

The Best
AMERICAN
SHORT
STORIES
1985

Selected from
U.S. and Canadian Magazines
by Gail Godwin
and Shannon Ravenel

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with Shannon Ravenel

With an Introduction by Gail Godwin



1985

Houghton Mifflin Company Boston

Shannon Ravenel is grateful to Margaret Doyle and Tina Brawn, who gave valuable consultation on science fiction and science fantasy.

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Publisher's Note

The *Best American Short Stories* series was started in 1915 under the editorship of Edward J. O'Brien. Its title reflects the optimism of a time when people assumed that an objective "best" could be identified, even in fields not measurable in physical terms.

Martha Foley took over as editor of the series in 1942 when Mr. O'Brien was killed in World War I. With her husband, Whit Burnett, she had edited *Story* magazine since 1931, and in later years she taught creative writing at Columbia School of Journalism. When Miss Foley died in 1977, at the age of eighty, she was at work on what would have been her thirty-seventh volume of *The Best American Short Stories*.

Beginning with the 1978 edition, Houghton Mifflin introduced a new editorial arrangement for the anthology. Inviting a different writer or critic to edit each new annual volume would provide a variety of viewpoints to enliven the series and broaden its scope. *Best American Short Stories* has thus become a series of informed but differing opinions that gains credibility from its very diversity.

Also beginning with the 1978 volume, the guest editors have worked with the annual editor, Shannon Ravenel, who during each calendar year reads as many qualifying short stories as she can get hold of, makes a preliminary selection of 120 stories for the guest editor's consideration, and selects the "100 Other Distinguished Short Stories of the Year," a listing that has always been an important feature of these volumes.

The stories chosen for this year's anthology were originally published in magazines issued between January 1984 and January 1985. 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; and (3) publication *as* short stories (novel excerpts are not knowingly considered by the editors). A list of the magazines consulted by Ms. Ravenel appears at the back of this volume. Other publications wishing to make sure that their contributors are considered for the series should include Ms. Ravenel on their subscription list (P.O. Box 3176, University City, Missouri 63130).

Introduction

Our perceptions are sharpest when we're estranged. We can see the shape of things.

— E. L. Doctorow, "The Leather Man"

He was amazed to note the range of emotion in the cluck of a chicken. Fear and anxiety soon gave way to a soft, throaty warbling for reassurance. Huggins responded.

— Wright Morris, "Fellow Creatures"

I'm still the man in this story, and Sarah is still the woman, but I'm telling it this way because what I have to tell you now confuses me, embarrasses me, and makes me sad, and consequently, I'm likely to tell it falsely.

— Russell Bank, "Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story"

"We gave it all the surfaces of fantasy — dark walnut, wind instruments, candlelight, chimes. For you, conscious fantasy is enthralling. For images, on the other hand, it is the blackest despair. All the acts we might have carried out we knew in advance to be artifice. So we sat in that quiet, horrible room, unable to speak or raise our heads or even cry."

— Bev Jafek, "You've Come a Long Way, Mickey Mouse"

THE ABOVE IS MEANT TO serve as a little overture to the selections that follow. Though the main criterion for my choices could be expressed by the simple *Sic enim mihi placuit*, because such is my pleasure, the motto of this collection might well be: "Tell me something I need to know — about art, about the world, about human behavior, about myself."

Any assemblage put together by an individual and labeled "the best of" is bound to be a reflection of that person's tastes

and values, as well as a revealing showcase of her pet subjects and idiosyncrasies; but it has been a treat for me, in these times when personal judgment is frequently eroded and diluted by committee meetings and group consensuses, to exercise the autocrat's refreshing freedom of choice. The twenty stories in this volume are here because I thought they were the best of the 120 sent to me by Shannon Ravenel (122, actually: we had to disqualify two of my favorites at the beginning, Robb Forman Dew's "Silverfish" and Louise Erdrich's "Sainte Marie," because they were parts of novels; then, at the last minute, Mark Helprin's "Palais de Justice," which I admired, had to be bumped because it had been originally published in an earlier year) and the best of the stories I had read in magazines during 1984. I chose sixteen of the stories from Shannon's batch; the other four, Margaret Edwards's "Roses," Starkey Flythe's "Walking, Walking," Joyce Carol Oates's "Raven's Wing," and Joy Williams's "The Skater" were from my personal file.

The good news this year is that there were more stories than ever to choose from, which led us to the corollary that more stories were *being published* than ever before. Shannon Ravenel culled her favorites from a total of 1,663 in 555 issues of 154 different U.S. and Canadian periodicals. "On looking back over past records," she wrote from St. Louis, "I see that the number of magazines has remained fairly consistent while the number of eligible stories has risen. This is the largest number of stories I've ever covered, by about 200."

In one of our phone conversations, I tried to worm out of her what her pet subjects were, and she did go so far as to admit a predilection for stories about children. I in turn admitted to a weakness for stories about fathers. But ultimately, we agreed, our preferences were for the stories we remembered vividly regardless of subject matter, those stories that left us with the impression that they had demanded to be written. In fact, there are only two stories that can be described as being "about" children, H. E. Francis's "The Sudden Trees" and Joy Williams's "The Skater," but these stories are also "about" death, so there goes that neat category. As for father stories, this year's crop was a vintage harvest. Though I finally chose only one, Deborah Seabrooke's "Secrets," I could have compiled an anthology. I

particularly liked Mary Morris's "Conquering Space," William Maxwell's "My Father's Friends," Joan Givner's "The Lost Sheep," Max Apple's "Bridging," Norma E. Depledge's "Except I Shall See in His Hands the Print of the Nails," and Stephen Dixon's "Wheels."

How did I go about choosing the stories you find here? Well, a registered packet would arrive from Shannon in St. Louis (there were four thick ones between July and February), and I would sit down on the sofa with a pile of stapled tearsheets, or I would carry off a stack to bed, and then I would simply shuffle through, inviting a first sentence or paragraph to snare me. Of course I found that many an arresting opening leads to a slackening middle or end, but when you are in the grip of a good story, you experience elation. As desire (for something to happen, for something to be revealed) takes on a definite shape, you begin to count on the story to fulfill the expectations it is arousing in you. As trust grows, there may even be a feeling of being in partnership with the author. If this trust lasts to the conclusion, the story attains the status of inevitability in your memory. You see it as always having moved toward this ending; it couldn't have been as satisfactory any other way, given the trail of events and images that followed that first sentence or paragraph.

Three of the stories in this volume caught me up in their opening lines and proved steadfast to the end. I was immediately attracted to the narrator's voice in Russell Banks's "Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story." Even the title expresses Ron's dogged intention not to let himself off easy, his determination to get to the bottom of something that cannot be comfortably classified. This narrator is prepared to risk embarrassment and artlessness in order to *understand*. That this artlessness — the refusal to let narrative flow or consistent point of view lead him away from his quest — *becomes* the art is the story's own reward. Banks also helped me clarify something about the nature of innovative fiction. Truly experimental writing is forced from the pressures of the material, not imposed on it by the writer's whim or wish to be "original."

John L'Heureux's "Clothing" and Marjorie Sandor's "The

Gittel" also won me over with their first lines. I like stories about people who live intense and scrutinized inner lives, and when a writer as proven in that sort of fiction as L'Heureux begins with, "Conor had been a Jesuit for sixteen years now," I can take it on faith that this is my kind of story. (This one exceeded my hopes in its masterful stripping away of some of the kinds of illusions in which we clothe our deepest decisions.) "The Gittel," through the rhythm and language at the beginning, promised a tale of traditional dimensions but with modern implications — and Sandor delivered, with powerful resonances attained as much by the method of the telling as by the awful reality into which the innocent dreamer walks.

So choosing those first three was easy. I put them into my "Priority" folder, where, over the months, they successfully sat out their contenders.

Then there were the stories I kept passing by because I was wary of how they began. I was afraid they would turn out to be the kinds of stories I like least. I'm talking about the ones where you know from the start that the writer is posing, or holding back, or trying to project a voiceprint rather than risk speaking in a real voice. Or the story that is choked from its outset by trendiness or condescension. I have learned to recoil at openings like (I'm making these up): "Sondra, fiddling with the strap of her Gucci watch, waits in the Express Checkout line to pay for her blueberry yogurt and arugula leaves." Or: "Noreen is catching the leaks from the ceiling of their single-wide mobile home in her husband's GM cap." I don't believe in Sondra and Noreen. I rather suspect their authors of doing market research into ordinariness so that I will conclude that "the Sondras" and "the Noreens" are capable of only a limited response to life. Why they should want me to conclude this I haven't yet figured out.

So gun-shy of this type of opening have I become that I at first mistook Sharon Sheeche Stark's fine story for a "Noreen." Was I ever wrong. "The Johnstown Polka" is a *rebuttal* of the notion that people are easily judged, or that you can predict anyone's actions on the basis of exterior trappings. But I would have missed the point had I not felt duty bound to persist beyond the opening sentence.

I include this small confession of antipathies to give you a back room glimpse of the selection process, which, I believe, is as individual as the vagaries and the passions and the prejudices of each judge. I learned a lot about myself as a choosing creature as I scanned these piles of stories, heading for the most promising ones as a bug homes in on the brightest lights. After I had exhausted that "first impression method," I adopted other approaches equally impulsive or idiosyncratic. I had no organized program. I didn't go in for any sort of equalizations. At one point, I looked down at my list of "chosens" and saw that I had eight stories, so far, by men and only one by a woman. Oh God, I thought, this will never do. But I was determined to keep faith with my first choices and leave statistics to the sociologists. Fate, however, was kind, and I ended up with a ten-to-ten ratio without having to compromise.

The Doctorow and the Oates and the Wright Morris and the Joy Williams choices were initiated by my "trusted author bias" method. I have become familiar with and admired these writers' sensibilities, and so, when I spotted their names, I stopped and read their stories. There were three by Oates, and Shannon Ravenel wondered why I hadn't found *her* favorite irresistible (she liked the weird one, "Harrow Street at Linden," about a repressed couple living vicariously off their more sensual neighbors' marriage). I admitted that I had read this with a writhing attentiveness, but that "Raven's Wing," about the pickpocket and the wondrously healing horse, wound itself around my mind, as the wife in the story winds that twist of stiff black tail hair around her wrist at the end. There were two excellent stories by Wright Morris, who always has something to say, and I believed, right up until the time I was writing this introduction, that I had chosen "Going Into Exile," because it explained to me, in that oblique way only art can, something about how the South has changed. But at the last minute "Fellow-Creatures" displaced it: I remembered those cows, with their craggy, primitive masks of faces, congregating on the deck of a house "like guests at a cocktail party." And like Colonel Huggins, U.S. Army, retired, who is "amazed to note the range of emotion in the cluck of a chicken," I underwent a change.

You see what I mean? Vagaries.

But a connecting thread does run through these Top Twenty despite my slippery *modus operandi*. Every story I have chosen is a skillfully rendered, compassionate foray into a unique combination of individual experiences, whether it is a retired colonel's visionary relationship with an undersized pullet named Lucy or a handsome man's nagging memory of his obsessive love affair with an ugly woman — or Mickey Mouse's own account of how we have made him suffer! The paradox I have discovered, in writing and in reading the writing of others, is that the more you respect and focus on the singular and the strange, the more you become aware of the universal and the infinite. Michael Bishop's "Dogs' Lives" is a felicitous illustration of how this paradox operates: Look at what can be made, through imagination, memory, and the ability to *connect*, out of a particular black Great Dane stalking into a freshman classroom and releasing his "power and aloofness." Or watch the ripple effect in the consciousness of one sixty-nine-year-old astronomy teacher as a result of his confrontation with a coarse neighbor who is determined to cut down his venerable elm, in Ethan Canin's "Emperor of the Air."

The seemingly endless combinations of individual experiences of human evil have provoked the storyteller's imagination since ancient times. Take just a single branch of evil — exploitation — and see how many variations of subject matter and artistic treatment you get in five stories. Angela, in Bharati Mukherjee's story of the Bangladesh girl adopted by an Iowa family, has built a new life on sheer gratitude for having survived a savage and mutilating physical exploitation. But can her New World spirit survive the "kind" and persistent courtship of Dr. Menezies, who comes from "the same subcontinent of hunger and misery"? Lily, Jane Smiley's lovely spinster-poet, invites two married friends to visit her, hoping they can help her discover why, despite all her prizes and fan letters, no one wants to love her. The couple bring their turbulent, dying marriage to her, use her to stir up its embers, and leave her frightened of her own accomplished and organized life. In "Raven's Wing," we experience the exploiter through his own (sympathetic) consciousness. So far inside his skin are we that we aren't really

aware of what he has been *doing* until the end. We see him as he sees himself: a guy who's had some rotten luck and so can treasure the good omen of a spirited racehorse who survives a shattered leg. Peter Meinke's piano tuner is Exploitation, a huge, hairy symbol-made-flesh who is allowed by the passive narrator to wreck his home. As the story unfolds with all the inevitability of a bad dream, we become uneasily aware that there is collusion between the "civilized" capitulator and the violent intruder. It is a very modern parable. "Walking, Walking," by Starkey Flythe, takes a surprising tack, turning a crooked funeral director's outrageous gyping of an old woman into a bizarre opportunity for grace. Rosa is utterly believable in her individuality: from the "light-skinned friend" she invents to keep her company after her son's death to her "virtue in letting go," which baffles the law enforcement officers who fully expected her to force them to bring the undertaker to justice.

Looking over my list, I see that I have picked three stories about seduction. Margaret Edwards's "Roses," though the story of an emancipated woman's one night stand, is notable for its freshness, its refusal to take a jaded view.

It is May, and roses are blooming in carefully groomed plots. She is still experiencing the wonderment of disorientation. Her mind is putting down rudimentary paths in what is otherwise a blank acreage of the unfamiliar. Directly in her line of sight sits a handsome man.

Whereas Norman Rush's seducer in "Instruments of Seduction" is a more sinister character. Her *method* has become her rapture. This is a cold *frisson* of a story, which had for me the attraction of an elegant weapon lying in wait on a bed of silk.

Beth Nugent's "City of Boys" shocked me into including it. It is streetwise and raw, and the "lady" who resides somewhere inside me kept protesting, "You don't want to put *this* in your book, surely." But I read on, and the story stayed with me, and I did. Shocking the "lady" may be what this story's all about.

What makes Deborah Seabrooke's "Secrets" art, rather than just a fascinating description of a family of resolute individualists

and of all the havoc caused by their independent pursuits, is the narrator's ability to pull the whole thing together with an illuminating counterbalance in nature, the school of big brown bass in the hatchery at home, "swimming in perfect synchronization along the slippery walls of their tanks."

"I'm going to go upstairs to change," he said, "then try to pull the day together at the lab." Pull the day together. That was what you did. When the water's surface broke and gave you glimpses of the harmony below, of how we could all have gently swum together like a school of fish, it only made you realize such beauty wasn't in you.

Joy Williams's "The Skater" and H. E. Francis's "The Sudden Trees" are both concerned with the death of children. Williams's laconic style, with its spare vocabulary and short sentences, corresponds exactly with the manner in which a bereaved family parcels out to itself as much memory as it can bear of a dead daughter while interviewing potential boarding schools for the surviving daughter. "The Sudden Trees" is a testament of how far compassion can reach when someone (in this case, a lonely teacher who adopts a dying girl) decides to immerse himself in the experience of another. It exerts an uncanny power through its close-range focus, its "hold back nothing" account of one person's journey into another's death.

Bev Jafek's "You've Come a Long Way, Mickey Mouse" and E. L. Doctorow's "The Leather Man" each in its original way offers thought-provoking insights into our culture. Jafek offers a playful but profound indictment of our insatiable need for images. Not the least of the pleasures I got from this story was imagining how the figure of Mickey had grown (to six feet four, no less), in the writer's mind, into the tall and velvety talk show guest, "eyes shining like wet coal and wet diamonds, dressed fit to kill, and every bit of fur combed and glowing," who explains why he doesn't see Minnie anymore. What came first, I wondered, the conception of an incarnated Mickey as an embodiment of our swollen needs, or the recognition of certain ironies shimmering behind a cigarette ad? And how did the two coalesce into a story that demanded to be written? (That is the kind of thing writers

are always wondering about the stories of other writers they admire.)

As for Doctorow's, well, I can't fathom all the reasons for its lasting effect on me.

"Who is this Slater, do you think?" I asked Shannon Ravenel one Sunday in February, when I had phoned her long distance to inquire about the eligibility of a story I wanted to include. Then we got around to discussing some of the other stories, which brought us to "The Leather Man."

"I'm not sure," said Shannon, who speaks with those soft consonants that make me nostalgic for my Southern childhood. "But I think he and the other man are sort of combination policemen and psychologists."

We kept the wires humming between Woodstock and St. Louis a little longer, mulling over why this story had illuminated some problematic corner of existence for us and made us meditate on our condition as solitary souls living tenuously on a crowded earth, but inveterately curious about one another.

"Well, anyway," Shannon concluded, "I really like that story."

I still don't know who Slater is, but I really like it, too.

GAIL GODWIN

GUEST EDITORS OF
The Best American Short Stories

- 1978 Ted Solotaroff
- 1979 Joyce Carol Oates
- 1980 Stanley Elkin
- 1981 Hortense Calisher
- 1982 John Gardner
- 1983 Anne Tyler
- 1984 John Updike
- 1985 Gail Godwin

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