

The Critical Response to Ann Beattie

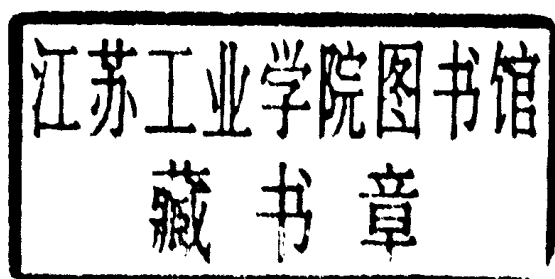
Edited by

Jaye Berman Montresor

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Series Foreword

Critical Responses in Arts and Letters is designed to present a documentary history of highlights in the critical reception to the body of work of writers and artists and to individual works that are generally considered to be of major importance. The focus of each volume in this series is basically historical. The introductions to each volume are themselves brief histories of the critical response an author, artist, or individual work has received. This response is then further illustrated by reprinting a strong representation of the major critical reviews and articles that have collectively produced the author's, artist's, or work's critical reputation.

The scope of *Critical Responses in Arts and Letters* knows no chronological or geographical boundaries. Volumes under preparation include studies of individuals from around the world and in both contemporary and historical periods.

Each volume is the work of an individual editor, who surveys the entire body of criticism on a single author, artist, or work. The editor then selects the best material to depict the critical response received by an author or artist over his/her entire career. Documents produced by the author or artist may also be included when the editor finds that they are necessary to a full understanding of the materials at hand. In circumstances where previous isolated volumes of criticism on a particular individual or work exist, the editor carefully selects material that better reflects the nature and directions of the critical response over time.

In addition to the introduction and the documentary section, the editor of each volume is free to solicit new essays on areas that may not have been adequately dealt with in previous criticism. Also, for volumes on living writers and artists, new interviews may be included, again at the discretion of the volume's editor. The volumes also provide a supplementary bibliography and are fully indexed.

While each volume in *Critical Responses to Arts and Letters* is unique, it is also hoped that in combination they form a useful, documentary history of the critical response to the arts, and one that can be easily and profitably employed by students and scholars.

Cameron Northouse

Preface and Acknowledgments

Since 1976, Ann Beattie has published five collections of short stories and four novels and has been acknowledged as an original and important voice in American letters. This is the first volume that seeks to examine the critical reception of her fiction over the entire span of her career to date.

The goal of this volume is to bring together a range of materials--book reviews, essays, interviews, biographical, and bibliographical material--which will help students, scholars, and interested readers understand Beattie's work in a critical context. In addition to presenting previously published materials, this volume also contains new essays on Beattie's fiction by scholars who draw on a wide range of contemporary theories in interpreting her writing. Ms. Beattie also allowed me to interview her for this book, which I hope provides some fresh insight into her stories and novels.

Reviews, essays, and interviews are grouped together according to the novel or short story collection to which they pertain. If an essay refers to more than one work, it is placed according to the most recent work mentioned.

I wish to thank Villanova University for its support of this project. I am especially grateful to the English department chair, Phillip Pulsiano, for his generosity and encouragement. I also wish to acknowledge the help of my graduate assistants, Dan Hipp and Jennifer Farthing, for their research and proofreading skills.

I especially want to thank Ann Beattie for the helpful details that she provided through letters and phone calls and for graciously allowing me to interview her for the book--a most pleasurable experience!

My parents, Mark and Kaye Berman, deserve special mention for caring for my son, Kip, during a very busy summer. And lastly, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my husband, Steven, for his calming presence and computer know-how. This book is dedicated to him with all my love.

Villanova University

Jaye Berman Montresor

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Introduction

Ann Beattie was born Charlotte Ann Beattie on September 18, 1947 in Washington, D.C. A self-described "artsy little thing," Beattie grew up in the Washington suburbs, where she was encouraged to read, draw, and write stories by her parents, HEW administrator James A. Beattie and housewife Charlotte (Crosby) Beattie. Beattie was raised in a middle class neighborhood and graduated in the bottom ten percent of her public high school class, a fact that may have been due, she said in an interview with Gene Lyons, to undiagnosed depression: "[my parents] should have known better. They should have taken me to a shrink or changed schools. I think I was clinically depressed. That is the only thing I haven't forgiven them. They should have done something." Beattie attended college at American University, where it took the former poor student only three years to earn her B.A. She had considered a possible career in journalism but decided to major in English. Although Beattie claims to have had no aspirations toward a writing career at the time, she did edit the university literary journal and was also chosen by *Mademoiselle* magazine to be a guest editor in 1968. After graduation in 1969, Beattie went on to do graduate work at the University of Connecticut, where she received her M.A. in English in 1970. She then began work on a doctorate but was unhappy with the way literature was being taught, and once her writing began being accepted for publication in 1972, she left the program without obtaining her degree.

She has said in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory that she began writing short stories because "I was so goddamn bored in graduate school I turned into a writer." Her first story, "A Rose for Judy Garland's Casket," was published in *Western Humanities Review* in 1972, and her first major story, "Victor Blue," was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1973, but her career really began when the *New Yorker* published "A Platonic Relationship" in 1974 after rejecting more than twenty of her stories in a row. She became a regular contributor to the magazine, and although her relationship with

the *New Yorker* has waned (only two stories have appeared there in the last six years), she is likely to be forever associated with the periodical that is famous for showcasing great American writing.

Beattie married David Gates, a writer and musician, in 1973; they divorced in 1980. She is currently married to painter Lincoln Perry, and they live in Charlottesville, Virginia, where Beattie was visiting writer and lecturer at the University of Virginia during 1975-77. She was also Briggs-Copeland lecturer at Harvard University the following year, but Beattie has chosen to support herself solely by her writing ever since she has been able to do so. Her awards have included a Guggenheim Fellowship, an award in literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a Distinguished Alumnae award and an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from American University. She is also a member of the International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists (PEN).

The simultaneous publication in 1976 of her first collection of short stories, *Distortions* (most of which had appeared in the *New Yorker*), and her first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, quickly established her reputation as an important new fiction writer, although critical responses were mixed. Few critics were as wholeheartedly enthusiastic as her fellow *New Yorker* writer John Updike, who expressed in his review of *Chilly Scenes of Winter* for that magazine, "ardent admiration of the author's cool powers." Her mentor at the University of Connecticut, J. D. O'Hara, also expressed unqualified praise in the *New York Times Book Review* where he proclaimed that she was "the best new writer. . . since Donald Barthelme." But then few critics could have so clearly understood what Beattie was attempting in her fiction, and where O'Hara found echoes of Beckett and Joyce in the static situations of her formless plots, other critics unprepared for the shape and substance of her storytelling found her work less inspired. Pico Iyer noted, for example, in *Partisan Review* that "Beattie's tales seem almost mass-produced. . . . nearly all the off-beat tunes she plays are in the same (minor) key, and after reading a few, one feels that one could write a few." And D. Keith Mano coined a phrase more memorable than he found the incidents in Beattie's novel, when he surmised in the *National Review* that "[s]he must have *wanted* to produce a novel that, like barium enemas, would pass through without assimilation or effect." Most reviewers, like Susan Horowitz writing for the *Saturday Review*, tempered their recognition of Beattie's skill as a writer with reservations concerning subject matter, characterization, or style: "She is obviously a first-rate craftswoman with an eye for idiosyncratic detail. I only hope that in her future work she will not keep her instincts and characters so much under glass." In a similar vein, *New York Times* writer Anatole Broyard diagnosed himself as "suffering from . . . the shock of unrecognition" after reading *Distortions* and *Chilly Scenes of Winter*. "In spite of a style that virtually eliminates personality, she still manages to haunt the reader with her work."

With the unusual situation of the novel and short stories coming out at the same time and often being reviewed in the same column, it was tempting for critics to take sides in rating Beattie as better suited to the novel or short story form. Writing for the *Yale Review*, David Thorburn expressed the minority opinion in finding *Chilly Scenes of Winter* "a more interesting and significant performance, richer in psychological nuance and in documentary power." He found the novel "less tendentious than the stories, less confined by neo-absurdist attitudes toward contemporary experience." The majority of those reviewing the two works were in agreement with Greg Morris, who wrote in the *Prairie Schooner* that "if you wander carelessly into *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, you're in for a disappointment, as the wit and the sharpness of the short stories have been surrendered to the necessities of the longer form."

With the publication of her next two novels, *Falling in Place* (1980) and *Love Always* (1985), and next two collections of short stories, *Secrets and Surprises* (1978) and *The Burning House* (1982), the critical balance continued to tip in favor of Beattie's skills as a short story writer. Writing in the *New England Review* after the publication of *Secrets and Surprises*, Blanche H. Gelfant represents the critical consensus in noting that the technique of accumulating trivial details which is so effective as a method for creating Beattie's short stories is far less successful when applied to her novel writing because "the novel becomes monotonous when insignificant details multiply and recur. . . . Beattie is more exciting, more creative with *nothing*, as a short story writer than as a novelist--at this stage in her career." And Broyard, having now recovered from "the shock of unrecognition," compared the process of reading *Secrets and Surprises* more positively to "an unplanned tour, the sort of trip that is determined from moment to moment or place to place on the strength of sheer whim or impulse. The chief virtue of unplanned tours lies in the surprises they afford and in the feeling of independence they permit. The unplanned tour may also be seen as an apt metaphor for progress in our time and it can therefore lay claim to a kind of authenticity or verisimilitude." The academic community began taking serious notice of Beattie's short stories, as well, and in addition to publishers anthologizing individual stories for classroom study, academic journals, especially *Studies in Short Fiction*, began publishing critical interpretations of her stories, all of which are reprinted in this volume.

Regarding her relative strengths as a short story writer or novelist, Beattie herself has always been clear about her discomfort with writing novels. She confessed to Joyce Maynard in a *New York Times Book Review* interview following the publication of her second novel to feeling like "a bumbler with the novel form. I can't envision ever writing another one. Then again, I didn't envision writing this one. I wonder if there *are* novelists who feel they know how to write novels. I wonder if this knowledge exists." Nevertheless, Beattie already showed considerable development as a novelist as reviews of *Falling in Place* attest. On the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, Richard

Locke observed that "*Falling in Place* is stronger, more accomplished, larger in every way than anything she's done. . . . It's like going from gray television to full-color movies." But unlike O'Hara, Locke saw "none of the existential terror of Samuel Beckett's seemingly banal subject matter." Rather, the suburban setting of Beattie's novel brought inevitable comparisons by Locke and others to her predecessors at the *New Yorker* who famously mined similar terrain--Updike, Cheever, and Salinger--comparisons which Beattie herself finds reductive.

With the publication of her third book of short stories, *The Burning House*, Beattie's reputation as a master stylist was firmly established. In her review in the *New York Times Book Review*, Margaret Atwood stated that Beattie wields her technique "with absolute control. Compared to the earlier stories, these are less grotesque, more narrowly and intensely focused, more accomplished; they are also less outrageous and less outraged and more sympathetic to their characters." In Atwood's view, "[n]o one is better at the plangent detail, at evoking the floating, unreal ambiance of grief. I would say Ann Beattie is at her best here, except that I think she can do even better." Atwood, like so many critics of Beattie's fiction, found that her subject was unworthy of her formidable technique. Maggie Lewis concurred with this view in her *Christian Science Monitor* review: "Ann Beattie's way with words makes you want to read whatever she writes next, even though every story in this new collection is depressing." While conceding the "occasional hopeful note," Daniel Zitin also lamented in his *Nation* review that "things are bad for Beattie's people. Of the sixteen stories in this volume, almost all feature dead or disintegrating relationships;" nevertheless, "their unity of theme and technique . . . gives them their strong claim on our attention."

It was with this collection that Beattie began using the copyright notice "Irony & Pity, Inc.," which in its joking reference to Hemingway points to an aspect of Beattie's writing that critics have found troubling. Locke, like many other critics of Beattie, detected a drawback in Beattie's use of "an irony so uniformly spread around the imagined world that nearly all color and feeling are leached away, an irony that becomes a kind of self-defensive verbal tic, an irony without reference to any higher, deeper, unironically embraced standards, not even esthetic standards." Writing for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Diana Rowan had earlier lamented Beattie's "preoccupation with maintaining her own stance--cool, arch, never sentimental" and found that "examining her characters' flaws . . . with relentless irony, makes her seem condescending, even contemptuous." In her essay, "Ann Beattie and the Culture of Narcissism," Barbara Schapiro also sees Beattie's irony as "unsatisfying, for in its detachment, it too is defensive and emotionally void." But she went further than other critics in looking beyond Beattie's characters' symptoms to their root cause, which she terms cultural narcissism (after Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*). She saw in her characters' idealizations--of the sixties, of rock and