalism and ethnic literature in the decades following the Civil War, short fiction writers created a new aesthetic—literary naturalism—by depicting characters at the mercy of large, far-off forces. A feeling of individual powerlessness gripped a considerable portion of the national imagination as immigration, industrialization, and the rapid swelling of cities continued to transform the country in unprecedented ways. The forces of the modern world that seemed to determine an individual's fate (regardless of socio-economic background) are dramatized in short stories by literary naturalists such as Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Edith Wharton. These writers demonstrate how the genre has adapted in order to express the dominant concerns and pressing anxieties of Americans plunging headlong into a bewildering modern world. By the end of the century, then, there was ample evidence that the multiregional, multicultural, multiethnic United States seemed especially well suited for a pluralistic literary genre.

The short story in America continued to develop in the twentieth century before and after the First World War. Popular magazines abounded in this era, publishing short fiction, much of which is

still worth reading. One of the most successful short story writers was William Sydney Porter, who, under the pen name O. Henry, produced original and memorable stories using a popular fiction formula of tightly constructed plots, plenty of high drama, and surprise endings. Other writers such as Ring Lardner, particularly with the increasingly popular subject of sports, crafted from common American experience and interests short stories that still amuse and nettle.

But it was in the decades between the world wars that the American short story went global, the result of the innovative, idiosyncratic approaches of the modernists. More mentioned perhaps than read, Gertrude Stein developed an anti-linear style filled with simple diction and deliberate repetitions, and, in the process, made an evocative kind of story suited for modern life. Her inventions are brilliantly on display in *Three Lives* (1909), which is comprised of long stories focused on lower-class female characters. Influenced by Stein, Sherwood Anderson, author of the classic collection *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), conducted his own experiments with the story form. In his *Memoirs*, Anderson described his impressionistic aesthetic, which radically de-emphasizes the reliance on plot—the sequence of events:

> What is wanted is a new looseness; and in *Winesburg* I had made my own form. There were individual tales but all about lives in some way connected. By this method I did succeed, I think, in giving the feeling of the life of a boy growing into young manhood in a town. Life is a loose flowing thing. There are no plot stories in life. (289)

Other significant modernist writers established their own stylistic and thematic territory. Willa Cather, best known for classic novels such as *My Antonia* (1918), began her career by writing and publishing short stories, many of which were about art and artists. "Paul's Case" (1905), perhaps her most frequently anthologized story, depicts an adolescent's tragic search for a better world beyond the middle-class banalities of his Pittsburgh neighborhood. F. Scott Fitzgerald, in work often driven less by artistic ambition than by the hope for a big pay day, chronicled his times in heart-wrenching

fashion. His strongest short stories, such as "Winter Dreams" (1922) and "Babylon Revisited" (1931), are powerful treatments of the Jazz Age and its melancholic after-effects. Though known most for his accomplishments as a novelist, William Faulkner also wrote many memorable short stories and created astonishing, book-length story cycles, such as *The Unvanquished* (1938) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

Arguably the most influential American short story writer of the period, however, was Ernest Hemingway. Like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Cather, and others, Hemingway wrote impressive novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). However, a strong case can be made that his greatest achievements were in short fiction. Indeed, *In Our Time* (1925), a genre-bending collection of stories and vignettes, was the writer's first major book. In *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway, though influenced by Stein and Anderson, clearly articulated his own powerful aesthetic:

> If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (192)

A consummate stylist—a writer who valued simplicity, subtlety, and subtext—Hemingway laid the ground work for a wide variety of fictional developments, from the hardboiled detective genre to the avant-garde minimalism that came into vogue in the seventies and eighties.

Looking back at American literature after the Second World War, the novel may be the genre to first strike the eye. Novelists such as Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and John Updike penned commodious books to express America's ample ambitions and stubborn contradictions. Furthermore, in their most famous novels, J. D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, and Joseph Heller challenged prevailing views on a variety of subjects such as adolescence, sports, and war respectively. Still, most of these novelists were also highly accomplished writers of short stories. Malamud, for example, won

the National Book Award for the story collection *The Magic Barrel* (1958). Updike, whose short fiction "provides a comprehensive chronicle of the metamorphosis of middle-class domesticity in an era of greater sexual freedom, rising marital discord, heightened spiritual uncertainty, and increased social unrest" (Luscher 345), won the 2006 Rea Award, given to a writer who has made a "significant contribution in the discipline of the short story as an art form" (*Rea Award*). Moreover, a number of other mid-century American writers are best known primarily for their short story craft, among them John Cheever and Flannery O'Connor. Cheever, who published more than a hundred stories in *The New Yorker* over a nearly fifty-year period (Michaud), wrote often of the dark side of suburbia. In frequently anthologized stories such as "Oh Youth and Beauty!" (1953) and "The Swimmer" (1964), for example, Cheever tells tales of men who, because of alcohol or extramarital affairs or the refusal to act their age, meet tragic ends. O'Connor, a Catholic and a keen observer of the rural South, wrote classics such as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1955) and "Good Country People" (1955), which expose the spiritual myopia of their main characters while leaving open the possibility of their redemption. In both novels and stories, writers pictured post-World War II (and post-atomic bomb) America—its sexual tensions, latent violence, and uneasy values—in unrivaled ways. Nevertheless, as a global superpower, the United States was officially a big country that seemed to require big books to express it.

Short story writers continued to diligently refine their craft, however, and in the last forty years, the genre has been the site of a dizzying array of styles and formal inventions. Often these advances draw upon the work of earlier story writers. Hemingway's stark, concise, seemingly simple prose style influenced the so-called minimalist writers—Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason—of the 1970s and 1980s, whose spare stories were sometimes denigrated by the terms "dirty realism" or, worse, "K-Mart realism," indicating once again that the short story genre is not always widely appreciated or understood by critics and readers. Although American writers are beholden to international short story masters such as