We Are the Stories We Tell

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THE BEST SHORT STORIES
BY NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN
SINCE 1945

Edited by
Wendy Martin

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The Lives and Work of Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich

ALSO EDITED BY WENDY MARTIN:

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Feminist Writings from Colonial Times to the Present

To my daughter,
Laurel Martin Harris

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Introduction

From its earliest beginnings, North American culture has been multi-ethnic and multi-racial, but only recently has there been a concerted effort to acknowledge this fact. Our official literary traditions, like our official cultural histories, have for the most part emphasized our European antecedents. Nevertheless, historians and scholars are remapping the literary territory to include a much broader range of materials, from Native American chants to the journals of early explorers, from Afro-American folktales to poems by early Chinese immigrants. In the past, the literary canon has been not only white but also largely masculine. Now, works by previously ignored women writers like the eighteenth-century Jane Turell, Milcah Martha Moore, Martha Brewster, and Ann Eliza Bleecker are becoming part of that canon, alongside works by such contemporaneous black authors as Jupiter Hammon, Prince Hall, and Gustavus Vassa.

The stories in this volume are important strands in the variegated fabric of fiction from Canada and the United States, written by women of African, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Jewish antecedents, as well as by women of other European ancestry. Articulating female experience in all its complexity, they give voice to what has been silenced, repressed, and excluded in women's lives. Insisting on the importance of remembering our personal and collective pasts, these narratives draw on memories, folk stories,

legends, and dreams. At the same time, many suggest emancipatory strategies, opening up new lives and new worlds. They explore the diverse terrain of women's experience as it is and as it could be, often depicting struggle and risk-taking as being among the essential features of that landscape.

This collection is possible because of the radical shift in our views of issues of race, class, and gender that has taken place in the past several decades. These changing social values have had a dramatic impact on our expectations about who writes and what kind of literature is published. In the past, writing women were anomalous creatures, in the New World as well as in the Old. Very few women entered what was essentially a male literary preserve. Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan poet whose family emigrated to Massachusetts, makes it abundantly clear in the preface to her volume of poems *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) that women writers were not welcome:

> *I am obnoxious to each carping tongue*
> *Who says my hand a needle better fits.*
> *A Poets pen all scorn I should thus wrong,*
> *For such despite they cast on female wits:*
> *If what I do prove well, it won't advance,*
> *They'l say it's stoln, or else it was by chance.*

Most writing by American women from the time of the European settlement to the end of the Revolution took private forms—spiritual meditations, diaries, letters; increasingly, this work is being included in anthologies and literary histories. In general, it was not acceptable for women to express themselves publicly, in literature or otherwise; the example of Anne Hutchinson, a seventeenth-century midwife who was branded a heretic and exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for holding meetings to read and discuss the Bible, made that abundantly clear. In the late eighteenth century, women writers of fiction wrote under double jeopardy. Not only did they have to contend with gender bias, they also had to answer their many critics who thought fiction encouraged female license (and apparently licentiousness). Puritans denounced fiction as "Sa-

tan's breeding ground," and women who wrote in this genre were accused of corrupting the community.

In spite of this hostile climate, eighteenth-century novelists like Susanna Haswell Rowson, who wrote the best-selling *Charlotte Temple*, and Hannah Webster Foster, author of *The Coquette*, had a wide readership. In the nineteenth century, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Lydia Sigourney, Louisa May Alcott, and Harriet Beecher Stowe are but a few of the authors who used the form of the sentimental novel to gain acceptance for their politics as well as their craft. While the primary plots of these enormously popular novels often centered on such themes as the seduction and abandonment of imprudent women or the punishment of female assertion, the subtexts contained other messages that encouraged women to think for themselves.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, extraordinary women writers like Sarah Orne Jewett, Edith Wharton, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, and Willa Cather emerged. As the twentieth century progressed, such authors as Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, Meridel le Sueur, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty began to build on these earlier female traditions. Although the Anglo-American literary tradition still dominated, black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen were introducing new subject matter and styles. But it was not until after 1945—essentially the end of World War II—that women from a wide range of backgrounds successfully entered the literary marketplace. Women from every class, race, and ethnic group had worked together in the war effort, proving that they could function effectively in the masculine sphere, and this successful collective enterprise changed the way many of these women thought about themselves.

The rapid urbanization of the postwar period—58.6 percent of the population was urban in 1945 and 73.5 percent in 1970—along with more educational opportunities for both women and men also brought increasing numbers of women into public life. During the 1950s, a period of enforced domesticity for many women, concern for individual political rights was not eclipsed. Civil-rights battles

fought in the South culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and were followed in the 1960s by widespread demonstrations against the Vietnam War and, in the early 1970s, against the bombing of Cambodia. This period of exceptional social and political ferment was the catalyst for an emerging awareness about issues of race and class.

The feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s was an extension of the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and it had an equally dramatic effect on American social thought. Along with race and class, gender came to be viewed as a socially constructed category that often enforced hierarchical power relationships. The feminist movement had a remarkable impact on women, as did advances in birth control.

Not surprisingly, then, there have been dramatic changes in subject matter and the way it is treated in late-twentieth-century women's writing. The stories in this collection have been selected in an effort to reflect this, to do justice to the shifts in and the variety of both women's lives and their fictional themes and styles since 1945. These stories testify to diverse cultural perspectives and individual points of view, and portray different social classes and geographical areas. Their protagonists are urban and rural, rich and poor, young and old, experimental and traditional in their way of life. The stories cover all the phases of female experience, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood and old age, and depict landmark experiences such as marriage, childbirth, and death.

The writers in this collection cross boundaries, challenge limits, and explore new possibilities. They celebrate enduring values like love, affection, and desire, and they also confront controversial and often previously taboo issues like racism, rape, abortion, sexual harassment, lesbianism, and family violence. Courtship, marriage, and other erotic relationships emerge here in their full complexity, stripped of sentimental veneer. So does parenting. The stories are written from all sorts of points of view—even from a masculine one.

Ranging from oracular, legendary, and metafictional tales to colloquial ones laced with vernacular and dialect, the works included here are all a pleasure to read and all represent the highest levels of

literary craft. This book's subtitle calls them "the best" of their era because they are clearly *among* the best, not because they are superior to the many fine stories which could not be included: literature by its very nature makes such pat rankings meaningless. In order to convey a sense of the evolution of styles and subject matter, the selections have been arranged in chronological order, based on the original date of publication when available; otherwise, on the date of first publication in a collection of the author's stories. Maxine Hong Kingston's "On Discovery," which was a self-contained unit in *China Men*, is here, with the author's consent, published as a separate story for the first time. Mary McCarthy's *The Blackguard* is overtly autobiographical, although all the rest are fiction. And I have included three of Sandra Cisneros's linked stories from *The House on Mango Street* because one story alone would not convey the rich and complex texture of her work.

To articulate experience, to give language to otherwise inchoate perceptions, is always empowering and liberating. To write the truth about all sorts of experience is both the fruit and the wellspring of freedom and knowledge. Mary Gordon has observed that "working-class people, among whom I grew up, are cut off from particular kinds of language that give them power." The authors of these stories have claimed the power to name, define, and judge experiences for themselves, and to help their readers to do likewise. Surely one of the most effective—and most pleasurable—ways to understand the issues facing us today is to make an empathic leap of understanding through fiction; as the stories in this collection make abundantly clear, it is only through knowing one another that we can know ourselves. Thus, these stories can teach us much about women's lives, American lives, and life in general.

The United States has been described as a melting pot, when "crucible" might be a more evocative word, suggesting the interaction of difference and unity and an aesthetic that is change-oriented, eclectic, and multifaceted. It implies a process that is often characterized by lively confusion and creates unpredictable but robust cultural alloys. The writers in this collection honor this process with all its inherent instabilities, variations, and discontinuities, along with its extraordinary vigor.