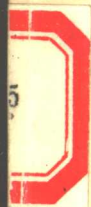


The Best
AMERICAN
SHORT
STORIES
1991



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AMERICAN
SHORT
STORIES
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Selected from
U.S. and Canadian Magazines
by ALICE ADAMS
with KATRINA KENISON

With an Introduction by Alice Adams



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON •

Foreword

WHAT IS THE SECRET of a good short story?

When I took on the job of series editor of *The Best American Short Stories*, I expected that a year of reading would result in some answers to that age-old question. Now, nearly two thousand stories later, I am beginning to suspect that it is the question itself that will keep me reading through the years ahead, for each good story offers a unique answer, not a formula that can be handily lifted and applied to some other piece of fiction. A good story has a way of announcing itself, rendering irrelevant any preconceived maxims or standards of excellence. When you're done reading, you don't have to ask yourself whether it worked or not.

However, the very process of reading and winnowing that narrowed 2000 stories to 120, and then 120 to the 20 that Alice Adams selected for this volume, gives rise to the temptation to generalize. What are writers writing about? Where are the good stories coming from? What are the trends? I'm happy to report that I had only to identify a trend tentatively for it to vanish into thin air. The more I read, the more variety I encountered, in voice, theme, and setting. One cannot read this collection without a deepening respect for the sheer range of human experience.

And yet, these stories do have something in common. All of them give voice to our universal quest for connection. If there is one sweeping statement that can legitimately be made about these twenty stories, it is this: each is about a struggle to connect. There is a Vietnamese woman, happily transplanted to America yet fervently awaiting the arrival of her grandfather, the only person

still alive who knew her as a child; an aging film actress whose self-esteem has ebbed so low that she can no longer reach out to anyone who might genuinely care for her; a widow who knows that her own time on earth is short but who nevertheless treats even her most casual acquaintances with unfailing respect; an amateur fighter who suspects that his relationship with his merciless trainer may be the closest he will ever come to love. "Only connect!" wrote E. M. Forster — and most of us spend our lives endeavoring to do just that. This volume features stories of connections lost and found, avoided and embraced, mourned and celebrated.

Alice Adams reveals in her introduction that reading a good story often provokes her to go and write one of her own. Perhaps we should all give thanks, then, for the inspiration writers draw from each other — one good story begets another. Surely this is a testament to the power of fiction to call forth our own creative impulses. For most of us, I suspect, this inspiration takes another form. In the afterglow of a good short story, consciousness is heightened — we see more clearly, gain fresh perspective, seek to live more thoughtfully and independently. A few years ago, there was concern in certain quarters that the proliferation of writing schools and workshops would result in homogenized fiction, technically proficient but lacking in passion and originality. The stories of 1990 offer compelling evidence that our best fiction writers are in no danger. Here are writers who know what they need to say, who are willing to risk all in the telling, and who suffer no crises of influence. Their stories will kindle your imagination. In the Contributors' Notes, the authors offer us a welcome glimpse into the creative process, as they describe the genesis of the stories collected here.

With this volume, I become the fourth series editor of *The Best American Short Stories*, following in the footsteps of three dedicated readers and friends of the short story: Edward O'Brien, who launched the series in 1915 and presided over it until 1941; Martha Foley, who, when she died in 1977, at the age of eighty, was at work on what would have been her thirty-seventh volume; and Shannon Ravenel, who, over the past thirteen years, has helped the series achieve the prominence it enjoys today. Since 1978, a different writer or critic has served each year as guest

editor of the anthology, thereby ensuring its continued diversity. The variety of viewpoints has enlivened the series and resulted in volumes that reflect the passions and predilections of some of the finest writers at work today.

The stories chosen for this year's anthology were originally published in magazines issued between January 1990 and January 1991. The qualifications for selection are: (1) original publication in nationally distributed American or Canadian periodicals; (2) publication in English by writers who are American or Canadian, or who have made the United States or Canada their home; and (3) publication as short stories (novel excerpts are not knowingly considered). A list of the magazines consulted for this volume appears at the back of the book. Publications that want to make sure that their contributors will be considered each year should include the series editor on their subscription list (Katrina Kenison, *The Best American Short Stories*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2 Park Street, Boston, MA 02108).

K.K.

Introduction

I AM DEEPLY enamored of short stories. The form delights me. Both reading and writing short stories have for many years given me much pleasure. And so I came to the task of reading a great many stories for this collection with an agreeable sense of anticipation. I looked forward to the sheer joy that a good story, a good read, brings — and also, since this work would involve some critical evaluation in making selections, I hoped that my critical standards would become more clearly formulated in the process.

In the first expectation I have to say that I was somewhat disappointed. I had imagined very difficult choices. I saw myself choosing twenty excellent stories from hundreds of good ones, imagined the ambivalence, the painful indecision. As things turned out, though, the choices were not all that difficult; the excellent stories made their presence felt very strongly, on first reading. (I should say too that the pleasure I derived from that reading, in many cases the discovery of a new voice, was all that I could have hoped for.)

But there should have been more first-rate stories from which to choose. What has happened to the wonderful renaissance of the short story that we have heard so much about for the past few years?

I would not pretend to know why, as it seems to me, fewer really good stories are being written now than, say, ten or fifteen years ago, but as I looked over the list of magazines from which I made my selection, I felt that at least one clue was offered. Six stories are from *The New Yorker*, one of the most visible and highest-pay-

ing magazines on the market (and one that continues to treat writers with gréat respect); the remaining fourteen are from quarterlies — some distinguished, some relatively unknown, most with a small circulation, and all, to my knowledge, very low- or nonpaying.

Where are the stories from the women's magazines, many of which were publishing good short fiction as recently as ten years ago? It is my impression that these magazines, though they continue from time to time to declare great interest in serious fiction, are publishing much less of it (if any), and that their editorial policies, always condescending toward their readership, have gotten considerably worse. They have always wanted stories, and especially the endings of stories, to be spelled out, explained, as though the women who read these magazines are wholly uneducated and/or mildly retarded, incapable of appreciating a subtle or, God help us, an ambiguous ending. My own most recent encounter with one of these magazines was so appalling — I was pelted with questions like "Why are they drinking Perrier?" and "Why does he kiss her just now?" — that I had to withdraw the story. For me this whole bout was extremely annoying, time- and energy-consuming; it surely would have been far worse for a younger, less experienced writer, say a young woman with a couple of part-time jobs and/or baby sitters to arrange for and pay. For such writers it must indeed be discouraging simply to send out stories, knowing how extremely poor their chances are. In a way I do not wonder that fewer and fewer good writers seem to be writing short stories.

There is, of course, a more or less alternate group of magazines, the male slicks. They pay extremely well, and occasionally, still, one of them will publish a good story. But as with the women's magazines, this apparently happens less and less frequently.

The sheer economics of short story writing, then, might to some degree explain why many writers decide not to take it up. I find it sad to recall that in the distant forties, writing short stories was a plausible full-time trade and, for many of us who started out then, an extremely attractive one. In those days there was not only *The New Yorker* but a whole array of high-exposure, high-paying magazines, as well as an enormous number of smaller, prestigious "little" magazines and reviews. How one laments their demise!

I am not saying that short stories are written primarily (or even secondarily) to earn money for their writers; still, it seems in some sense deeply wrong for someone who has taken several months to write a good story to be compensated with a hundred dollars or less, or with no dollars and a subscription to a magazine.

One encouraging sign is that book publishers are becoming more generous about bringing out volumes of stories by relatively unknown writers. Until fairly recently, writers had to bribe their publishers with promises of novels to come in order to have such a book published. It is possible that publishers have become aware of excellent writers of short stories who simply do not write novels, do not wish to and never will. Raymond Carver, of course, comes first to mind; it seems vastly to his credit that he chose to spend his energies and intelligence in trying to perfect his skill in the form he loved. And it worked — his excellent stories got better and better and better. In any case, it is good to see so many volumes of stories, and extremely interesting to note that in many cases, despite the excellence of the work, it has never been published before, in any magazine or review.

Book reviewers, I have sometimes felt, do not like collections of short stories. For one thing, you have to read them all; you cannot just skim for plot and tone and then turn in your review. Also, a good collection, even by a single writer, is apt to contain considerable variety; you can't just read one or two stories and come to strong conclusions as to theme, intention, use of energy, whatever. Although heaven knows this has been attempted. My favorite personal instance is that of a reviewer who insisted that in a collection of my stories *all* the heroines left their husbands/lovers for frivolous reasons. There was one story, however, that he liked in spite of himself, whose heroine he described as a widow; the only problem was that I had described her as having been somewhat cruelly and very intentionally dumped by her husband.

Wallace Stegner says in the introduction to the recently published edition of his collected stories that short stories are a young writer's form, "made for discoveries and nuances and epiphanies and superbly adapted for trial synthesis." I am not at all sure what this means, but it strikes me generally as a highly personal view, and one with which I cannot agree. My own experience aside (I know that I am writing better stories now than I did at thirty),

much short story literature disproves his point. Perhaps the greatest living practitioner of the form, V. S. Pritchett, is over ninety, and many people writing good short stories now are at least over fifty — John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Millicent Dillon (I hope I am not off about anyone's age). And as for the brilliant young — say, Lorrie Moore, or Rick Bass — it seems most likely that they, like Pritchett, will simply get better and better.

Which brings us to my second aim from all this reading: more clarity about what that elusive marvel the good short story actually is. Anne Lamott, a remarkable young novelist who, alas, does not write short stories, shares my enthusiasm for the stories of Alice Munro, and she thus describes her pleasure in a Munro story: "It's like a perfect meal at Chez Panisse, exotic and delicate and imaginative, really beautiful, and afterwards you're perfectly satisfied and happy and comforted. Not stuffed and never bored." I quite agree, although I am not at all sure that this standard can be applied to all good stories — in fact, I know that it cannot. Mary Gordon's "Separation," for example, leaves one almost gasping with pain at the same time that one admires its devastating skill and the pure compassion that informs its creation.

One obviously important factor (true in any fiction, novels as well as stories) is that of sheer interest, or narrative curiosity; one wants to find out what happens. In this volume, I think, this is most clearly true in the stories by Millicent Dillon and Leonard Michaels — very different stories in terms of style and governing sensibility, but both fairly long narratives that one reads with extreme curiosity. Whatever will happen to that young woman who has chosen such an aberrant milieu? one wonders, reading Ms. Dillon's "Oil and Water." And in Leonard Michaels's ornate, exotic, and baroque structured "Viva la Tropicana," one reads quite feverishly about the extraordinary events surrounding a most curious inheritance.

"It's simply a question of what grabs you" I have heard as an explanation of taste in short stories, a remark that is usually accompanied by its corollary (which we all know too), "and of course in a short story that has to happen right away." I suppose that this is true, for who could not go on with a story that begins "My mother had me sort the eyes. Blue in the biggest box, green in the middle, brown in the smallest box" — the opening lines of Elizabeth Graver's "The Body Shop"? But then, all the stories in

this collection have wonderful opening lines. How about "In the middle of the eulogy at my mother's boring and heartbreaking funeral, I started to think about calling off the wedding," from "Love Is Not a Pie," by Amy Bloom? Or "So often, at weddings, one kisses and hugs the bride and groom and then stands there dumbstruck, grinning with dread," from "Dog Stories," by Francine Prose? And no, I do not have a special fondness for stories having to do with weddings.

I do have an important private criterion, though, which is a very particular sort of excitement, familiar (I have been aware of this for over forty years) but hard to describe, that comes with certain stories. What I can most accurately say is that on reading these stories, I am seized with a desire to write a story of my own. The story that I long to write is not necessarily in any sense "like" or even influenced by the story that set off its impulse. Often, for example, I have felt this urgency on reading stories by Joyce Carol Oates; I have come away from reading one of them highly excited, inspired, and have written, though slowly, one of my own, a story that no one would ever suspect of having been inspired by Ms. Oates. Further back, in the forties, which is when I first began to read stories, I was excited in just that way by the work of Elizabeth Bowen, Katherine Anne Porter, Scott Fitzgerald, Mark Schorer — to name a few of the marvelous writers publishing then.

But obviously this is not a reliable criterion for selecting stories. I might (I hope I would) recognize an excellent story about the recent Gulf war; however, I don't think I would have to such a story the sort of response that triggers new work in myself. And so we are left with our private criteria, what grabs us — our individual and sometimes collectively inexplicable reasons for enthusiasm for certain stories.

I would like, though, to thank all the writers of the stories collected here for the pleasure I have taken in their work, and in many cases for the inspiration. And I want to thank, too, Katrina Kenison, who did the preliminary reading for this enterprise, which is to say that she read several thousand stories, probably, while I only dealt with the couple of hundred that she culled from the rest.

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RICK BASS

The Legend of Pig-Eye

FROM THE PARIS REVIEW

WE USED TO GO to bars, the really seedy ones, to find our fights. It excited Don. He loved going into the dark old dives, ducking under the doorway and following me in, me with my robe on, my boxing gloves tied around my neck, and all the workers inside the bar turning on their stools, turning as if someday someone *special* might be coming through, someone who could even help them out, perhaps — but Don and I were not there to help them out.

Don had always trained his fighters this way, all of them: in bars, with poor lighting and a hostile, hometown crowd. We would get in his old red truck on Friday afternoons — Don, his wife Betty, and Jason, their fourteen-year-old son, and my two hounds, Homer and Ann — and we'd take out driving, heading for either the coast — Biloxi, Ocean Springs, Pascagoula — or sometimes up into the woods, to the Wagon Wheel bar in Utica, or, if it had been a long enough time, long enough for them to have forgotten the speed of the punches and the force and snap of them, we'd go into Jackson, to the rotting, sawdust-floor bars like the Body Shop or the Tall Low Man. That was where the most money could be made, and it was sometimes where the best fighters could be found, but not always.

Jason would wait out in the truck with the dogs. Sometimes Betty would stay out there with him, with the windows rolled down, so that they could tell how the fight was going; but other times she would come in with Don and me, because that was what would get the bets up, a woman who had come in with a man and who was not drinking, who was only there for the fight.

We'd make anywhere from five hundred to a thousand dollars per fight, from our bets.

"Anybody, any size, any age, man or woman," Don would say, standing behind the bar with his notepad, taking bets, though I never fought a woman. The people in the bar would pick their best fighter, and they'd watch Betty, and watch Don, or they'd watch their fighter — but they didn't ever watch me the way they should have if they were going to bet on it; and I would look around, I would wish there was better lighting, and then I'd take my robe off, I'd have my gold trunks on underneath, and sometimes a few of them, drunk or sober, would begin to realize that they had done the wrong thing. But by that time things were in motion, the bets had already been made, and there was nothing to do but play it out.

Don had said that when I won a hundred bar fights, I could go to New York. He knew a man up there, a promoter to whom he sometimes sent his better fighters after training them, and that was what I had to do to get up there: win a hundred fights.

Don was forty-four — Betty, thirty-eight — and Don only trained one fighter at a time. Don hadn't boxed in almost twenty years. Betty had made him promise, swear on all sorts of things, to stop, when they got married. Don had been very good, but he had started seeing double after one fight, a fight he'd won but had been knocked down in three times, and he still saw double, twenty years later, when he got tired.

Whenever we talked about the fights, after they were over, it was always *us, we, ours*. My parents thought fighting was the worst thing a person could do, and so I liked the way Don always said "we": it was like I wasn't misbehaving all by myself, like it was someone else's wrongdoing, too. Don knew that. We'd come back out to the truck after a fight, carrying the money in a cigar box. A light mist might be falling, in the summer, and Don would be holding my robe over Betty's head to keep her dry, and we'd be hurrying to get out of the rain, but also to get away from the bar.

"How'd it go?" Jason would ask.

"We smoked 'em," Don would say. "We had a straight counter-puncher, a good man, but we kept our gloves up, worked on his body, and then got him with an overhand right. He didn't know what hit him. When he came to, he wanted to check our gloves, to see if we had put *lead* in them."

Jason would squeal, then smack his forehead, wishing that he'd been able to see it, wishing that he'd been old enough to go into the bar.

We'd put the dogs, black-and-tan pups, in the back of the truck. The faithful Homer-dog would be frantic at having been separated from me and would scramble around in the back, howling, pawing and leaping; but fat Ann would curl up on a burlap sack and fall quickly asleep — and we'd go out for pizza, then, or to a drive-through hamburger place, and we'd talk about the fight, as we waited for our order, and we'd count the money to make sure it was all there, though if it wasn't, we sure weren't going back after it. We used the old rattle-truck so that when the drunks, angry that their fighter had lost, came out into the parking lot, throwing bottles and rocks at us as we drove a way, it would not matter too much if they hit the truck.

Usually we could tell just from looking at the outside what a place was going to be like, if it was the kind of place where we would have to leave Betty in the truck with Jason — sometimes with the engine running — and where we did not know for sure if we would win or lose.

We looked for the backwoods nightspots, more gathering-place than bar, and with huge, angry men — men who either worked hard for a living and hated their jobs or who did not work and hated that, too, or who hated everything, usually beginning with some small incident a long time ago — these were the kinds of men and places we wanted to find, because they were as much of a challenge as any pro fighter would be.

Some nights we would not find the right kind of bar, the one we were looking for, until almost midnight, and Betty would be asleep with her head in Don's lap, and Jason would be driving so I could rest, and the dogs would be asleep on the floorboard. Then, finally, there would be the glow of lights in the fog, the crunch of a crushed-shell parking lot beneath our tires, and a cinder-block tavern, sometimes near the Alabama state line and set back in the woods, with loud music coming through the doors, seeping through the roof and into the night, and the clack of pool balls between songs. It was an angry, caged sound, and we'd feel a little fear in our hearts, it would be just perfect.

"We'll be out in a while," Don would tell Jason. "Pistol's in the glove box. Leave the engine running. Watch after your mother."

The noise would rush out at us like wild dog when we opened the door, and the smell of beer, the smell of anger, the hostile, attacking eyes turning on us when we were swallowed up inside. . . .

We kept a tag hanging on the rearview mirror that told us how many fights in a row we had won, what the magic number was, and after each fight, it was Jason's job to take down the old tag and put the new one up.

Eighty-six. Eighty-seven. Eighty-eight.

Driving home, back to Don's little farm in the woods: Jason with the radio on, steering the truck with just one hand and with the other arm thrown up over the seat next to him like a little man, already like a farmer driving the truck to market on a Saturday. He was a good driver.

We kept rocking chairs in the back of the truck, for the long drives, and sometimes after a fight Don and I would sit in the back like that, with our backs to the cab, and we'd lean back, looking up at the night, and watch the stars and the tops of the big trees that formed tunnels over the lonely back roads. We'd whistle down the road as Jason bombed along, driving hard, with the windows down and his mother asleep in the front. The dogs would be asleep at my feet.

When we drove through the creek bottoms the fog would rise all around us, so we could barely see, and Jason would slow down slightly, and the air would be warm and damp, and the stars would be gone, but when we'd be going fast again, getting back up into the hills, and the air would be clean and cool, we'd see stars once more, and we'd be driving sixty, seventy miles an hour.

We'd lean back and talk about fighting. I was twenty, but I wanted to be fourteen again. I wanted to be like Jason, and I wondered what it would have been like to drive my father and mother around like that, to be able to do something for them, something right. Jason was already like a little man. My parents lived in Chickasaw, Oklahoma, and raised cattle, and owned a store.

I thought it would be nice if I could win the one hundred fights and go to New York and turn pro and send my parents money. Don got to keep all of the bar fight money, and he was going to get to keep a quarter of the New York money, if there ever was any. I wanted to buy my parents a new house or some more cattle

or something, the way I read other athletes did, once they made it big. My childhood had been wonderful, and already I was beginning to miss it, and I wanted to give them something.

When I took the robe off and moved in on the bar-fighter, there was Don and Betty and Jason to think of, too. They were just making expenses, barely — nothing more. I could not bear to think of letting them down. I did not know what my parents wanted for sure but I did know what Don and Jason and Betty wanted, so that made it easier, and after a while it became easier to pretend that it was all the same, that everyone wanted the same thing, and all I had to do was go out there and fight.

Don had been a chemist once for the coroner's lab in Jackson. He knew about chemicals, drugs. He knew how to dope my blood, days before a fight, so that I would feel clean and strong, new blood, a new man. He knew how to give me smelling salts, sniffs of ammonia vials broken under my nose when I was fighting sloppily, sniffs that made my eyes water and my nose and lungs burn but that focused me, made me remember what everyone wanted. And even in training, Don would sometimes feint, sparring without gloves, and would catch me off-guard, going one way when I should have been going the other, and then he would slip in and clasp a chloroform handkerchief over my face; I'd see a mixed field of black, and of sparkling, night-rushing stars, and then I'd be down, collapsed in the pine needles down by the lake where we did our sparring, and I'd feel the sun on my shoulders, the sun on my back, feel a delicious sense of rest, lying there, and I'd want to stay down forever, but I'd hear Don shouting, counting, "... Three! FOUR! FIVE!" and I'd have to roll over, get my knees beneath me, and rise, stagger-kneed, and the lake a hard glimmer of heat all around me, and Don would be moving in on me, dancing around me like a demon, moving in and slapping me with that tremendous reach of his and then dancing back, and I had to get my gloves up and stay up, had to follow the blur of him, with that backdrop of deep woods and lake, with everything looking new and different suddenly, making no sense, and that, Don said, was what it was like to get knocked out, and he wanted me to practice it occasionally so that I would know what to do when it finally happened: in New York, or Philadelphia, or even in a bar.

We shaved my body hair before each fight, me sitting in a chair

down by the lake in my shorts, while the three of them, with razors and buckets of soapy water, shaved my legs, my back, my chest, arms, everything, so that the blows would slide away from me rather than cutting, and so that I would move faster, or at least *feel* faster — that new feeling, the feeling of being someone else, newer, younger, and with a fresher start.

After they had me all shaved, I would walk out on the pier and dive into the lake, plunging deep, ripping the water with my new slipperiness, and I would swim a few easy strokes, swimming out into the middle, where I would tread water, feeling how unbelievably slippery I was, how free and unattached, and then I would swim back in, and some days, walking with Don and Betty and Jason back up to the house, my hair slicked back and dripping, clean and shaven, with the woods smelling good in the summer and the pine needles dry and warm beneath my bare feet — some days, then, with the lake behind me, and feeling changed, I could almost tell what it was that everyone wanted, which was nothing, and I was very happy.

After our bar fights, we'd get back home around two or three in the morning; I'd nap on the way, though, in the rocker in the back of the truck, rocking slightly, pleasantly, whenever we hit a bump in the road. Sometimes I would dream, completely relaxed, with my robe wrapped around me and the wind whipping my hair, but whenever I woke up and looked at Don, he would be awake.

He would be watching the stars still, or looking back, watching the darkness and trees slide in across the road behind our tail-lights, filling in behind us as the road thinned and then disappeared, with Jason driving like a bat out of hell, driving with the windows down so that coffee cups and bits of hay and gum wrappers swirled around inside the cab.

Sometimes Don would have turned his chair around, so that he was looking into the cab, looking in over Jason's shoulder watching him drive, watching his wife sleep. Don had been a good boxer but the headaches and double vision had just gotten too bad. I wondered what it would take for me to stop. I could not imagine anything would. It was the only thing I could do well.

On the long narrow gravel road leading into Don's farm, with