

PRIZE STORIES 1987

The O. Henry Awards

EDITED AND WITH
AN INTRODUCTION
BY WILLIAM ABRAHAMS



47-632
H523-
lop

PRIZE STORIES 1987

The O. Henry Awards

EDITED AND WITH
AN INTRODUCTION
BY WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK
1987

The Library of Congress has cataloged this work
as follows

Prize stories. 1947-

Garden City, N. Y. : Doubleday

v. 22, 1971.

Annals. 22

The O. Henry awards.

None published 1952-53.

Continues: O. Henry memorial award prize stories.

Key title: Prize stories. ISSN 0079-5453.

h Short stories, American--Collections works.

PZ1 O11

813'0408--d73

21-9372

IARC-S

Library of Congress

(6052183)rev4

Library of Congress Catalog in Publication Data

ISBN 0-385-23394-1

Copyright © 1987 by Doubleday & Company, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FIRST EDITION

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This volume is the sixty-seventh in the O. Henry Memorial Award series.

In 1918, the Society of Arts and Sciences met to vote upon a monument to the master of the short story, O. Henry. They decided that this memorial should be in the form of two prizes for the best short stories published by American authors in American magazines during the year 1919. From this beginning, the memorial developed into an annual anthology of outstanding short stories by American authors, published, with the exception of the years 1952 and 1953, by Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Blanche Colton Williams, one of the founders of the awards, was editor from 1919 to 1932; Harry Hansen from 1933 to 1940; Herschel Brickell from 1941 to 1951. The annual collection did not appear in 1952 and 1953, when the continuity of the series was interrupted by the death of Herschel Brickell. Paul Engle was editor from 1954 to 1959 with Hanson Martin co-editor in the years 1954 to 1960; Mary Stegner in 1960; Richard Poirier from 1961 to 1966, with assistance from and co-editorship with William Abrahams from 1964 to 1966. William Abrahams became editor of the series in 1967.

In 1970 Doubleday published under Mr. Abrahams' editorship *Fifty Years of the American Short Story*, and in 1981, *Prize Stories of the Seventies*. Both are collections of stories selected from this series.

The stories chosen for this volume were published in the period from the summer of 1985 to the summer of 1986. A list of the magazines consulted appears at the back of the book. The choice of stories and the selection of prize winners are exclusively the responsibility of the editor. Biographical material is based on information provided by the contributors and obtained from standard works of reference.

INTRODUCTION

Two decades—from *Prize Stories 1967* to *Prize Stories 1987*—comprise a period of time long enough to justify one's making generalizations and taking retrospective views. Ordinarily this is just the sort of thing I have attempted to avoid in introducing each year's stories; too often the wisdom of one year contradicts the wisdom of the year before, or becomes the cliché of the next. Still, arriving at the twenty-first collection for which I have had editorial responsibility, I think it would be overly cautious not to state what I believe to be true, that the 400 stories that have appeared in the twenty-one collections represent a creative achievement of a rare order. Several of these stories, going back to the end of the 1960s and the 1970s, are on their way to classic stature, and one can predict as much for others more recent. The vitality and variety are unflagging.

Indeed, it is the variety—many forms, many voices, many attitudes and intentions—that accounts for the sense one has of an irrepressible vitality. As we know from its long history, there is no one prescribed mold for the story—that, surely, is one of its attractions to writers and readers alike. Each story written for its own sake, because its author feels it must be written *thus*, rather than in response to some condition imposed from without, becomes a kind of adventure or exploration: one listens for an individual voice, the mark of authenticity.

Fashion is something apart from this, though it is convenient and traditional to assign writers to schools, movements, and tendencies. New writers, especially, have been known to cluster together for comfort and attention. But no matter under which rubric they may write—as “new” this-that-or-the-other—in the end it is the story itself that matters, and if it is good enough, if it is its own story, it will survive the fashionable moment.

Influence, however, is something very different, and should not be confused with fashion. Consciously or not, there is no writer who has not been influenced by writers who came before. In the simple act of writing a story each new writer joins a continuum that extends from the present back to the beginnings of language and that first primitive need to tell someone about something that happened. But it is not necessary, nor especially enlightening, to establish a prehistoric lineage for the

story; it is sufficient to acknowledge that the masters of this century—James, Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield, Lawrence, Hemingway—are felt presences in the continuing story of the story. And much that is “new” is often rediscovery of an earlier discovery. Of course, one is always in search of new writers, but there is the danger that in the search one will lose sight of a significant progression, that writers will go on writing (one hopes), and bring to the story the enrichments of experience. In that sense the history of the story is of a never-ending renaissance.

It would be an exaggeration to speak of the rediscovery of “the first-person story,” for its history is as long and continuous as the story itself. But in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of such stories. Hundreds of them are being published in magazines that range from the large to the little, from the conservative to the defiantly experimental. Just under half the stories in the present collection, including the two that share First Prize, are stories in the first person. Such an outpouring can’t be shrugged off as mere coincidence; it suggests a deeply felt need. The sense of truthfulness that we accord to “I” the narrator, the listener, the watcher, the witness, or to “I” the participant, bearing witness to his or her own experience, a member of the story, the explorer, the discoverer—that truthfulness exerts a powerful appeal, now especially when we are being subjected to a tyranny of facts at every level of our lives, cunningly or blatantly manipulated to keep us from the truth.

The story-memoir, or memoir-story, may seem at first glance restrictive in what it allows its author to do—after all, so much escapes the “I” and the eye. Granting, then, the limitations of a particular narrative point of view, there prove to be, on the evidence here, an astonishing variety of ways of writing such stories.

The point is perhaps best made by looking at Louise Erdrich’s “Fleur” and Joyce Johnson’s “The Children’s Wing.” Each is told in the first person; each is a distinctive achievement. Having said that, one ceases to look farther for resemblances between them. One listens instead to their very different voices.

Louise Erdrich is a poet and a writer of highly charged prose, a maker of legends and myths. She—that is, of course, her narrator, a member of the Chippewa nation who exists at the margins of the story

—like the tale she has to tell, flies high as a tornado over the real and the possible.

What are we to think of her heroine, Fleur Pillager? (The name itself is a suggestion.) When "only a girl," she is saved from drowning by two men, both of whom subsequently disappear. Is that Fleur's fault? Evidently. Here the narrator enters: "It went to show, my grandma said. It figured to her, all right. By saving Fleur Pillager, those two men had lost themselves."

When Fleur drowned again she was twenty, and we are told "though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepesu, the waterman, the monster, wanted her for himself."

The fantastication becomes dazzling in a description of the waterman:

Our mothers warn us that we'll think he's handsome, for he appears with green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child's. But if you fall into his arms, he sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins. His feet are joined as one and his skin, brass scales, rings to the touch. You're fascinated, cannot move. He casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mice on your breasts. He holds you under. Then he takes the body of a lion or a fat brown worm. He's made of gold. He's made of beach moss. He's a thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive.

The story to its very end remains an unanswered enigma, holding in balance the magical and the ordinary. Fleur moves from the Chippewa reservation to the town of Argus, a few miles south, and the narrator tells us she "almost destroyed that town." Are we meant to believe in what happened in Argus in the year 1920? Or is it all a gorgeous, echoing tall story, timeless as legend, brought to life again in an extraordinary retelling? The narrator comments on how old men retell the story: "It comes up different every time and has no ending, no beginning. They get the middle wrong too." One would like to believe, we are prepared to believe, that Louise Erdrich has got it right.

To go from Argus in 1920 to Manhattan in the present is a tremendous leap, but it is easily done, and in doing so one discovers yet again the vitality and the variety of the contemporary story. If the narrator in "Fleur" teases us into half-believing that the story she tells is actually

true, Joyce Johnson's "The Children's Wing" presents itself as a straightforward memoir:

The summer Nicky was so sick, I would leave work a little early and go to the Chinese takeout place on Forty-ninth Street. After a while it was my regular routine. Nicky would call me at the office and place his order. "An egg roll, of course," he'd say. "And sweet and sour shrimp. And Mom, would you bring me a Coke?" I didn't like him to have soft drinks, but he'd say, "Please, please," trying to sound pitiful, and I'd always get one for him in the end. It was hard to refuse him anything that summer. When I'd get to the hospital the other mothers would be there already with their shopping bags. Soon whole families would be gathered around the bedsides of the children, everyone eating out of foil containers or off paper plates, like an odd kind of picnic or a birthday party that had been displaced.

Simple, spare, plain, this is the language of testimony or reportage, telling us how it was. But that final word, "displaced," so precisely used, startles us with its reverberations. The story will not merely accurately recall the events of that summer when the narrator's son was "so sick," it will in its quiet, unemphatic way reveal its true meanings not only for Nicky but for the narrator too.

"Displaced" as in "displaced persons"; the D.P. camps that became familiar to us in World War II and afterward; the phrase from T. S. Eliot, "the whole world is a hospital"—symbolism abounds. But Joyce Johnson is an artist who knows how much of art lies in what is left unsaid. The narrator never raises her voice, or quavers sentimentally, or brings to the surface of her story the metaphors that lie just out of sight beneath it. The details she gives us engender a kind of urban poetry:

The children's wing was in the oldest part of the hospital, one of those gloomy gray stone buildings put up at the turn of the century. There was a marble rotunda on the ground floor. When you took the elevator up, there was no more marble, just dim green corridors and unending linoleum and muffled fake laughter from all the television sets.

That "muffled fake laughter" is not heard in the narrator's voice. She resists the besetting temptation of the first person to tell too much about herself. We know that she is Nicky's mother, that she is divorced, that she works "at the office," that she visits him daily in the children's

wing, talks sensibly to him when he telephones anxiously in the middle of the night, though she admits to a moment of private panic: "I wanted to go straight to the hospital and bring Nicky home."

In truth, we know all that we need to know, no more. The very controlled and selected way in which the story is given to us adds immeasurably to its credibility. Early on, the narrator writes, "I kept thinking Nicky's time in the children's ward would change him." And it does. That, after all, is what the story is about. Its final sentence, so brief and unadorned and inevitable, is like an epitaph carved on a gravestone. In its six words it becomes the summation of all that has gone before. Reading this story we have been displaced from conventional expectations; we are moved and enlightened.

I want to express my appreciation to Sally Antoseros, Barbara Broadhurst, and John M. Dean.

—William Abrahams

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Publisher's Note | vii |
| Introduction by William Abrahams | ix |
| Co-Winners of First Prize: | |
| Louise Erdrich, "Fleur," <i>Esquire</i> , August 1986. | i |
| Joyce Johnson, "The Children's Wing," <i>Harper's Magazine</i> , July 1986. | 15 |
| Robert Boswell, "The Darkness of Love," <i>Ploughshares</i> , vol. 11, nos. 2-3, 1985. | 25 |
| Alice Adams, "Tide Pools," <i>The New Yorker</i> , December 16, 1985. | 65 |
| Stuart Dybek, "Blight," <i>Chicago</i> , October 1985. | 81 |
| James Lott, "The Janeites," <i>The Virginia Quarterly Review</i> , Summer 1986. | 103 |
| Donald Barthelme, "Basil from Her Garden," <i>The New Yorker</i> , October 21, 1985. | 115 |
| Gina Berriault, "The Island of Ven," <i>Ploughshares</i> , vol. 11, nos. 2-3, 1985. | 124 |
| Jim Pitzen, "The Village," <i>Fiction Network</i> , Spring/Summer 1986. | 132 |
| Richard Bausch, "What Feels Like the World," <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , October 1985. | 144 |
| Millicent Dillon, "Monitor," <i>The Threepenny Review</i> , Fall 1985. | 160 |
| Norman Lavers, "Big Dog," <i>The North American Review</i> , September 1985. | 170 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Robert Taylor, Jr., "Lady of Spain," <i>The Hudson Review</i> , Spring 1986. | 188 |
| Helen Norris, "The Singing Well," <i>TriQuarterly</i> , Fall 1985. | 208 |
| Grace Paley, "Midrash on Happiness," <i>TriQuarterly</i> , Winter 1986. | 232 |
| Lewis Horne, "Taking Care," <i>The Virginia Quarterly Review</i> , Autumn 1985. | 235 |
| Warren Wallace, "Up Home," <i>Raritan</i> , Fall 1985. | 251 |
| Joyce Carol Oates, "Ancient Airs, Voices," <i>The Antioch Review</i> , Winter 1986. | 274 |
| Daniel Stern, "The Interpretation of Dreams by Sigmund Freud: A Story," <i>The Ontario Review</i> , Spring-Summer 1986. | 300 |
| Mary Robison, "I Get By," <i>The New Yorker</i> , July 21, 1986. | 308 |
| Magazines Consulted | 316 |

FLEUR

LOUISE ERDRICH

Louise Erdrich grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, and now lives in New Hampshire with her husband and collaborator Michael Dorris, and their five children. Her first book, *Love Medicine*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Her second novel, *The Beet Queen*, was published in 1986.

The first time she drowned in the cold and glassy waters of Lake Turcot, Fleur Pillager was only a girl. Two men saw the boat tip, saw her struggle in the waves. They rowed over to the place she went down, and jumped in. When they dragged her over the gunwales, she was cold to the touch and stiff, so they slapped her face, shook her by the heels, worked her arms back and forth, and pounded her back until she coughed up lake water. She shivered all over like a dog, then took a breath. But it wasn't long afterward that those two men disappeared. The first wandered off, and the other, Jean Hat, got himself run over by a cart.

It went to show, my grandma said. It figured to her, all right. By saving Fleur Pillager, those two men had lost themselves.

The next time she fell in the lake, Fleur Pillager was twenty years old, and no one touched her. She washed onshore, her skin a dull dead gray, but when George Many Women bent to look closer, he saw her chest move. Then her eyes spun open, sharp black riprock, and she looked at him. "You'll take my place," she hissed. Everybody scattered and left her there, so no one knows how she dragged herself home. Soon after that we noticed Many Women changed, grew afraid, wouldn't leave his house, and would not be forced to go near water. For his caution, he lived until the day that his sons brought him a new tin bathtub. Then

Copyright © 1986 by Louise Erdrich. First appeared in *Esquire*. Reprinted by permission.

the first time he used the tub he slipped, got knocked out, and breathed water while his wife stood in the other room frying breakfast.

Men stayed clear of Fleur Pillager after the second drowning. Even though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepeshu, the waterman, the monster, wanted her for himself. He's a devil, that one, love-hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur.

Our mothers warn us that we'll think he's handsome, for he appears with green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child's. But if you fall into his arms, he sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins. His feet are joined as one and his skin, brass scales, rings to the touch. You're fascinated, cannot move. He casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mica on your breasts. He holds you under. Then he takes the body of a lion or a fat brown worm. He's made of gold. He's made of beach moss. He's a thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive.

Unless you are Fleur Pillager. We all knew she couldn't swim. After the first time, we thought she'd never go back to Lake Turcot. We thought she'd keep to herself, live quiet, stop killing men off by drowning in the lake. After the first time, we thought she'd keep the good ways. But then, after the second drowning, we knew that we were dealing with something much more serious. She was haywire, out of control. She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice, and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn't talk about. Some say she kept the finger of a child in her pocket and a powder of unborn rabbits in a leather thong around her neck. She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body. We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. By day her silence and the wide grin she threw to bring down our guard made us frightened. Some thought that Fleur Pillager should be driven off the reservation, but not a single person who spoke like this had the nerve. And

finally, when people were just about to get together and throw her out, she left on her own and didn't come back all summer. That's what this story is about.

During that summer, when she lived a few miles south in Argus, things happened. She almost destroyed that town.

When she got down to Argus in the year of 1920, it was just a small grid of six streets on either side of the railroad depot. There were two elevators, one central, the other a few miles west. Two stores competed for the trade of the three hundred citizens, and three churches quarreled with one another for their souls. There was a frame building for Lutherans, a heavy brick one for Episcopalians, and a long narrow shingled Catholic church. This last had a tall slender steeple, twice as high as any building or tree.

No doubt, across the low, flat wheat, watching from the road as she came near Argus on foot, Fleur saw that steeple rise, a shadow thin as a needle. Maybe in that raw space it drew her the way a lone tree draws lightning. Maybe, in the end, the Catholics are to blame. For if she hadn't seen that sign of pride, that slim prayer, that marker, maybe she would have kept walking.

But Fleur Pillager turned, and the first place she went once she came into town was to the back door of the priest's residence attached to the landmark church. She didn't go there for a handout, although she got that, but to ask for work. She got that too, or the town got her. It's hard to tell which came out worse, her or the men or the town, although the upshot of it all was that Fleur lived.

The four men who worked at the butcher's had carved up about a thousand carcasses between them, maybe half of that steers and the other half pigs, sheep, and game animals like deer, elk, and bear. That's not even mentioning the chickens, which were beyond counting. Pete Kozka owned the place, and employed Lily Veddar, Tor Grunewald, and my stepfather, Dutch James, who had brought my mother down from the reservation the year before she disappointed him by dying. Dutch took me out of school to take her place. I kept house half the time and worked the other in the butcher shop, sweeping floors, putting

sawdust down, running a hambone across the street to a customer's bean pot or a package of sausage to the corner. I was a good one to have around because until they needed me, I was invisible. I blended into the stained brown walls, a skinny, big-nosed girl with staring eyes. Because I could fade into a corner or squeeze beneath a shelf, I knew everything, what the men said when no one was around, and what they did to Fleur.

Kozka's Meats served farmers for a fifty-mile area, both to slaughter, for it had a stock pen and chute, and to cure the meat by smoking it or spicing it in sausage. The storage locker was a marvel, made of many thicknesses of brick, earth insulation, and Minnesota timber, lined inside with sawdust and vast blocks of ice cut from Lake Turcot, hauled down from home each winter by horse and sledge.

A rathskle board building, part slaughterhouse, part store, was fixed to the low, thick square of the lockers. That's where Fleur worked. Kozka hired her for her strength. She could lift a haunch or carry a pole of sausages without stumbling, and she soon learned cutting from Pete's wife, a string-thin blonde who chain-smoked and handled the razor-sharp knives with nerveless precision, slicing close to her stained fingers. Fleur and Fritzie Kozka worked afternoons, wrapping their cuts in paper, and Fleur hauled the packages to the lockers. The meat was left outside the heavy oak doors that were only opened at 5:00 each afternoon, before the men ate supper.

Sometimes Dutch, Tor, and Lily ate at the lockers, and when they did I stayed too, cleaned floors, restoked the fires in the front smokehouse, while the men sat around the squat cast-iron stove spearing slats of hewing onto hardtack bread. They played long games of poker or cribbage on a board made from the planed end of a salt crate. They talked and I listened, although there wasn't much to hear since almost nothing ever happened in Argus. Tor was married, Dutch had lost my mother, and Lily read circulars. They mainly discussed about the auctions to come, equipment, or women.

Every so often, Pete Kozka came out front to make a whist, leaving Fritzie to smoke cigarettes and fry raised doughnuts in the back room. He sat and played a few rounds but kept his thoughts to himself. Fritzie did not tolerate him talking behind her back, and the one book he read

was the New Testament. If he said something, it concerned weather or a surplus of sheep stomachs, a ham that smoked green or the markets for corn and wheat. He had a good-luck talisman, the opal-white lens of a cow's eye. Playing cards, he rubbed it between his fingers. That soft sound and the slap of cards was about the only conversation.

Fleur finally gave them a subject.

Her cheeks were wide and flat, her hands large, chapped, muscular. Fleur's shoulders were broad as beams, her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow. An old green dress clung to her waist, worn thin where she sat. Her braids were thick like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved, deliberately, slowly in her work, held in and half-tamed, but only half. I could tell, but the others never saw. They never looked into her sly brown eyes or noticed her teeth, strong and curved and very white. Her legs were bare, and since she padded around in beadwork moccasins they never saw that her fifth toes were missing. They never knew she'd drowned. They were blinded, they were stupid, they only saw her in the flesh.

And yet it wasn't just that she was a Chippewa, or even that she was a woman, it wasn't that she was good-looking or even that she was alone that made their brains hum. It was how she played cards.

Women didn't usually play with men, so the evening that Fleur drew a chair up to the men's table without being so much as asked, there was a shock of surprise.

"What's this," said Lily. He was fat, with a snake's cold pale eyes and precious skin, smooth and lily-white, which is how he got his name. Lily had a dog, a stumpy mean little bull of a thing with a belly drum-tight from eating pork rinds. The dog liked to play cards just like Lily, and straddled his barrel thighs through games of stud, rum poker, vingt-un. The dog snapped at Fleur's arm that first night, but cringed back, its snarl frozen, when she took her place.

"I thought," she said, her voice soft and stroking, "you might deal me in."

There was a space between the heavy bin of spiced flour and the wall where I just fit. I hunkered down there, kept my eyes open, saw her black hair swing over the chair, her feet solid on the wood floor. I couldn't see up on the table where the cards slipped down, so after they

were deep in their game I raised myself up in the shadows, and crouched on a sill of wood.

I watched Fleur's hands stack and ruffle, divide the cards, spill them to each player in a blur, rake them up and shuffle again. Tor, short and scrappy, shut one eye and squinted the other at Fleur. Dutch screwed his lips around a wet cigar.

"Gotta see a man," he mumbled, getting up to go out back to the privy. The others broke, put their cards down, and Fleur sat alone in the lamplight that glowed in a sheen across the push of her breasts. I watched her closely, then she paid me a beam of notice for the first time. She turned, looked straight at me, and grinned the white wolf grin a Pillager turns on its victims, except that she wasn't after me.

"Pauline there," she said, "how much money you got?"

We'd all been paid for the week that day. Eight cents was in my pocket.

"Stake me," she said, holding out her long fingers. I put the coins in her palm and then I melted back to nothing, part of the walls and tables. It was a long time before I understood that the men would not have seen me no matter what I did, how I moved. I wasn't anything like Fleur. My dress hung loose and my back was already curved, an old woman's. Work had roughened me, reading made my eyes sore, caring for my mother before she died had hardened my face. I was not much to look at, so they never saw me.

When the men came back and sat around the table, they had drawn together. They shot each other small glances, stuck their tongues in their cheeks, burst out laughing at odd moments, to rattle Fleur. But she never minded. They played their vingt-un, staying even as Fleur slowly gained. Those pennies I had given her drew nickels and attracted dimes until there was a small pile in front of her.

Then she hooked them with five-card draw, nothing wild. She dealt, discarded, drew, and then she sighed and her cards gave a little shiver. Tor's eye gleamed, and Dutch straightened in his seat.

"I'll pay to see that hand," said Lily Veddar.

Fleur showed, and she had nothing there, nothing at all.

Tor's thin smile cracked open, and he threw his hand in too.