Out of Dallas:

14 Stories

Edited by Jane Roberts Wood
with Donna Dusart Gormly
and Sally Schrup

Out of Dallas:
14 Stories

Edited by Jane Roberts Wood
with Donna Dysart Gormly
and Sally Schrup

University of North Texas Press
and
Dallas County Community College District

This book was made possible in part by a grant from the Chancellor's Fund of the DCCCD Foundation

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Out of Dallas: 14 stories / edited and with an introduction by Jane Roberts Wood; associate editors, Donna Dysart Gormly & Sally Schrup.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-929398-03-3 : $12.95
1. Short stories, American—Texas—Dallas.
2. American fiction—20th century. I. Wood, Jane Roberts, 1929- . II. Gormly, Donna Dysart. III. Schrup, Sally.
PS572.D3509 1989
813' .01'0897642812—dc19 88-38942
CIP

University of North Texas Press
P. O. Box 13856
Denton, Texas 76203-3856

Out of Dallas:
14 Stories

INTRODUCTION

Jane Roberts Wood

Many of the fiction writers in Dallas know or know of each other. How, then, we asked ourselves, could we be completely objective in choosing which of the sixty-three stories submitted by the faculty and staff of the Dallas County Community College District would be included in this collection.

So that the selection would be objective, we decided to ask Celia Eckhardt and Pete Gunter, both writers and scholars, to blindly read and select the stories for us. Over a period of weeks they read each one several times and, finally, compiled a list of "best" stories. The lists, not surprisingly, were not identical. Then phone calls between the two began, followed by more reading. Letters passed back and forth, followed by still more reading until, finally, on a cold day in March, I came home from Brookhaven College and found these fourteen stories in my mailbox.

Having been a writer longer than an editor, I looked first to see if one of my stories was really there, although the titles had been given to me by phone the evening before. Then I sat down and read the others straight through, stopping only long enough to put another log on the fire or to pour myself a cup of tea.

My first reaction was delight at the variety of voices I heard that afternoon. Ah, I thought, this is surely one of the strengths of the collection. Sometimes the voices are harmonious, like the innocent voices of childhood in "Bologna Sandwiches and Blackberry Patches" and the recapturing of another kind of innocence in "Here at the Mini-Warehouse." Sometimes the voices are jarring. The voices of the self-conscious adolescent in "The Calf-Killing" and the self-knowing young man of "Androgynous Zones" are filled with anxiety and anger. These voices seemed to cover an incredible range of emotions.

Then, over a period of months, I read the stories several more times. And I saw that not only the voices, but the subjects, the themes, the sense of place, the plots (or the lack of), all were interestingly different. Looking at this various assortment, I began to ponder again a question I have often, rather glibly, asked my classes: What is a short story? What comprises it?

In her introduction to *Best American Short Stories*, Joyce Carol Oates says that in a short story she wants "simply the sense, which the writer conveys only through the skill of his language, that something unique is being offered." But then she goes on, in her brilliant and informed way, to embroider this minimalistic definition, so that it is defined, redefined and, thus, expanded. John Updike, who is a superb short story writer (I like his short stories more than his novels), uses a metaphor to define a short story. He says, "A narrative is like a room on whose walls a number of false doors have been painted; while within the narrative, we have many apparent choices of exit, but when the author leads us to one particular door, we know it is the right one *because it opens*."

I like this idea. Still, I want something more from a short story. That something has to do with feeling. When I love

a story, it is because it has evoked, just as a good poem does, an emotional response. After I've read such a story, I feel a shade wiser, older, younger, happier, sadder. And perhaps that's why the choosing of stories for anthologies, after the stories reach a certain level of writing, is subjective.

Three of these stories are about manipulation. And the *via media* through which manipulation occurs can be almost anything. In "Charlie McLung Goes To Town," it occurs through television, Lenore uses her sex in "The Calf Killing," and in "Joy," a minister uses religion. But how different each voice sounds. Dodge casts a modern warning about television in a mythic voice. Gormly, in "Joy," tells about the cruelest kind of manipulation, that at the hands of a friend. Here the voice, echoing the rhythms of the revival, is a child's, and she sees clearly what her father does not see; that is, the difference between religion and religiosity. In "The Calf Killing," Schrup suggests that girls who feel they have no control over their lives (Lenore runs errands, is ignored, has to be "nice" to cousins), often set up situations that allow them to feel some control. Lenore's voice is always anxious, often angry.

"Commodities" and "Moonshot" are about women confronted with and making choices in today's society, and although in each story a choice is made, the reader senses that it is not definitive. In "Commodities," the American, traveling between Tangier and Germany is emotionally, as well as physically, caught between two worlds—the arid world of Tangier where she can love freely and the verdantly green Western world that offers her only an emotional emptiness. And the story is enriched by the ironic echoing of the Hemingway voice in his short story, "Hills Like White Elephants." In "Moonshot," Carolyn Bankston must choose, within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, between individual and communal responsibilities

and goals. The writing resonates with tonal variations which reflect her joy in her own being and in the progress of Civil Rights, and her anger when she realizes that to fulfill one responsibility is to deny the other.

"Correspondence" and "Blue Curtains" are about the pervasive and terrible effects of war. In the first, Toots, a young Japanese-American man, moves from careless youth and a careless patriotism to a questioning of his own values and that of his country during World War II. Although he remains an American who says, "This is my country. Her fight is my fight," he begins to consider his heritage, to listen to the *obesans* (old women). The voice moves from an energetic innocence to anger and, finally, to quiet contemplation.

In "Blue Curtains," Revel, returning from the Vietnam war, senses the loss of a gentler, more sensitive self. His unconscious desire to regain this lost self leads to still more self-deception, to violence, to loss. And that, perhaps, is one of the saddest truths of war, and one not often told. Revel's two selves are discordant; underlying the hopeful, idealistic voice of the narrator is the other—the hopeless, the ominous, the out-of-control voice.

In "Here at the Mini-Warehouse," the narrator, during a mid-life crisis, quietly describes his struggle to live with himself, *the way he is*, without feeling alienated. Here the author's voice interweaves, supports, and harmonizes with the speaker's, quietly laughing at the speaker, but liking and admiring him, too.

"Bologna Sandwiches and Blackberry Patches" offers the unique sense that we are in another place and in another time. The time, the place is artlessly drawn through the clarity and spareness of a child's voice. The reader judges the father who "was disabled with asthma and bronchitis" and "who was also an alcoholic" and "who

never held a job for very long," but the child never does. The child describes how the father moved his family from one abandoned house to another. With what poignance she says, "Sometimes we lived in one long enough to raise a nice garden."

"Thin Silk Kites" and "Androgynous Zones" are about discovery. In the first, a young woman comes to terms with the fragile quality of life as she realizes how mightily we resist the sureness of death. She learns that in order to live fully, each one of us in our own being must come to that moment when we understand the magnitude of the pain of death and come to terms with it. The full import of the title is felt in the delicate, attentuated voice, a voice like the story's title.

"Androgynous Zones" is about the discovery that we always know so little about the people around us, and about ourselves. The surprise ending is fairer than most of O'Henry's. Not only do we share the unexpectedness of the speaker's discovery, but in the last line through the careful use of the word "that," we are surprised by the speaker himself.

"In Nomine Xerox" is just plain fun. After reading this story, who could ever look at a Xerox machine the same way.

"Beneath the Jacaranda" is this editor's story. The sense here is that beauty (art in any form), offers balance to our lives; that is, the simple act of responding to beauty brings repose, creativity, humor—whatever is needed for balance.

"At Summer's End" is a heartbreaking story about a marriage. The line, "Suddenly afraid of that other bullet, she fired it into the ground near her," is one of the most frightening I have ever read. We are all human, the story reminds us. We are sometimes afraid, we are capable of hate, we are capable of killing. In its own way, the story

is as threatening as Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" because the woman moves as inexorably toward killing.

Each voice, each story in this collection rewards us by offering a glimpse into another world. Written by teachers and technicians, critics and clerks, they invite all of us to write for the pure pleasure that this creative act brings to life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Here at the Mini-Warehouse

Ed Garcia

HERE AT THE MINI-WAREHOUSE

Ed Garcia

Most of the time you'll find me here at the mini-warehouse, Pilgrim's Mini-warehouse, owned by Mrs. Etta Fontenot. Etta is the main reason I write here: I met her the day after the night my wife, now my ex-wife, suggested I move out and take my back issues of *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, and *Show Business Illustrated* (the whole run) among others, including selected numbers of *Sports Illustrated* and the *New York Times Magazine* with me. She could never understand why I kept all those shelves of magazines, cluttering up her closets, she said. We went round and round about that one.

Of course, that wasn't why she finally invited me to leave, that was just a pleasant side-effect for her. I guess I came home late one night too many, and she smelled my breath and could tell I hadn't been drinking and said, very quietly and sort of scary, "That's enough. Get out and take those fucking magazines with you." She didn't usually use the f-word as I call it in discussions with the kids, so I knew she was really hot and, on reflection, it seemed a good idea to take her up on it before she changed her mind.

So the next day I drove to Pilgrim's—the name just appealed to me—and talked to the manager about renting a good-sized mini that I could have access to whenever I

wanted to use the magazines for research, which is why, as I told my ex-wife a dozen or so times, I kept them. (Of course, some of the magazines are plain treasures like the *Sports Illustrated* with Tommy Nobis on the cover. I used to sit in Geology next to a guy who was Tommy Nobis's high school buddy but was too small to play college football himself and a buddy of mine sat next to Tommy, so sometimes we would switch places and I got to sit next to my buddy and Tommy next to his.) Something about my request or maybe about me intrigued Etta who was in charge that day and who was wearing a little outfit that *several* years ago they called "Hot Pants" with some sort of fuchia hose with a pattern in them and little heels.

Etta isn't what you'd call pretty, but she has nice legs and breasts large enough that you notice them because they stick right out even without a bra and you can see the nipple through the little t-shirt she generally wears. I won't go on in that vein because it gives the wrong impression of Etta, but it tells you something about my state of mind when I met her. I had spent the night in the cheapest motel I could find: It had a worn-flat chenille bedspread, clean but a little tattered around the edges, and you had to phone through the switch-board which I think was kind of embarrassing for the kids when they called me. I spent that night full of half-waking fantasies about all the sordid lovemaking that I guessed went on in a motel like that. Surprisingly, there wasn't much coming and going in the night—none at all that I noticed, to my disappointment. But I kept saying to myself, like it was part of a prayer or something, "I'm going to fuck my brains out." If I was going to be divorced, then I was going to f-word my brains out. Over and over again, like a song you find yourself singing, over and over. So when I saw Etta in those little hot pants and the heels and the t-shirt, well you can imagine what I was thinking.

Etta is one of those people you come across who aren't educated—it pretty well shows and they'll tell you every 10 minutes, too—but who are so damn competent you've just got to be grateful. She *ran* those mini-warehouses. She knew what was allowed and what wasn't, where you could get the best locks at the best prices, what size you need for what, what the rates were by the week, by the month, by the year, everything. She just rattled it all off, smiling but not showing too much teeth because she had braces. You don't usually see a woman in her thirties with braces, but that's what she's like. She had hated her teeth for so long and just decided when her daughter's braces were paid for, it would be her turn. As I said she isn't exactly pretty, but she has a pleasant face and the way she talks real fast and smart and smiles, you can't help but like her.

Right off, I was pretty sure Etta liked me even though I wasn't the kind of person Etta had much to do with. College degree, English teacher, even if it's just high school, beard, wire-rimmed glasses, sandals. She liked me, but she didn't make any kind of move, because as it turned out she was still married at the time. With some people, you can't make judgments based on the way they dress. At twenty paces you would have taken her for a hooker, but she turned out, on closer inspection, to be a nice girl who had grown up to be a nice lady, who just didn't have very good taste when it came to clothes. I'm glad I was too afraid to reach over and touch her very nice breast as I thought of doing when we were alone in one of the minis, because that would have been it for us and I might have gotten arrested to boot.

I took the mini and saw her several times while I moved in the magazines and the boxes of *my* books and the few things I had before we got married—some of my mother's old crockery and pots and a little chest of drawers which my folks had at the old house before the one they have now

which is pretty old itself. Etta was always helpful and full of good ideas about how to fit things in and if she hung around more than she absolutely had to, well I was trying for bookishly fascinating and she didn't have that much to do. Nothing happened and she probably didn't even know she was flirting which to this day I tell her she was and she refuses to comment on. After that, I seldom went to the mini because, as my ex-wife would love to hear me admit, doing research in old magazines does not come up that often in daily life.

The next school year was my last one teaching and it was awful. If you haven't taught in high school, you don't know just how repulsive young people can be. Not all the time and not all of them, but some of them you want to throw off the auditorium balcony or stuff into a locker—one time I tried to do just that to a senior boy and luckily he was the one who got in trouble. I wasn't doing anybody any good because I went around feeling *alienated* all the time. Everybody attributed it to my divorce and a couple of the unmarried women teachers and one of the married ones indicated they were willing to save me from it, but there was a lot more to it than the divorce. I would go around—for years, not just that year—wondering who are these people, what am I doing here. And if I talked to someone, I would ask myself do you really mean that, does that person care whether you live or die, what would they think of you if they knew what you really thought and things like that. It was like going around with a Walkman tuned to a very depressing station only it's you.

That going around alienated and subsequently depressed is probably what convinced my wife that she could do better than a big hairy guy, running to middleage who didn't do squat (as she would have put it) all day and stayed up half the night watching TV. *I* think it was teaching in