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KATRINA KENISON

S E R I E S E D I T O R

# *The Best* AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1999

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Selected from  
U.S. and Canadian Magazines  
by AMY TAN  
with KATRINA KENISON

*With an Introduction by Amy Tan*



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
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*The Best*  
**AMERICAN  
SHORT  
STORIES  
1999**

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1980 STANLEY ELKIN  
1981 HORTENSE CALISHER  
1982 JOHN GARDNER  
1983 ANNE TYLER  
1984 JOHN UPDIKE  
1985 GAIL GODWIN  
1986 RAYMOND CARVER  
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1988 MARK HELPRIN  
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1996 JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN  
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## Foreword

AS I REREAD the stories Amy Tan has chosen to include in the 1999 edition of *The Best American Short Stories* — the last volume of the twentieth century — I could not help but wonder what Edward O'Brien, the creator of this eighty-five-year-old series, would have to say about the evolution of his brainchild were he able to hold this book, directly descended from the first, in his hands.

Could he have imagined, as he sifted through the 2200 short stories published in periodicals in 1914 and selected 20 for his first collection of "bests," that his successors would be performing much the same task, in much the same way, nearly a century later? Perhaps, in his fondest dreams. What no editor, no matter how prescient, could have foreseen in 1915, however, was the dramatic upheavals — technological, medical, social, and personal — that would transform early twentieth-century life into something altogether different by century's end. Thus, tales of farm labor, tuberculosis, sailing ships, Bible-thumping preachers, and séances — all favorite themes in the early volumes — would be supplanted in the years to come by stories of urban ennui, AIDS, Web surfing, New Age gurus, and twelve-step groups. In the course of this series' history, the icehouse became a Sub-Zero, the horse and buggy an SUV, the letter from overseas an e-mail message. The details, the stuff of daily life, have changed, and the stuff of fiction changed with them.

Yet I suspect that O'Brien would still embrace *The Best American Short Stories* 1999. Though the world as he knew it has largely disappeared, the spirit in which he read stories and encouraged

writers to write them is the very spirit that informs this series today. Underlying his decision to launch an annual anthology of short stories was his conviction that the American short story would continue to develop as an essential literary genre in its own right. "The truth is," O'Brien asserted, "that the American short story cannot be reduced to a literary formula, and if we are to measure its progress at all, it must be with a growing reed. . . . During the past few years, slowly and naturally as the budding and growth of a plant, a new spirit in fiction has been making itself felt and spreading itself in many directions throughout the country."

From this vantage point, looking back over a century that has produced such masters as Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, John Cheever, and Eudora Welty — and, more recently, Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Munro, Tobias Wolff, Cynthia Ozick, and Andre Dubus, to name only a few — I think it is safe to say that the growing reed is now indeed a tree, distinguished by deep roots, a vast canopy of branches, and abundant fruit. In other words, Edward O'Brien had it right when he peered into the future and foresaw the blossoming of this beloved, and quintessentially American, form. So perhaps he would not have been surprised either that by century's end, the short story's staunch defenders, readers and writers alike, would have succeeded in turning this series into a literary institution in its own right, attracting hundreds of thousands of devoted readers each year.

In all but one or two cases, the contributors to *The Best American Short Stories 1915* are long since forgotten. Any illusions about the permanence of literary reputation are swiftly quelled by a look at the contents page of that inaugural volume. Donn Byrne, Virgil Jordan, Merton Lyon, Newbold Noyes, Katharine Metcalf Roof, Elsie Singmaster — whatever became of you? And yet, reading these authors' works, I found much to appreciate; their voices still speak with some urgency to anyone with the time and inclination to listen. The magazines from which the first volume was compiled have long since folded up their tents too, though their names still exert a pull on the imagination: *The Midland*, *The Outlook*, *The Masses*, *Everybody's Magazine*, *The Fabulist*. . . . In our era of brand names and niche publishing, which has given rise to such ventures as *Fast Company*, *Vegetarian Times*, and *Cigar Aficionado*, one can't help but feel a certain nostalgia for the democratic inclusiveness of



that earlier age. Imagine trying to launch *Everybody's Magazine* today!

Nonetheless, in a century during which so much else has changed, the guiding spirit behind this annual collection has remained remarkably consistent. "Here and there in quiet places, usually far from great cities, artists are laboring quietly for a literary ideal, and the leaven of their achievement is becoming more and more impressive every day," O'Brien wrote in his first introduction. "It is my faith and hope that this annual volume of mine may do something toward disengaging the honest good from the meretricious mass of writing with which it is mingled." Thus was set an editorial direction that has not been questioned or superseded to this day.

In this volume you will find stories that meet that standard, some by writers already acclaimed for their vision, others by writers just at the beginning of their careers. These twenty-one stories were chosen not because they are clearly of this time, but on the chance that they also might transcend it. After all, the strivings and concerns of the human spirit are not circumscribed by time or place. While art may serve to point up our differences, it also reaches across vast distances of time and space to remind us of our common humanity. What's more, it outlasts us. Perhaps at the next century's end, some yet-to-be-born editor will pull *this* volume off a shelf and wonder about the authors whose works are gathered here: Lorrie Moore, Junot Díaz, Annie Proulx, Rick Bass, Melissa Hardy. . . . But then, perhaps, that editor, casting about for an idea for an end-of-the-century foreword, will settle in to read a story or two and be surprised to discover that although the world is a very different place than it was way back in 1999, there is something about those old stories. They hold up.

From the moment Amy Tan and I exchanged our first e-mail messages early in 1998, I knew how fortunate we were that she had agreed to assume the guest editor's duties this year. We quickly formed a book group of two, via the Internet, and happily kept each other apprised of our reading and discoveries throughout the year. Her desire to do justice to the year's harvest of short fiction was immediately apparent, as was her willingness to take a stand in the line of guest editors whose tastes and predilections have shaped

this series for the past twenty years. Like all the best critics and readers, Amy Tan combines a highly developed sense of what works with a genuine desire to give every story the benefit of the doubt. In practical terms, that meant that she devoted a great deal of her time to this process, considering each and every story fully, and on its own terms, before making a judgment. As she notes in her introduction, when you love a particular story, it seems a sacrilege to attempt to describe it, to say what it's "about." Better simply to put it into someone else's hands and say, "Please read it yourself." As I placed this year's stories in Amy Tan's hands, I knew that the writers of 1998 were fortunate indeed to have her in their corner. The readers of this volume will be equally well served.

The stories chosen for this anthology were originally published in magazines issued between January 1998 and January 1999. 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*

FORTY YEARS AGO, just before I turned seven, my father started reading to me from a volume of 365 stories with an equal number of pages.

The stories were supposed to be read in sequence, a tale a day, beginning with a sledding caper on a snowy January first. They concerned the ongoing activities of children who lived in lovely two-story homes on a block lined with trees whose changing leaves reflected the seasons. They each had a father and a mother as well as two sets of grandparents, and these older folk conveyed simple truths while taking cookies from a hot oven or fish from a cold stream. Each day the children had small adventures with baby animals, balloons, or bicycles. They enjoyed nice surprises, got into small troubles, and had fun problems that they could solve. They made thingamajigs out of mud and stone and paint, which wound up being the prettiest ashtray Mommy and Daddy had ever received. Within each of those five-hundred-word stories, the children learned a valuable lifelong lesson, which they promised never to forget.

By the middle of the book, I had learned to read well enough to finish a book in one day. And being impatient to learn what happened to the children in the rest of the year, I polished off the remaining stories in one sitting. On the last day of the year, the children went sledding again, completing the happy circle. Thus, I discovered that those children, between January first and December thirty-first, had not changed much.

I was glad, for that was the same year I accumulated many wor-

ries, which I numbered on my fingers. One was for the new home we had moved to, the fifth of more than a dozen I would occupy during my childhood. Two was for the dead rat crushed in a trap, which my father showed me, believing that this would assure me that the rat was no longer lurking in my bedroom. Three was my playmate, whom I saw lying in a coffin while my mother whispered, "This what happen when you don't listen to Mother." Four was for the operation I had, which made me think I had not listened to my mother. Five was for the ghost of my playmate who wanted me to come live with her. Six was for my mother telling me that when she was my age her mother had died, and the same sad fate might happen to me if I didn't appreciate her more. Eventually, I ran out of fingers.

That year, I believed that if I could make sense of my worries, I could make them stop. And when I couldn't, I would walk to the library. I went there often. I would choose my own books. And I would read and read, a story a day.

That girl from forty years ago has served as your guest editor for *The Best American Short Stories 1999*. I felt I should tell you about my earliest literary influences, because I'm aware that if you scan the table of contents, you might suspect that I have been reactionary in my choices. You may wonder if they are a vote against homogeneity, a vote for diversity in preordered proportions.

This collection holds no such political agenda. The stories I have chosen are simply those I loved above all others given to me for consideration. This is not to say that my literary judgment is without personal bias. I am a particular sort of reader, shaped by all kinds of influences — one of them being those bedtime stories of long ago, for I still do most of my reading in bed.

I also now realize that I dearly loved those stories. In fact, I regret that I finished them so quickly that my father no longer had to read them aloud to me each night, for what I loved most was listening to his voice. And what I love most in these twenty-one stories is the same thing. It is the voice of the storyteller.

At the beginning of 1998, the year these stories first appeared in magazines, I found myself in an airport lounge in Seoul, waiting for a connecting flight to Beijing. For reading material, I had brought with me *The Best American Short Stories 1992*, the volume whose guest editor was Robert Stone. I remember settling in with a cup of

ginseng tea, then glancing up and seeing, with a shock of recognition, a woman who seemed like a younger version of me. She was Asian, I would guess even Chinese American, and she was with a husband who looked quite similar to mine in height and build and coloring. But more striking than these superficial similarities was what she held in her hands: the same teal-blue volume of *The Best American Short Stories*.

Did she notice me as well? She gave no indication that she did. Meanwhile, I had an urge to run up to her and ask all kinds of questions. Was she a writer? What story was she reading? Why had she picked this book to bring on a long flight to Asia?

But I remembered those times my mother used to embarrass me as a child, going up to strangers in public places just because they happened to look Chinese. So I stayed put, reading from my book, then wondering how she could not notice me, our similarity. After all, it wasn't as though we were reading the same blockbuster novel of the year. It wasn't a travel book on Asia. It wasn't even the most recent volume of *The Best American Short Stories*. So what was it about our lives, our tastes, our choices that had brought us to this literary meeting point in Seoul?

Shortly after I returned home, I was asked to serve as guest editor of *The Best American Short Stories 1999*. And from October 1998 until February 1999, I read stories, manna from heaven, or wherever it is that Katrina Kenison makes her home. And after I had made my selections and sat down to write this introduction, I thought about that woman at the airport. I wondered if she would one day read the stories in this volume and find compatibility with my choices. Or would she pose the hard-nosed literary question "Huh?"

That is the response I sometimes have after seeing certain movies or plays that others have raved about. In fact, my husband and I have friends we have long associated with a particular film, *Babette's Feast*. We recalled their saying it was subtle and unpretentious, artless in the way pure art should be. So we went to see it. Huh? We found it tedious, interminable. And so we avoided any future recommendations for movies by these same friends.

*Babette's Feast* had me thinking the other day that the same avoidance principles might apply to people who take on the role of literary arbiter for others — reviewers, critics, panels for prizes, and yes, even guest editors. Such people may have an eye for literary conventions and contrivances, allusions and innovations on the art.



But what are their tastes based on? What are their biases? Is part of it the common prejudice in the arts that anything that is popular is by default devoid of value? Do they tend to choose work that most resembles their own? Perhaps those critics who publicly declare “this is good and that is not” ought to present a list of more than just the titles of their most recently published works.

I, for one, would like a résumé of habits, a précis of personality. What movies would they watch twice? Do they make clever and snide remarks, but mostly about people who are doing better than they? When recounting conversations, do they imitate other people’s voices? When sharing a meal with friends, do they offer to pick up the tab, split the bill evenly, or portion it out according to what they ordered and how little wine they drank? When a friend of theirs has suffered a terrible loss, do they immediately call or wait until things have settled down a bit? What are their most frequent complaints in life? What do they tend to exaggerate? What do they downplay? Do they think little dogs are adorable or appetizers for big dogs? And, of course, I would want to know the names of books they love and loathe and why.

In other words, if you ran into this person at a party, would you even like him or her? I am being only half facetious. I do think the answers would say something about a person’s sensibility regarding life and human nature, and hence his or her sensibility regarding stories, beyond the surface of craft. I think the stories we love to read may very well have to do with our emotional obsessions, the circuitry between our brain and our heart, the questions we thought about as children that we still think about, whether they are about the endurance of love, the fears that unite us, the acceptance of irreversible decay, or the ties that bind that turn out to be illusory. In that context, I also think that if *Babette’s Feast* was your all-time favorite film, then you might not like the stories I picked.

Anyway, for the woman at the airport, for our friends whose taste in movies serves as a reverse indicator, and for anyone now taking a flyer on my judgment, I want to reveal what kind of tastes I developed between the stories I read forty years ago and the stories I read this year.

As a worrisome child, I developed an osmotic imagination, and I loved fairy tales for their richness in the grotesque. I read them all:



Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Aesop's Fables, Little Red Riding Hood — whatever was on the library shelf, a book a day, many of them devoured at bedtime, which my mother said is why I ruined my eyes and had to wear glasses at such a young age.

Because my father was a part-time Baptist minister, I also read Bible stories, which I thought were quite similar to fairy tales, for they too contained gory images, gut-clenching danger, magical places, and a sense that things are never as they first appear. By the end of these stories, much had always changed. Kingdoms and seas rose and fell. Humble creatures turned into handsome princes or prophets. Straw became gold, a crumb a thousand loaves. And a lot of bearded giants lost their heads.

I loved these stories because, along with the horrific, they contained limitless and amazing ways in which people, places, and circumstances changed. It gave me a sense of instability, distrust, and wonder that mirrored my own life. I remember a particular Halloween, being lost on a dark street, then finally seeing my mother, her red swing coat. I flew toward her, hugging the back of her coat, crying for joy because I was no longer lost, only to see a stranger's startled face looking down at me. As a child, I thought it was a kind of terrifying magic that my mother transformed into a woman with blond hair. She changed quickly in other ways as well. Sometimes she was happy with me, the next moment disappointed, wild with anger. And in her eyes, I too had changed, and she was ashamed beyond belief that I had strange, bad ingredients inside me that neither she or I had suspected were there until my awful behavior had leaked out like a stench. And I would wonder, who am I really? A fairy? An evil sprite? A good princess in the temporary form of a rotten Chinese girl?

With fairy tales, you could immerse your imagination like your big toe in a tub of hot water and retract it if it didn't agree with you. Part of the thrill was seeing what you could take, guessing what might happen, delighting if you were surprised, decrying if you were unfairly fooled. Kind creatures turned into genies. People who died, fell down holes, or became lost later might be transformed into happier beings. They could wind up in lands that nobody else knew existed. In stories, you could hide or escape.

Since my father was a minister and my mother a believer in bad fate, I used to wonder: What are the reasons that catastrophe hap-

pens? Is calamity a lesson, a curse, or a test? Is it a punishment for evil? Does it occur because of blind luck or blind revenge? Or does it simply happen for reasons we can never know or would not want to know? I was a child who rode a whirligig of questions and flew out in all directions.

Whatever the case, I was addicted to stories about the morbid: the beheadings, the stonings, the man who was three days dead and already stank when he came back to life. These were people with fates worse than mine. So far, at least. But just in case, I wanted to prepare for other dangers that might still await me.

Around this same time, I discovered a book at home that was also useful to me in this regard. It was a medical textbook my mother was studying so she could become a licensed vocational nurse. The textbook concerned medical anomalies. Inside were descriptions and photographs of people with acromegaly, elephantiasis, hirsutism, leprosy, and superfluous or missing appendages — all kinds of deformities that vied with *Ripley's Believe It or Not* for open-jawed disbelief.

I tried to imagine the lives of these people, how they felt, their thoughts as they stared back at me from the photographs. I imagined them before they had their disease. I imagined them cured. I imagined taking them to school and all the kids screaming in terror, while I alone remained calm, a true friend. I imagined them changing into genies, princes, and immortals. I imagined I might become just like them, now plagued and miserable, soon to be transformed into someone else. These people were my imaginary playmates. Their consciousness, I believed, was mine. And those notions, I think, were among the first stories I made up for myself.

Like many children, I read to be scared witless, to be less lonely, to believe in other possibilities. But we all become different readers in how we respond to books, why we need them, what we take from them. We become different in the questions that arise as we read, in the answers that we find, in the degree of satisfaction or unease we feel with those answers. We differ in what we begin to consider about the real world and the imaginary one. We differ in what we think we can know — or would want to know — and in how we continue to pursue that knowledge.

One story can be a different story in the hands of a different reader.

I believe that now, although in college I allowed myself to believe otherwise. Back then, I believed good taste was an opinion held by others — namely, the designated experts. I was an English major, and I remember that in my sophomore year I wrote a theme paper (as they were then called) on Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. I thought the story was well written, but I did not like it much: the cynicism, the fact that by the end of the story the characters had not changed, which was the point, but one that I did not find interesting. I said so in my theme paper, and the following week my professor chose to read it aloud. He said it was remarkably different from the rest of the papers he had read in all his years of teaching. I blushed, thinking this was high praise. And then he started to read my sentences in a tone that became increasingly less benign. Soon his face was livid as he gasped after each of my paragraphs: "Who is *this* writer to criticize Hemingway, the greatest American writer of our century? *This* writer is an idiot! This novel deserves a better reader!" If *this* writer had had the means, she would have killed herself on the spot.

The following year, I was in another English class at another college, and the same novel was assigned. This time I wrote a theme paper that noted the brilliant characterization — how, despite the panorama of events and the opportunities afforded these characters, nothing much had changed in their lives, and how this so convincingly captured the realism of ennui. It represented the pervasive American sense of a lost generation whose lives, singly or together, held no hope or direction. My paper received high praise.

By the time I graduated, I was sick of reading literary fiction. My osmotic imagination had changed into one with filters, lint traps. I thought that literary tastes were an established norm that depended on knowing what others more expert than I thought was best.

For the next twelve years, I read an occasional novel. But I did not return to my habit of reading a story a day until 1985. By then I had become a successful but unhappy person, with work that was lucrative but meaningless. This was one of those moments that cause people to either join a religious cult, spend a lot of money on psychotherapy, or take up the less drastic and more economical practice of writing fiction.

Since I was a beginning writer, I believed that the short form was