

AMERICAN WOMEN
SHORT STORY
WRITERS

*A Collection of
Critical Essays*

Edited by
Julie Brown

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General Editor's Introduction

The volumes in this series, Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History, and Culture, are designed to reflect, develop, and extend important trends and tendencies in contemporary criticism. The careful scrutiny of literary texts in their own right of course remains a crucial part of the work that critics and teachers perform: this traditional task has not been devalued or neglected. But other types of interdisciplinary and contextual work are now being done, in large measure as a result of the emphasis on "theory" that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that has accelerated since that time. Critics and teachers now examine texts of all sorts—literary and non-literary alike—and, more generally, have taken the entire complex, multi-faceted field of culture as the object for their analytical attention. The discipline of literary studies has radically changed, and the scale and scope of this series is intended to illustrate this challenging fact.

Theory has signified many things, but one of the most crucial has been the insistent questioning of familiar categories and distinctions. As theory has grown in its scope and intensified in importance, it has reoriented the idea of the literary canon: There is no longer a single canon, but many canons. It has also opened up and complicated the meanings of history, and the materials and forms that constitute it. Literary history continues to be vigorously written, but now as a kind of history that intersects with other histories that involve politics, economics, race relations, the role of women in society, and many more. And the breadth of this historical inquiry has impelled many in literary studies to view themselves more as cultural critics and general intellectuals than as literary scholars.

Theory, history, culture: these are the formidable terms around which the volumes in this series have been organized. A number of these volumes will be the product of a single author or editor. But perhaps even more of them will be collaborative ventures, emerging from the joint enterprise of editors, essayists, and respondents or commentators. In each volume, and as a whole, the series will aim to highlight both distinctive contributions to knowledge and a process of exchange, discussion, and debate. It will make available new kinds of work, as well as fresh approaches to criticism's traditional tasks, and indicate new ways through which such work can be done.

William E. Cain
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Introduction

Julie Brown

I write short stories. I read short stories by American women. I teach short stories by American women. For a long time, I believed there was little literary criticism or theory available on American women's short stories—over the years I have pieced together information found in genre studies, women's studies, and American studies, compiling files for myself and readers for my students. Until I read Alicia Ostriker's wonderful *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's comprehensive *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1984), I hadn't realized that, alongside these books outlining the histories of women's poetry and women's novels (respectively), a book outlining the history of women's short stories was needed.

In her introduction, Ostriker discusses her reasons for launching an in-depth study of women's poetry. Looking back over her literary education, she laments,

My opinions on poetry were . . . formed predominantly by reading male poets and by the dicta of professors and critics who eloquently and reverently represented what Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been thought and said" in western culture. That their eloquence veiled gender bias, and that what they believed to be "universal" was only partial, did not occur to me. (2)

A poet herself, Ostriker must have found it difficult to value her own work when the work of others like her had been

systematically ignored and discounted for so long. She eventually came to realize that "we cannot measure the work of women poets, past or present, without a thorough—and if possible demystified—awareness of the critical context in which they have composed and continue to compose their work" (2).

Gilbert and Gubar set out to write a historical study of (British) women's novels for similar reasons. As they note in their preface, "We realized that, like many other feminists, we were trying to recover not only a major (and neglected) female literature but a whole (neglected) female history" (xii). Their monumental study not only outlines the history of women's novels but also gives important information about the biographies of the women who wrote them, their thematic and stylistic concerns, the economic climates in which they published, and the public's reactions to their works.

Why has no one written such a comprehensive study of American women's short stories?

Short story genre critics often preface their studies by stating how neglected the short story genre is; then they proceed to offer a study that adds to the body of story criticism that probably began with Poe's review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* (1842) and continues through such works as Clare Hanson's *Re-reading the Short Story* (1989). Hanson's question is typical: "Why has the short story been neglected, in both academic and non-academic critical circles? It is a form, after all, which is immensely popular with readers, and perhaps more importantly, with writers" (1). What Hanson and her peers fail to notice, however, is that the short story in general (read: male short story) has indeed received a great deal of attention over the past 150 years but that the female short story in particular has received very little.

Short story criticism has reached us in two waves. The first wave began, perhaps, with Poe's review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* (1842), continued through Brander Matthews's *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (1901), and culminated in studies by Robert Wilson Neal (1918), Fred Lewis Pattee (1923), Roger Cuff (1953), and Frank O'Connor (1963). Predictably, these critics focus on the lives, texts, and theories of white male practitioners of the short story form. Most of these "first wave" critics do not

even mention women authors, although an exception to this group is Pattee. Unfortunately, Pattee mentions women authors only to disparage their efforts (more on this follows).

When I examined second wave criticism, beginning with Charles May's *Short Story Theories* (1976), I was surprised to find the same thing: building on the criticism that preceded them (always a quotation from Poe, a nod to Matthews, an acknowledgment of O'Connor), these critics also focus mainly on male authors and their stories, nearly ignoring the contributions that women and other minorities have made to the genre. May's book does include 7 essays (out of 24) by female critics, but beyond a few brief references, there are no essays about women authors or their stories.

Susan Lohafer's *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (1983) does not focus on women writers either, except for a few pages on Joyce Carol Oates and Kate Chopin. Valerie Shaw's *The Short Story* (1983) is dominated by references to male-authored texts and theories as well. In her bibliography of story writers, for example, she lists 40 male authors and only 12 female.

Finally, Clare Hanson's *Re-reading the Short Story* does contain one essay called "Gender and Genre" by Mary Eagleton (there are also two essays about Doris Lessing's stories, but these are not discussed in terms of gender). "Gender and Genre" begins with two odd disclaimers. Eagleton says, "Firstly, I am not speaking as an expert on the short story. . . . I am speaking from my interest in feminist literary criticism, but here lies my second disclaimer, for feminist criticism which has had so much to say about women writers . . . has had much less to say about genre" (55). She then goes on to discuss the general aims of feminist literary criticism but says very little about short stories by women, ending with the suggestion that we apply everything she says about novels to short stories.

Both waves of short story genre criticism have focused on five areas. Each of these areas is so slanted toward male authors that one would almost think that women have hardly written short stories at all, when in fact, I would estimate that one-third to one-half of all stories written between 1820 and 1900 were by women (see Gilbert and Gubar 5).

The first task of the short story genre critic is usually to define the short story, beginning with Poe's definition that a story be read in "one sitting" and produce a "unified effect." H.G. Wells provides a particularly phallic description of the short story. As quoted by Shaw, Wells said that "in order to produce its 'one single vivid effect,' the short story must 'seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gather it together more and more until the climax is reached.' . . . [It must] 'explode and finish before interruption occurs or fatigue sets in'" (48). It should be noted that, while definitions of the form differ, most critics feel compelled to *define* the genre, often using masculine terms.

The second task has been to pinpoint the origins of the short story. It is usually traced back to Washington Irving, or further back to Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1351-1353) or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400). But Somerset Maugham has gone even further back than this, to an origin of which contemporary American author Robert Bly would certainly approve. "It is natural," Maugham says, "for men to tell tales, and I suppose the short story was created in the night of time when the hunter, to beguile the leisure of his fellows when they had eaten and drunk their fill, narrated by the cavern fire some fantastic incident he had heard of" (Shaw 83). Obviously, the identification of this origin makes it clear that the short story was a product of the male imagination and that, since females presumably never left the cave to hunt, they never had stories to tell.

Thirdly, once the critic has established the short story origins, the writer moves on to trace the *history* of the genre. In American literature this often follows the chain of Irving/Melville/Hawthorne/Poe to Harte/Twain/Fitzgerald/Hemingway to Barth/Coover/Barthelme/Carver. Women, especially lesbians and women of color, are almost always excluded from this lineup, to differing degrees. Nina Baym explains this phenomenon by telling us that "the critic does not like the idea of women as writers, does not believe that women can be writers, and hence does not see them even when they are right before his eyes" (64). One exception to this is Pattee's *The Development of the American Short Story*, which does mention

numerous women authors, a few of them in a positive light. This work is important because he preserves the names of many women writers whose works have gone out of print since he wrote his study in 1923. Unfortunately, most of his remarks about their stories are ambivalent at best, derogatory at worst. Of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's story "'Tenty Scran," for example, he notes that "even a sophomore might point out its inherent weakness of structure" (179). Of Rose Terry Cooke, he notes, "That the short story differed from the novel save alone in the attribute of length she never seems to have discovered" (176). Pattee devotes an entire chapter to "The Rise of the Lady's Book," where he examines periodicals such as *Godey's* that published numerous women authors. His thesis seems to be that women "ruined" the genre with their "sentimental" stories, and it is with a sigh of relief that he explains how gentlemen's magazines and literary magazines rescued the genre from "feminized fiction" (169). This sentiment is echoed 40 years later by William Peden, who reassuringly informs us that *Esquire* and *Playboy* have been "major forces" (13) in contemporary short fiction. Apparently, he never read *Redbook* or *Cosmopolitan*. Furthermore, with the rise of *The New Yorker* story, Harold Ross (an early *New Yorker* editor) notes that fiction is no longer written for the "little old lady in Dubuque" (Peden 11).

In the fourth task, once the history is established, each critic then identifies the *masters* of the genre. Most of these pronouncements are articulated in words similar to A.E. Coppard, when he says (as quoted by O'Connor) that "if he ever edited an anthology of short stories he would have an easy job because half the book would be by Chekhov, and the other half by Maupassant" (62). A woman writer might be identified as the best local colorist or the best teller of the ghost story, or even as the best woman writer, but never the best writer, and certainly never the master (mistress) of the genre.

Finally, the fifth task of the short story genre critic is *theorizing* the short story. After history has answered the *who*, *when*, and *where* questions, theory begins to ask *how* and *why*. Short story critics mainly offer theories explaining how short stories are written (or should be written) and how short stories are read (or should be read). These theories usually begin with

the words of Poe and Brander Matthews, and if we are lucky, they might look in the direction of Virginia Woolf or Eudora Welty. These theories then end in agreement with male theorists such as Tzvetan Todorov, Jean-François Lyotard, or Wolfgang Iser. A sad recurrence is the development of theory that denigrates stories by women rather than considering the possibility that women might write differently from men. Somerset Maugham, for example, offered a theory that the best short stories are "well made" and "strongly plotted" and then accused Katherine Mansfield of writing plotless stories "using atmosphere to 'decorate a story so thin' that it could not exist without its 'trimmings'" (Shaw 16). (A feminist critic, such as Shaw, would recognize the lyrical nature of Mansfield's work that deliberately "dislodge[s] the narrative element" [Shaw 16]). This is the same phenomenon that has also been used to criticize the brilliance and originality of women's poetry: "Originality in a woman poet is censured by the commentator or is invisible to him because it does not resemble masculine originalities with which he is already familiar" (Ostriker 6).

I believe Clare Hanson comes closest to identifying the direction in which short story theorists should move in the future. In her excellent introduction, she ponders the fact that "the short story has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks—writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative' or epistemological/experiential framework of their society" (2). Ironically, stories by these marginalized groups have been excluded from academic study at the same time the academics were pleading that the genre itself was excluded. Hanson takes the first step toward a feminist critique of the genre when she posits that "the short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women" (3). How sad it is, then, in light of this observation, that Hanson included in her collection only one essay that could have discussed women's contributions to the short story genre (Mary Eagleton's "Gender and Genre") but didn't.

Feminist critics have produced essays, articles, and books that perform the delightful and important tasks of rescuing,

identifying, analyzing, and celebrating works by women writers. Feminist criticism has devoted itself to helping us understand the poems and novels that women have written, but curiously little scholarship has been written about the woman's short story, and what scholarship does exist is scattered. Individual stories are sometimes singled out, especially Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Individual authors, such as Eudora Welty or Flannery O'Connor, are often studied. The short story is used to illustrate such literary trends as local color, female gothic, or modernism. Recently, feminist scholars have been reevaluating the work of female magazine editors such as Sarah Hale. But, to my knowledge, there has not yet been a systematic book-length evaluation of the contributions that American women have made to the short story genre. And to begin such a study, we must begin with questions.

Will we use the same *definition* for women's short stories that have been used to describe male stories? Will we define the genre anew? Will we decide that such definitions are limiting and abandon them altogether? Edith Wharton (as quoted by Barraca) reminds us that "general rules in art are useful chiefly as a lamp in a mine, or a handrail down a black stairway; they are necessary for the sake of the guidance they give, but it is a mistake, once they are formulated, to be too much in awe of them" (8). Thus, it may be that feminist critics will refuse to define the short story, for definitions limit, exclude, and deaden our capacity for surprise. Eudora Welty says that "a short story writer can try anything . . . because the power and stirring of the mind never rests. It is what the power will try that will most pertinently define the short story. Not rules, not aesthetics, not problems and their solution" (Shaw 1).

Will it be necessary for us to pinpoint the *origin* of the woman's short story? It might be difficult to name the first female short story author in America, since many women published either using masculine pen names or anonymously. Susan Koppelman has noted that Catherine Maria Sedgewick (1789–1867) and Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880) were among the earliest women to publish their stories, both publishing in the mid-1820s ("Interim" 2). Koppelman maintains, furthermore, that it is pointless to argue about who wrote the first story

anyway, since "along with Irving and a few other early colleagues, this *group* of writers invented that fluid, undefinable but recognizable genre we know as the American short story. The creation of a literary genre is not the work of a single individual; it is an antiphonal and collaborative work" ("Interim" 2; emphasis added). Therefore, we may view American women's short stories as springing not from the pen of one isolated woman but from the pens of a community of women who shared and read each other's works.

If we look further back, we will of course find that storytelling is indeed a very female art form (complete with "legitimate" mythological origins), beginning perhaps with Scheherazade (*The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*) or Penelope (Homer's *Odyssey*), who told stories for their survival. The very alphabets with which stories are written were given to us by female deities: Carmenta created a Latin alphabet, Medusa gave the alphabet to Hercules, Isis gave the alphabet to the Egyptians, and Kali invented the Sanskrit alphabet (Kramarae and Teichler 41). Recognizing that the short story in America has been written by people other than white males, we should also look at other origins of the short story, including Chinese talk/story (which must have influenced Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan), Native American oral histories and chants (to better understand works by Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich), and African American folk tales and slave narratives (see Zora Neale Hurston's short stories). It is also likely, in spite of Maugham's "caveman hunter" scenario, that the very earliest women's stories were fairy tales women told to their children at twilight, old wives' tales women passed on to preserve knowledge, or love stories women whispered to each other with a wink while the men were away. Why not? "[M]any of the stories we heard as children were told to us by women. We heard those words in a female voice; thus, we associate our earliest stories with women" (Barreca 2).

The names of many of the first women storytellers/writers may have been forgotten, but "women writers have their own rich and important tradition. A shared fund of secrets, silences, surprises, and truths belong to those who have experienced growing up female in a world where the experience is erased,

written over, or devalued" (Barreca 2). No one asks, "who made the first wheel?" or "who wove the first cloth?"; therefore, we might also view the short story as the by-product of communal living, a craft developed and practiced by people who had something important to say to each other.

What is the *history* of the female storytelling tradition? What will we gain when we have reclaimed our history? How much of it has been lost? Why is it lost? Can we write a history of the woman's short story that will be inclusive of all the kinds of women who write stories? Or should women instead write the histories of their stories? Where should we begin?

Over the past few years, numerous women editors have gathered anthologies of American women's short stories. This is surely a very important first step toward learning and re-discovering the history. Judith Fetterley's excellent *Provisions: A Reader from 19th-Century American Women* (1985), for example, gathers important short stories from the nineteenth century, a period that is often underrepresented in American women's literary history. As she notes in her useful and interesting introduction, "Without access to the primary texts, there could be no community of readers, and without such a community there could be, as I saw it, no finally intelligent criticism. Clearly, then, the first task of the reader-critic committed to this material was to get it into print" (2).

Others, including Irene Zahava, Susan Cahill, and Stephanie Spinner, agree with Fetterley and have also compiled collections. Susan Koppelman has been especially industrious in editing anthologies by women writers (see the bibliography for titles of her works). Koppelman edits books thematically and historically (mother/daughter stories, Christmas stories, "The Other Woman" stories), showing the different ways women have written about the same themes throughout history. In her recent essay "About Anthologists," she defines her task as an anthologist:

An anthologist is a teacher making a syllabus public and permanent by putting its contents between the covers of a book. An anthologist is a Florenz Ziegfeld, producing a variety show in which each act has to keep the audience engaged and has to prepare them for the next act. An

anthologist is a midwife assisting artists in delivering their work to the world. An anthologist is a cultural anthropologist putting together the artifacts of a people in such a way that the shared culture becomes visible. (2)

Koppelman is also currently compiling a book-length bibliography of women's short stories from 1820 to the present. Such a list will surely be an invaluable tool for studies. (See, at the end of this book, the bibliographies compiled by Susan Koppelman [story collections and anthologies by women] and Amy Shoenberger [critical studies about women's stories]).

Many anthologists, including Regina Barreca and Susan Cahill, have worked to show the diversity of women's experiences in their anthologies. Wendy Martin (1990) is notable for her efforts to gather contemporary short stories by women of very diverse ethnicities, religions, and ages. Her introduction notes that "from its earliest beginnings, North American culture has been multi-ethnic and multi-racial, but only recently has there been a concerted effort to acknowledge this fact" (3), and then explains how she wants to reflect women's cultural diversity in her anthology. This philosophy of anthologizing echoes that of Laura Holloway, who edited one of the first anthologies of women's stories in 1889 (*The Women's Story as Told by Twenty American Women*). In her introduction, Holloway writes that "the differences in population, the varieties of classes, and the broad distinctions in local coloring are vividly exhibited in the annals of American fiction, the largest contributors to which are women" (Barreca, 12).

Although Terry McMillan's *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Fiction* (1990) contains stories by African American men as well as women, it gathers together many important stories by women of color for the first time. McMillan explains in her introduction that rage was one of the primary motivations for her to edit the collection. She noticed that few, if any, black writers appeared in collections like *Best American Short Stories*, and wrote, "I was appalled as I snatched every last one of these anthologies off my bookshelf, and could literally count on one hand the number of African-American writers who were in the table of contents. I sat at my desk and fumed. My heart pounded with anger. How dare they!" (xviii).

She compiled an anthology that was arranged alphabetically, rather than hierarchically, and included not only published authors, but also “emerging” and unpublished authors as well (McMillan, xxii). This book was compiled, in part, so that others would not live with the same lack of self-knowledge that she had earlier had: “As a child,” she says, “I didn’t know that African-American people wrote books” (xv). Another important anthology is Asha Kanwar’s *The Unforgetting Heart: An Anthology of Short Stories by African American Women (1859–1992)*, which includes even more short stories by black women and covers a broader period.

Lesbian authors, too, are finally being recognized for their short stories. Several magazines, including *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* and *Sinister Wisdom*, now actively publish short stories by and about lesbians. Lee Fleming’s anthology *Tide Lines: Stories of Change by Lesbians* (1991) gathers together 27 short stories that focus on the theme of change. The publisher notes, “All human beings experience change, but in this anthology, change occurs because we are *lesbians*” (back cover). Fleming’s goal in editing this anthology echoes the goals of other women anthologists, celebrating the shared experiences of women within the lesbian community, while at the same time celebrating the differences.

As more and more anthologies of women’s stories are compiled, we may want to look at the larger picture—at how the short story form has been used by women from 1820 to the present. We might ask more questions. What is the history of women who wrote stories? What is the publishing history of women’s stories? What is the history of women’s writing education? What is the history of women as short story readers? We must think carefully about ways of reporting this information. Rather than one single narrative, the grand picture might be conceived of spatially, like a sky filled with stars, some of which form groupings, some of which fly alone. Like the stars, the vast number of stories written by women are “largely unread and unexplored” (Koppelman, “Interim” 1).

Unlike patriarchal critics of the short story form, feminist critics will undoubtedly be uninterested in the question of “who is the best.” Wendy Martin explains the subtitle of her collection by noting, “This book calls them ‘the best’ of their era because