

| THE BEST OF 1999 |

THE O. HENRY AWARDS

PRIZE STORIES

PRIZE JURY

SHERMAN ALEXIE

STEPHEN KING

LORRIE MOORE

SERIES EDITOR

LARRY DARK

Prize Stories



The O. Henry Awards

Edited and with an Introduction
by Larry Dark



DOKS

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Prize Stories 1999

THE O. HENRY AWARDS

Past Jurors

1997: Louise Erdrich, Thom Jones, David Foster Wallace

1998: Andrea Barrett, Mary Gaitskill, Rick Moody

Past Magazine Award Winners

1997: *Epoch*

1998: *The New Yorker*

Publisher's Note

WILLIAM SYDNEY PORTER, who wrote under the pen name O. Henry, was born in North Carolina in 1862. He started writing stories while in prison for embezzlement, a crime for which he was convicted in 1898 (it is uncertain if he actually committed the crime). His writing career was short and started late, but O. Henry proved himself a prolific and widely read short story writer in the twelve years he devoted to the craft, and his name has become synonymous with the American short story.

His years in Texas inspired many lively Westerns, but it was New York City that galvanized his creative powers, and his New York stories became his claim to fame. Loved for their ironic plot twists, which made for pleasing surprise endings, his highly entertaining tales appeared weekly in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*.

His best known story, "The Gift of the Magi," was written for the *World* in 1905 and has become an American treasure. Dashed off past deadline in a matter of hours, it is the story of a man who sells his watch to buy a set of hair combs as a Christmas present for his wife, who in the meantime has sold her luxurious locks to buy him a watch chain. "The Last Leaf" is another O. Henry favorite. It is the story of a woman who falls ill with pneumonia and pronounces that she will die when the last leaf of ivy she sees outside her Greenwich Village window falls away. She hangs on with the last stubborn leaf, which gives her the resolve to recover. She

eventually learns that her inspirational leaf wasn't a real leaf at all, but rather a painting of a leaf. Her neighbor, who has always dreamed of painting a masterpiece, painted it on the wall and caught pneumonia in the process.

His work made him famous, but O. Henry was an extremely private man who, sadly, preferred to spend his time and money on drink, and ultimately it was the bottle that did him in. He died alone and penniless in 1910. O. Henry's legacy and his popularization of the short story was such that in 1918 Doubleday, in conjunction with the Society of Arts and Sciences, established the O. Henry Awards, an annual anthology of short stories, in his honor. At the end of the century the short story continues to flourish. Styles have radically changed and there can be no greater evidence of the evolution and high achievement today's short story writers enjoy than the contents of this 1999 edition of *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards* selected and compiled by the series editor, Larry Dark. Anchor Books and Doubleday are proud, with the seventy-ninth edition of the series, to continue the tradition of publishing this much beloved collection of outstanding short stories in O. Henry's name.

The twenty stories included in *Prize Stories 1999: The O. Henry Awards* were chosen by the series editor, Larry Dark, from among the three thousand or so short stories published during the course of the previous year in the magazines consulted for the series and listed on page 419. Blind copies of these twenty stories, that is copies with the names of the authors and magazines omitted, were then sent to the prize jury members. Each juror was instructed to vote for his or her top three choices, and the first-, second-, and third-prize winners were determined as a result of these votes. The jurors for the 1999 volume were Sherman Alexie, Stephen King, and Lorrie Moore. An introduction by one of the three jurors precedes each of the top-prize stories selected.

A short list of fifty other stories given serious consideration for *Prize Stories 1999: The O. Henry Awards*, along with brief summaries of each, can be found on page 409.

The Magazine Award is given to the magazine publishing the

best fiction during the course of the previous year, as determined by: the number of stories selected for *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, the placement of stories among the top-prize winners, and the number of short-listed stories. The Magazine Award winner for 1999 is *The New Yorker*. A citation for this award is provided on page 417.

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Introduction

THE EXPERIENCE of reading a short story is intensely personal. Though the words on the page are the same for everyone who reads them, each person's experience of what the words add up to is different, sometimes vastly so. In this respect, "A Rose for Emily" is not "A Rose for Emily" is not "A Rose for Emily." Stories are a distillation of thought and experience that requires interpretation. The source of their effectiveness lies not only in what they give us but also in what they ask of us, and a good literary short story sometimes asks a lot.

The inherent subjectivity of the reading experience is one of the factors that make the task of explaining why I chose the stories I did so difficult. I would like to be able to lay out my criteria, to pinpoint the qualities and characteristics that make for an O. Henry Award-winning story. And it would be convenient to have the capacity to assess everything I read in a precise manner, to be equipped with a hard-edged instrument of objective degree that I could lay up against each story, one that would allow me to pronounce with certainty that: "This one measures up, this one nearly does, this one doesn't quite, and, sorry, this one not at all." But I can't provide reasons that would cover all of my choices this year and in years past and for the foreseeable future, because whenever I try to pinpoint what I believe to be the essential characteristics of the well-made story, I read something not encompassed by or anticipated by my

notions. Though the short story is a well-defined form and a good subject for critical analysis, it is also wonderfully elastic and the potential for the creation of something new remains, no matter how many millions of stories are written. If there's one thing that I could say I look for in compiling this collection, it would be the story like no other story I have ever read.

I won't claim that every one of these twenty stories precisely fits that description, but they all reach toward it, some of them quietly, others in more obvious ways. I have, for instance never before encountered a story in which Richard Nixon serves as the muse for an actor facing his own mortality.¹ Nor have I ever read a wryly analytical study of depression that shows how prolonged navel-gazing can lead to a tragically isolating solipsism.² Or how about two hundred or so years in the history of the Pacific nation of Tonga through the eyes of a tortoise long favored by the island's monarchs?³ And this situation is new to me as well: a broad pastiche of trailer park minimalism married to a gothic morality tale in which a male exotic dancer/waiter living with his sister, his cousin, and the girls' out-of-wedlock infants are visited by a maiden aunt returned from the dead.⁴

These are instances of artistic risk-taking in which the gambles pay off to reveal deeper truths about human nature. But a story doesn't need an outlandish concept to make it worthy of attention, and ambitious efforts in this direction often fail, reducing the characters rather than enlarging them. The examples above notwithstanding, most of the stories in this year's collection caught my attention with seemingly conventional approaches, yet each does something very well, whether it's capturing a milieu convincingly, speaking with a distinctive voice, or insightfully detailing the inner workings of a character or characters.

Among the interesting milieus visited in these stories are those of the rodeo circuit, where, against all good sense, compulsion drives a young man to risk life and limb riding bulls for the short-lived

¹ "Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree," Gerald Reilly.

² "The Depressed Person," David Foster Wallace.

³ "A Tortoise for the Queen of Tonga," Julia Whitty.

⁴ "Sea Oak," George Saunders.

adrenaline rush that makes him feel truly alive⁵; the sites of ancient Hindu ruins in India, toured by an Americanized Indian family and their romantically inclined native guide⁶; a whitewater rafting expedition on the Colorado River attempted under the most dangerous possible conditions, which becomes the backdrop for a pitched battle between the sexes⁷; the Pacific nation of Fiji, where a tribal woman educated abroad finds herself caught in the dangerous no-man's-land between Western-style politics and ancient traditions⁸; and turn-of-the-century Fresno, California, where an Italian laborer, frustrated in his dreams of establishing a winery, turns to his skill at digging as a last stab at redemption.⁹

Among the distinctive voices with which the stories in this year's collection speak are those of: a married woman who has suffered a series of miscarriages and who discovers what she believes to be the terrible reason she wasn't meant to have children¹⁰; a disaffected man and his equally disaffected girlfriend who, while driving back from a friend's wedding, stop for a strange couple who have just escaped from a burning building¹¹; and a grown man who finds that he has eclipsed the accomplishments of an older brother who had once seemed to him the embodiment of perfection.¹²

The short story is perhaps at its best when it convincingly details the inner workings of its characters in a way that, though particular, sheds light on the human condition in general. Among the characters insightfully depicted in this collection are: a group of boys who, out of morbid curiosity, cruelly prey upon a classmate whose accidentally severed feet were surgically reattached¹³; a wife and mother returning from a conference at which she betrayed her husband, who finds herself aboard a plane with serious mechanical

⁵ "The Mud Below," Annie Proulx.

⁶ "Interpreter of Maladies," Jhumpa Lahiri.

⁷ "Cataract," Pam Houston.

⁸ "Fork Used in Eating Reverend Baker," Kiana Davenport.

⁹ "The Underground Gardens," T. Coraghessan Boyle.

¹⁰ "Sign," Charlotte Forbes.

¹¹ "Burning," Robert Schirmer.

¹² "Mister Brother," Michael Cunningham.

¹³ "Miracle Boy," Pinckney Benedict.

difficulties¹⁴; a privileged but troubled American teen and a boy who has labored in a rug factory in Pakistan who find common ground despite their differences¹⁵; a businessman on his way to an appointment who stops in a village green to watch a girls' soccer game and recalls his youthful prowess at the sport¹⁶; and a woman impregnated by a rapist who decides to keep the baby, despite the strains it puts on her marriage.¹⁷

Though I have read many thousands of stories in three years of editing this series, all of these felt new to me. The ones I haven't yet mentioned are this year's top-prize winners, as selected and introduced by Sherman Alexie, Stephen King, and Lorrie Moore. I was impressed with the dedication, honesty, and generosity these writers brought to their role as jurors. I know from experience that it's difficult to read with an open mind and difficult to bestow special recognition on a few out of many. As Stephen King put it, "Reading the stories was a pleasure. Judging them was not."

What's most interesting this year is that few readers are likely to recognize the names of the first- and second-prize winners or to have read the magazines in which these stories were published. The truth this underscores is that the field of the short story is as wide open as the creative possibilities. While it's likely that an Alice Munro or a T. C. Boyle or a David Foster Wallace will write some of the best stories of the year, it is also possible that a Peter Baida or a Cary Holladay will. And while *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine* can be expected to publish great fiction, there's also a good chance that *The Gettysburg Review* and the *Alaska Quarterly Review* will as well. Skill, talent, insight, inspiration, editorial acumen, and a propensity to take risks were all part of the mix in the stories published during the course of the year. May it ever be so.

LARRY DARK, 1999

¹⁴ "Afterbirth," Sheila M. Schwartz.

¹⁵ "Moon," Chaim Potok.

¹⁶ "Watching Girls Play," W. D. Wetherell.

¹⁷ "Son of the Wolfman," Michael Chabon.

Contents

INTRODUCTION • xv

Larry Dark

Test 2A NURSE'S STORY • 11

FIRST PRIZE

Peter Baida

The Gettysburg Review, Vol. 11, No. 3

Introduced by Sherman Alexie

Test 2B MERRY-GO-SORRY • 33

SECOND PRIZE

Cary Holladay

Alaska Quarterly Review, Vol. 16, Nos. 3 & 4

Introduced by Stephen King

Final SAVE THE REAPER • 59

THIRD PRIZE

Alice Munro

The New Yorker, June 22 & 29, 1998

Introduced by Lorrie Moore

THE DEPRESSED PERSON • 91

David Foster Wallace

Harper's Magazine, January 1998

CATARACT . [REDACTED]

Pam Houston

CutBank, No. 50

SEA OAK . 142

George Saunders

The New Yorker, December 28, 1998 & January 4, 1999

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES . (167)

Jhumpa Lahiri

Agni, No. 47

NIXON UNDER THE BODHI TREE . (189)

Gerald Reilly

The Gettysburg Review, Vol. 11, No. 3

MISTER BROTHER . [REDACTED]

Michael Cunningham

DoubleTake, No. 14

MOON . 204

Chaim Potok

Image, No. 19

BURNING . 224

Robert Schirmer

Fiction, Vol. 15, No. 1

WATCHING GIRLS PLAY . (239)

W. D. Wetherell

The Georgia Review, Vol. LII, No. 2

AFTERBIRTH . (257)

Sheila M. Schwartz

Ploughshares, Vol. 24, Nos. 2 & 3

SON OF THE WOLFMAN . 277

Michael Chabon

Harper's Magazine, December 1998

MIRACLE BOY . 302

Pinckney Benedict

Esquire, December 1998

THE UNDERGROUND GARDENS . 314

T. Coraghessan Boyle

The New Yorker, May 25, 1998

FORK USED IN EATING REVEREND BAKER . 332

Kiana Davenport

Story, Spring 1998

SIGN . 346

Charlotte Forbes

New Orleans Review, Vol. 24, No. 1

A TORTOISE FOR THE QUEEN OF TONGA . 356

Julia Whitty

Harper's Magazine, June 1998

THE MUD BELOW . 375

Annie Proulx

The New Yorker, June 22 & 29, 1998

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES . 399

JURORS . 408

SHORT-LISTED STORIES . 409

1999 MAGAZINE AWARD: *The New Yorker* . 417

MAGAZINES CONSULTED . 419

PERMISSIONS . 441

FIRST PRIZE

A Nurse's Story

By Peter Baida

Introduced by Sherman Alexie