

**the  
Best**

**American**

**Short**

**Stories**

**1974**

Stories by

Eleanor Clark

Maxine Kumin

Mary Lavin

John L'Heureux

Phillip Lopate

Michael Rothschild

William Saroyan

John Updike

Edited by  
Martha Foley

Arturo Vivante

Alice Walker

and others

THE  
BEST  
AMERICAN SHORT STORIES

1974

&

*the Yearbook of  
the American Short Story*

MARGARET LOUISE

Houghton Mifflin Company

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1974

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**TO  
WILLIAM SAROYAN**

## Acknowledgments

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## Foreword

WHAT IS A SHORT STORY? The businesslike *Short Story Index* defines it as “a story of more than two average-sized pages and not more than one hundred and fifty average-sized pages.” The more literary *American Heritage Dictionary* states it is “a short prose fiction aiming at unity of characterization, theme, and effect.” Robert Penn Warren says, “It is a story that is not too long.” Then a novel might be defined as a story that is not too short? Henry James said a story could be an anecdote or a picture and “I prefer the picture.” Edward J. O’Brien thought the modern short story grew out of the essay. Others think its genesis was in tales told by prehistoric people around cave fires. A Supreme Court justice, struggling with a pornography case decision, exclaimed, “I can’t define obscenity but I know it when I see it!” So it is, I believe, with a short story. You know a short story when you read it!

Years ago, however, during the Depression, a now famous author sent me another definition in a rather extraordinary way. When I was editing *Story* magazine, which was unique in those days because it was the only literary magazine devoted solely to the short story, I received a manuscript on densely typed yellow manila paper. The story was from a writer whose name I couldn’t then pronounce — Saroyan — and was called “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze.” It was like no short story I had ever read and it intrigued me. The other editors agreed that we should take it and I wrote the author that we were accepting his story. He answered that this was the first time a story of his had ever been accepted and he was so

greatly encouraged that from now on he was going to write a story every day to send to me. I laughed and thought it won't last, that's the natural exuberance of any writer accepted for the first time. I went on to read other manuscripts of which we were receiving about a hundred a day. A couple of days later a story arrived from Saroyan, and the next day another, and the next day another, and then another and another and another. This was impossible. "Put them in the crank file," I told my secretary. By the end of the month the crank file overflowed. Something had to be done. So one weekend my co-editor, Whit Burnett, and I took them to the country to read. Every one was a good story. Conscience-stricken, I wired an apologetic telegram to the author explaining no magazine could use a story a day from an author but his stories were wonderful and I would try to interest other editors. Back from California came a telegram: "What do you mean sending me a telegram? I am not supposed to receive them. I deliver them." He had a job as a postal telegraph messenger.

In that stack of manuscripts was one which, although it was to be published as such in his first book, was not a short story. It was a letter explaining to me why he couldn't send me a story that day. He was too cold. The California temperature had sunk abnormally low, he was freezing and he had no money to buy fuel. There was an old tub and he thought of getting warm by burning in it some of his five hundred books, most of which he had bought for a nickel apiece. But as he turned over the pages and looked at the words, even German ones which he did not understand, he could not burn them. He simply could not burn any book. The important story he had hoped to write for me before being silenced by the cold which made him jump up from his chair and do bending exercises was lost forever.

"Well, I can tell you about it . . . I will tell you the things I was telling myself this morning while I was getting this story lined up in my mind." Then comes Saroyan's definition of how a short story should be written.

*Think of America, I told myself this morning. The whole thing. The cities, all the houses, all the people, the coming and going, the coming of children, the going of them, the coming and going of men and death, the movement, the talk, the sound of machinery, the*



oratory, think of the pain in America and the fear and the deep inward longing of all things alive in America. Remember the great machines, wheels turning, smoke and fire, the mines and the men working them, the noise, the confusion. Remember the newspapers and the moving picture theatres and everything that is a part of this life. Let this be your purpose: to suggest this great country.

Then turn to the specific. Go out to some single person and dwell with him, within him, lovingly, seeking to understand the miracle of his being, and utter the truth of his existence and reveal the splendor of the mere fact of his being alive, and say it in great prose, simply, show that he is of the time, of the machines and the fire and smoke, the newspapers and the noise. Go with him to his secret and speak of it gently, showing that it is the secret of man. Do not deceive. Do not make up lies for the sake of pleasing anyone. No one need be killed in your story. Simply relate what is the great event of all history, of all time, the humble, artless truth of mere being. There is no greater theme: no one need be violent to help you with your art. There is violence. Mention it of course when it is time to mention it. Mention the War. Mention all ugliness, all waste. Do even this lovingly. But emphasize the glorious truth of mere being. It is the major theme. You do not have to create a triumphant climax. The man you write of need not perform some heroic or monstrous deed in order to make your prose great. Let him do what he has always done, day in and day out, continuing to live. Let him walk and talk and think and sleep and dream and awaken and walk again and talk again and move and be alive. It is enough. There is nothing else to write about. You have never seen a short story in life. The events of life have never fallen into the form of the short story or the form of the poem, or into any other form. Your own consciousness is the only form you need. Your own awareness is the only action you need. Speak of this man, recognize his existence. Speak of man.

There is a sequel. *Harper's Magazine* this past year published a short story by Saroyan. It is called "Isn't Today the Day?" and is all about why again he doesn't write a story. I shall not spoil it by telling you about it. It is included in this collection and you can read it for yourself.

Much more than usual, the short story has been a prime topic of

discussion this past year. Lamenting the pressure put upon short story writers to produce novels which he considers a kind of publishing elephantiasis, L. E. Sissman, in an *Atlantic* article, emphasizes the fact that many excellent short story writers are unable to attain the same excellence in novels. Mr. Sissman does not say so but it is equally true that many fine novelists cannot write good short stories. I knew one, the Rumanian Peter Neagoe, who used to say "Give me a novel to write any time! If you get stuck in a novel you can always say, 'The next morning.'"

Mr. Sissman regrets that the publishing rating game with its continual emphasis on "bigness" in writing as in sports, architecture, production, and all American endeavors, has all but legislated a particularly apposite form of American writing out of existence.

*I am talking, of course, about the short story. It could be argued that the short story, though not a domestic invention, has been perfected in America, and that, in an age of lightning disjunction and sleight-of-hand change, it is perfectly adapted to mirror and describe the way we live now. This is, after all, a time of short takes, of instant inputs, of kaleidoscopic sense experiences flashing and fading, dozens of times a day, before our eyes. Modern art has adapted itself to these changes by telescoping the space-time continuum: on a single canvas, we may see an object simultaneously in various elevations, in various stages of metamorphosis. Modern poetry has jettisoned the long forms—the epic and the narrative—in favor of short epiphanies, if I may use that wan New Criticism term just one more time. Modern film has invented the intercut, the jump cut, and the split screen to feed us different sequences of action and different levels of meaning almost simultaneously. But the prose narrative has, conversely, been moving from the short and timely to the long and irrelevant. . . . Why is this? Purely, I'd say, a matter of the rating game and the marketing structure that supports it.*

Mr. Sissman goes on to cite two well-known authors as examples. "The granddaddy of manqué short story writers was Ernest Hemingway. The pouchful of glittering first-water half-carat diamonds he wrote in the twenties—of which 'In Our Time' is the archetypal example—was soon superseded by increasingly sprawling novels, none of which after *The Sun Also Rises* is really first-rate." Philip

Roth is another example he gives of a writer who had been cajoled by marketing considerations and perhaps a desire for wider recognition into abandoning the short story which he had mastered for an imperfect grasp of the novel.

There are ever so many more instances. One of the most heart-breaking I think, is Katherine Anne Porter, author of magical short stories. Many years before it was finally published, there was an announcement that she had contracted to write a novel. Every now and then all through those many years word was given out that the novel was progressing and would appear soon. When *Ship of Fools* did at last appear it was incredibly inferior to the short stories her readers love so much in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and her other collections. Only those who have been close to writers and know their struggles with the act of composition can guess at the agony Miss Porter must have endured trying to cope with a novel and waiting publishers. Worse yet, think of all the beautiful short stories she might have been writing!

Another writer whose early short stories I personally prefer to his later novels is Vladimir Nabokov. He, too, has been writing recently in praise of the short story, saying that he is confirmed "in the exhilarating belief that at the present time (say, for the last fifty years) the greatest short stories have been produced not in England, not in Russia, and certainly not in France but in this country." As his particular favorites he lists John Cheever's "The Country Husband," John Updike's "The Happiest I've Been," J. D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Herbert Gold's "Death in Miami Beach," John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," and Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities."

Critics, rather than publishers, bear the brunt of Vance Bourjaily's ire in his *New York Times Book Review* article, "Stories Should Not Be Their Own Reward." Since he has been associated with the Iowa School of Letters and a judge in the Iowa Short Fiction prize contest, he has become deeply aware of the importance of American short stories. He declares, "Two things must become clear to us: one is that the short story is not a satellite but as different from the novel as is poetry from drama. The other that, in terms of story talent, there are exciting people around, doing first-rate work . . . couldn't we encourage and support a separate criticism? Then we might hope to expand university activity in book publication, periodicals

and prize-giving — and how very welcome it would be to be joined in this by the creation of a story-collection category in the National Book Awards.”

Fortunately for short story lovers there are a number of magazines throughout the country publishing good stories. Three of the most important are *The Hudson Review*, edited by Frederick Morgan, which is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, *The South Dakota Review*, edited by John Milton, celebrating its tenth anniversary, and *The Quarterly Review of Literature* with a thirtieth anniversary. This country is to be congratulated on possessing literary magazines of such high quality.

I am grateful to all the editors who have kept this anthology supplied with copies of their magazines and to their authors for generously granting reprint rights. The editor of any new magazine is urged to send copies to me.

The editors and staff of Houghton Mifflin are entitled to gratitude for their help. Finally, tribute is paid to the memory of Edward J. O'Brien who founded this anthology.

Martha Foley

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# AGNES BOYER

## *The Deserter*

(FROM PRISM INTERNATIONAL)

THE DESERTER SITS at the kitchen table. He eats his cold beef sandwiches slowly and quietly.

"I only keep the fellows two days," I say.

The deserter looks at me and says nothing. His face is a blank page and the eyes that return every look I give him give back the same blank answer.

"I find it works out best that way," I say.

He still says nothing. His face is young-old; his wrists are very slim. The knuckles on his fingers show white through the thin skin. He continues eating in the same careful manner, but his eyes now move from mine to the open door and the green-wet shimmering beyond. He watches the little poplars flickering in the wind against the deep blue of the southern Ontario sky. It's very nice here, his look says.

He looks down at his plate.

"Most of them can't stand me much longer than that, anyway," I say, trying for a smile. "My husband is not —" I search for the word that will not wound too deeply, — "how shall we say? Sympathetic."

The eyes shift and move and come up to my face, then lower and rest upon my mouth.

"It's not been easy for him," I say. "Here. His life here, I mean. It wasn't easy for him before either, you know. When he was a young man, I mean."

His gaze moves just beyond me. His eyes reflect nothing at my

words; it is impossible to know what he is thinking. His silence is beginning to nettle me. After all, I think, I could tell him what they instructed me downtown: "Promise one night only. See how it works out. Then you can extend your invitation if you like."

"And then, too," I say aloud, "it's my son's room, you know. And he may be trekking home anytime this weekend." I chuckle softly to myself. "One never knows about him, you know. He's that kind of fellow. A kind of a kook, you know."

His face has formed into a kind of rigid mask. "Would you like some more coffee?" I ask, jolting the table a little as I start up.

His arms lie inert on the table. I can see that it will not take a hard word to evict him, not even a frowning glance; he has already accepted his unacceptance. And yet, somehow, this one is different: I sense somewhere deep inside him, strong and hard, a person still; and him carefully maintaining that sure knowledge, even while the whole external world contrives to make something else of him.

"You got a lot more, then?" he asks, the sentence rising in the air just before the end, like a question that has changed its mind, and I hear the mountain highlands of central Pennsylvania in his deep voice.

"I'm going out for a while," I say, pouring the coffee. "Do you think you might like to cut some grass in back?"

"Yeah, sure," he says, softly, drinking noiselessly.

I hover near the table; I am not through with him yet.

"Have you been to Rochdale at all? You should really try to find a place in Metro, you know. Where there are groups of people you could get in with; meet, I mean. Others like yourself, I mean."

The deep sultan on his face has already begun to fade. His eyes are grey, deep-set and penetrating.

"If you would just get one of those underground newspapers," I continue, trying not to show impatience, "you'd get to learn about these things — your way around and all."

How docile he is, I think. I sit down again, opposite. I want to tell him then about how it is with Sherman and how I usually give fellows like him a place to stay only when Sherm was gone to the States or the West Coast or someplace like that. I want to tell him that last winter Sherman made a trip to Japan and I had two fellows like him living in the downstairs room; but I am afraid he will



answer me with another blank look. I want to tell him he will have to learn to be tough here, — tougher than ever, because there is a stigma on him here, not from what he has done, but just from his origin. I want to tell him how the hatred comes thick here now, thick and virulent, a superficial amiability hiding an ill-concealed contempt, a hatred spreading now and touching everything and everyone, in its intensity making no distinctions among comers from the south; — but he would not hear me now. at any rate, so very wary has he become.

“Have you been to the Hall? They have a great meal down there on Christmas and Thanksgiving, I’ve heard.” He stares at me. “You haven’t been there? You should, you know. You should look it up. You could make some good contacts there, you know.”

“What’s that?” His voice comes out loud, startling me a little.

“The Hall? It’s just a place where the American exiles go.” He waits. “I’ve never been there myself, you understand,” I add hurriedly, “I’ve only heard about it. It’s right downtown someplace.” I wave my arm in that direction; as it drops, my fingers brush his sleeve, and I pull my hand back to me quickly. A faint shadow crosses his face then, like the shadow of a passing bird’s wing, faint and fleeting; I think I see disgust, or something very close to it, and I suppress the little points of anger rising up in me. “The lawn mower’s in the garage,” I say abruptly.

He smiles to himself then, a tiny smile, hiding his poor teeth. I leave the room quickly to avoid his eyes. I go upstairs to get my purse and keys and when I come down he has gone out into the back and is standing next to the rose garden. Hands in his pockets, his stance is detached, dreamy.

I am gone for half an hour before I remember another thing the man downtown had said: “Never leave them alone in the house when you’re not there.” I force myself not to hurry, to pace myself as if it were any other shopping trip, any other day. I visit the supermarket, the bank, the liquor store. I buy every vegetable I can ever imagine using, waiting patiently for each weighing. I look at all the American magazines, glossy and blatant, stacked in the rack near the check-out counter. I spend a lot of time reading the lists of all the foreign wines at the LCBO outlet. I finally pick out a Graves and a Portuguese rosé, declining the Puerto Rican rum be-