

THE BEST
AMERICAN
SHORT
STORIES *OF THE*
EIGHTIES

EDITED BY

SHANNON RAVENEL

The Best
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SHORT
STORIES
of the Eighties

Shannon Ravenel is grateful to JOHANNA WOOD, who has provided invaluable assistance and consultation, and to BETTYE DEW, DALE PURVES, and JOE SCHUSTER for their helpful criticism.

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Introduction

THE YEAR 1990 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the *Best American Short Stories* series. This steadfast old friend of the short story has been published every year without interruption since its inception in 1915. It was the brainchild of a New England poet, Edward J. O'Brien, who sold the idea to a Boston publisher, Small, Maynard & Company. Dodd, Mead & Company published the series from 1926 to 1932. Then Houghton Mifflin Company took it on and has published all the subsequent volumes: those edited by O'Brien from 1933 to 1941; those of his successor, Martha Foley, from 1942 to 1977; and the "new series," with its guest editors, since 1978. Houghton Mifflin has also sponsored periodic commemorative and retrospective anthologies, the most comprehensive of which was the excellent *Fifty Best American Short Stories, 1915-1965*, edited by Martha Foley.

I have been series editor of the annual for thirteen years. As such, I was offered the opportunity to put together a retrospective anthology to celebrate a decade that has seen the American short story come — some would say come *back* — into its own. I was eager for the job, knowing that it would provide reason and time to reread and savor the introductions and my own favorite stories of the past ten years. It also gave me an excuse to wander back into the history of the anthology. I have long been curious about my two predecessors, especially about how they coped with the great volume of reading. I am chronically panicked by the rising tide of new stories published each year, and am

amazed to find that neither of them seemed ever to have mentioned it — at least not in print. It is a noble tradition of non-complaint that O'Brien and Foley set, one that should be upheld.

Clearly, Edward O'Brien was an avid and voracious reader. He was also a busy literary innovator (in addition to *The Best American Short Stories*, he edited a British version of the story anthology and, for a while, a *Best Poems* series) and a frequent and opinionated commentator on the story form. But what may have been most unusual about him was his passion for statistics, certainly an unexpected trait in a poet. The legacy of his love of counting and listing is a wealth of information about the American story in its golden age of mass circulation weekly magazines. To my surprise, I discovered in O'Brien's 1919 volume (an edition with 67 pages of indexes) a list of more than 2,000 qualifying short stories—almost as many as I read in 1989. The majority of those stories appeared in the popular weekly magazines. *The Saturday Evening Post* published 308 short stories that year. *The Smart Set* published 135, *Collier's Weekly* 114, *Hearst's Magazine* 71, *The New York Tribune* 70, and *Harper's Magazine* 60. O'Brien's list of weeklies that regularly published short fiction includes more than fifty names. In those pre-TV times, determined writers could support themselves from the sale of stories to magazines that paid handsome fees indeed — for the right kinds of stories.

A far cry from the current magazine scene. Now there is only one national weekly buying and publishing short fiction, *The New Yorker*. In the few monthly magazines still able to buy and publish fiction, dwindling advertising has meant fewer pages and therefore fewer stories per issue. That once thriving mass market outlet has been replaced over the last quarter century by scores of privately funded or institutionally subsidized non-profit literary quarterlies. It is this largely unsung cultural resource, the "little magazine," that now provides the biggest and most consistent outlet for the best short story writers, only a tiny fraction of whom have any expectation of living off their writing.

In the past decade, "the renaissance of the short story" has become something of a catchphrase. I've heard little discussion,

however, about exactly what this label means. If “renaissance” is taken to mean that the current new interest in the American short story heralds a rebirth of the genre’s popularity among the masses to match that of the teens and twenties, then I’d say the phrase overshoots the truth. If “renaissance” refers to the story itself, then I think most readers and critics would agree that the born-again story of the 1980s has far exceeded the literary standards of its popular forebears. As evidence of the great distance the story has come, I have only to turn again to the 1919 anthology and O’Brien’s introduction, in which he laments what he believed was the by-product of the magazine fiction boom: “For the past year, it has been a source of much questioning to me to determine why American fiction fails so conspicuously in presenting a national soul, why it fails to measure sincerely the heights and depths of our aspirations and failures as a nation, and why it lacks the vital elan which is so characteristic of other literatures? . . . Why is [our] national consciousness so tangled in evasion of reality?”

As an answer to his own rhetorical question, O’Brien quotes from a letter sent to him by an unnamed writer (who, unlike O’Brien, gets right to the point): “What writes itself in me is too intense for the light weight American magazines. My last story took me months to write and I had to ruin it by tacking on to it a happy ending — or starve.”

O’Brien’s mission was to combat commercial formularization of the literary short story. For twenty-six years, until his death in 1941, his selections for *The Best American Short Stories* were based on an unrelenting insistence upon literary distinction and authorial integrity. He eschewed tales with contrived plots and happy endings in favor of stories in the classic American tradition of Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Crane.

His efforts paid off. The stories in his collections improved over the years, and by the time of O’Brien’s death, Martha Foley was able to write in the introduction to her own first volume of the *Best*, in 1942, that “the lifelessly plotted story, with the forced happy or trick ending, is dying, slowly but surely dying.” Indeed, the number of memorable stories in Foley’s first collection is in contrast to the scarcity of those in O’Brien’s early volumes. And when Foley compiled *Fifty Best* in 1965, she in-

cluded only five stories from the first decade of the series, compared with fifteen from the 1955 to 1965 annuals.

Foley edited the series until 1977, when she died at age eighty. Her knowledge of the short story was encyclopedic. And it was not limited to just the American short story. She read and considered translations, British stories, South African stories, anything and everything that appeared in English in American and Canadian periodicals. But it was her unerring eye for literary quality in work by new writers that made her a great figure in American literature.

Martha Foley and her husband, Whit Burnett (whom she later divorced), had together founded *Story* magazine, and she co-edited it at its peak, from 1931 to 1942. When she assumed the job of editor of the *Best American* series, she offered this deceptively simple definition of the short story as the one she liked best: "A good short story is a story that is not too long and which gives the reader the feeling he has undergone a memorable experience."

The open-endedness of that definition may be the secret of Foley's success. Looking back over the thirty-six years of her editorship of the anthology, I am struck by the unfailingly high standards of the collections she assembled and by the sustained admiration of those who reviewed them. It's hard to believe that after so many years an editor wouldn't become jaded or lose touch with the times, or play favorites and begin to lose the respect of the literary critics. But to the end of her life Martha Foley maintained her critical integrity along with an extraordinarily open-minded response to new approaches to the short story. She was enthusiastic about whatever *worked*.

Martha Foley had appointed no successor, and Houghton Mifflin considered a number of ways to continue the series. They settled on a format that has changed the original procedure of selection to one intended to ensure that over time a variety of tastes will be at work in selecting the "best" stories. Because I had acted for some years as Houghton Mifflin's in-house editor of *The Best American Short Stories* and was known to cherish it, I was asked to serve as series editor in support of a different writer or critic invited to edit one annual volume. My job for the past thirteen years has been to read each year's

eligible stories published in U.S. and Canadian magazines and to select 120 for the guest editor's consideration. (To be eligible, a story must be written in English by a citizen of the United States or Canada and appear first in a nationally distributed periodical. An entry cannot be an excerpt of a longer work.) I also select the stories that make up the yearly list of "100 Other Distinguished Stories," which appears at the back of each collection.

To be perfectly honest, when Houghton Mifflin proposed this procedure to me in 1977, I agreed to it secretly hoping that the complicated new system would soon be rejected in favor once again of a single ongoing editor. Of course, I wanted that editor to be me. But there is nothing like success to change the direction of one's ambitions. The plan seemed not only to work but to work extremely well. The new series, which indeed is no longer so new, has been lively and wide-ranging in taste, and readers in America have shown their approval by buying increasing numbers of the volume every year. Sales have quadrupled in the past ten years as the guest editors have, in their considerations of and introductions to each year's crop of stories, commanded wider and wider attention for the anthology itself and for the story in general. In fact, the genre does now enjoy the oft-cited renaissance. And I believe the 1980s will be known as another golden age, though for reasons very different from those which led to the story's great popularity in the teens and twenties, when writers could live off their work in a way that today's practitioners cannot. But if the present golden age is not as economically sustaining as the previous one, certainly it provides a far richer environment for the development of younger writers.

There are, of course, those who have reservations about the longevity of the current literary appetite for short stories. In 1987 Ted Solotaroff, who had served as the first guest editor of the new series, called the short story "the sun-dried tomato of the literary world," implying that readers' interest in the genre runs no deeper than the latest gourmet fad. I think indications prove otherwise. A proliferation of graduate programs in creative writing has produced not only more short story writers but more demanding readers. And there is no denying that this

growing interest in short fiction has been well served over the past twenty-five years by those "little magazines" that have sprung into existence. The number of literary journals is ever growing, supported by an increasing budget for literature in the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as by stronger state arts councils. These journals provide, in turn, more space for more stories to be published by those new writers and new pipelines to that new audience. The increase in the number of stories being published is startling. Since I began work on *The Best American Short Stories*, the number of eligible stories that have found their way to me has more than doubled, from fewer than 900 in 1977 to more than 2,000 in 1989.

Another indication of the short story's resurgence in the 1980s is that collections and anthologies are being reviewed more often in magazines and newspapers. In 1989 alone, the *New York Times Book Review* turned over its front page to a short story collection four times, and in the spring of 1988 a first collection of stories, *Emperor of the Air* by Ethan Canin, was on the *Times* best-seller list for seven weeks. Cropping up too are features with titles like, "Is There a Short Story boom?" That article, which appeared in *Publishers Weekly* in 1987, asked a particularly relevant question: "Although there may be a proliferation of little magazines and presses . . . does that mean that there is also some considerable increase in the number of great writers of the genre?"

Every generation has its share of great writers. Ratios of one genre's greats to another's may simply reflect the literary climate of the times. But whatever the climate, I'm not worried about the short story. "It is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior," said the African writer Chinua Achebe. "It is the story that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence."

The guest editors of the 1980s have been as staunch as I in their belief in the genre. They have been as insistent as Edward O'Brien was about literary distinction and authorial integrity, and they have been as inclusive as Martha Foley in the broadness of their definitions of what "best" short stories should be. Margaret Atwood could have been speaking for all of them when she cautioned against rules in writing. A rule, she said, is

a “challenge to the deviousness and inventiveness and audacity of the creative spirit.” But the guest editors, all of them accomplished practitioners of the form, worked hard to select stories that best reflected their individual tastes, and all of them went to some trouble to communicate what the essentials of their tastes were. What is very welcome are the plain and emphatic statements by these ten editors of what they wanted from a short story. What follows is a selection of some of those statements, fresh and immediate redefinitions of what we’ve all been taught are the basic elements of the best fiction.

In contemplating their expectations of the short story’s form, one guest editor approached it metaphorically, another more practically:

It’s the chamber music of literature and has the same kind of devotee.

— HORTENSE CALISHER

I want stories to startle and engage me within the first few sentences, and in their middle to widen or deepen or sharpen my knowledge of human activity, and to end by giving me a sensation of completed statement.

— JOHN UPDIKE

When it came to style, two guest editors were quite direct about what they wanted:

The most appealing short-story writer is the one who’s a wastrel. He neither hoards his best ideas for something more “important” (a novel) nor skimps on his materials because this is “only” a short story . . . A spendthrift story has a strange way of seeming bigger than the sum of its parts; it is stuffed full; it gives a sense of possessing further information that could be divulged if called for. Even the sparest in style implies a torrent of additional details barely suppressed, bursting through the seams.

— ANNE TYLER

Abjure carelessness in writing, just as you would in life.

— RAYMOND CARVER

Nobody wanted to be specific about plot or subject matter or theme, but belief in the depth of the story's responsibility was clear and of great interest:

A good writer addresses questions over which no human authority can ever hold sway.

— MARK HELPRIN

One of the conclusions I have reached is that people want order, but some part of them craves anarchy, and writers are seen to embody both elements: in a sane, reasonable way, writers will present a situation, but the components of that situation, and the implications, can be dynamite.

— ANN BEATTIE

All I want from a good story is what children want . . . They are longing to hear a story, but only if you are longing to tell one.

— MARGARET ATWOOD

Short stories should tell us what everybody knows but what nobody is talking about. At least not publicly. Except for the short story writers.

— RAYMOND CARVER

I want stories in which the author shows frank concern, not self-protective, "sensible" detachment.

— JOHN GARDNER

The more you respect and focus on the singular and the strange, the more you become aware of the universal and the infinite.

— GAIL GODWIN

And when two of the editors discussed characterization, they plainly emphasized personal involvement:

Is it not astounding that one can love so deeply characters who are composites, portraits, or born of the thin air, especially when one has never seen or touched them, and they exist only in an imprint of curiously bent lines?

— MARK HELPRIN

What is wanted then is sadness. (We're talking literature, not life. We're talking Kenny Rogers's chipped and country voice, not music.) This, it seems to me, is the absolute, ideal humor for respectable men. Sadness mind you, not grief.

— STANLEY ELKIN

In defining the elements of their own tastes, the ten guest editors remind us why it is we want to read the "best" stories and why it is that only the story can continue "beyond the war and the warrior."

This volume celebrates a decade that has seen a rich diversity of approaches to the short story form, to its style; its themes, its characterizations. I have chosen twenty stories, two from each of the past ten volumes. My purpose is to reflect not only the variety of stories written and published in the 1980s, but also the wide range of tastes at work in this new series. These stories have been sifted through my idiosyncratic process of selection. Not every reader will love every story, but as different as each one is from another, I believe that all of them meet Raymond Carver's criteria: "Short stories, like houses — or cars, for that matter — should be built to last. They should also be pleasing, if not beautiful, to look at, and everything inside them should work."

In the end, I cannot improve upon the words and sentiments of Martha Foley's introduction to her first volume of *The Best American Short Stories* in 1942: "When O'Brien started this anthology many years ago, the short story had fallen to a very low level. It was easy then, and quite honest, to be able to say, 'These are the very best stories published during the entire year.' Now the level of short story writing again has risen so high it is not feasible to include in any one volume all the excellent stories published . . . All that any editor can say today is: 'These are the stories I myself liked best. I hope you will agree.'"

Amen.

SHANNON RAVENEL

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1980

PETER TAYLOR

Stanley Elkin characterized this story as “almost sociology, and a sociology that isn’t even operative anymore — the stiff, cold codes of a Memphis of the mind.” He also said it was “surely a masterpiece.” At fifty-six pages, “The Old Forest” threatens the limits of the story form in length, but as with all of Taylor’s short stories, it meets the classic criteria of focused time, place, and event. Peter Taylor was born in Tennessee in 1917. He was educated in schools in Nashville, Memphis, and St. Louis, and attended Kenyon College and Vanderbilt University. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The Old Forest

I WAS already formally engaged, as we used to say, to the girl I was going to marry. But still I sometimes went out on the town with girls of a different sort. And during the very week before the date set for the wedding, in December, I was in an automobile accident at a time when one of those girls was with me. It was a calamitous thing to have happen — not the accident itself, which caused no serious injury to anyone, but the accident plus the presence of that girl.

As a matter of fact, it was not unusual in those days — forty years ago and a little more — for a well-brought-up young man like me to keep up his acquaintance, until the very eve of his wedding, with some member of what we facetiously and somewhat arrogantly referred to as the Memphis demimonde. (That was merely to say with a girl who was not in the Memphis debutante set.) I am not even sure how many of us knew what the word *demimonde* meant or implied. But once it had been applied to such girls it was hard for us to give it up. We even learned to speak of them individually as demimondaines — and later cor-

rupted that to demimondames. The girls were of course a considerably less sophisticated lot than any of this sounds, though they were bright girls certainly and some of them even highly intelligent. They read books, they looked at pictures, and they were apt to attend any concert or play that came to Memphis. When the old San Carlo Opera Company turned up in town, you could count on certain girls of the demimonde being present in their block of seats, and often with a score of the opera in hand. From that you will understand that they certainly weren't the innocent, untutored types that we generally took to dances at the Memphis Country Club and whom we eventually looked forward to marrying.

These girls I refer to would, in fact, very frequently and very frankly say to us that the M.C.C. (that's how we always spoke of the club) was the last place they wanted to be taken. There was one girl in particular, not so smart as some of the others perhaps and certainly less restrained in the humor she sometimes poked at the world we boys lived in, an outspoken girl, who was the most vociferous of all in her disdain for the country club. I remember one night, in one of those beer gardens that became popular in Memphis in the late thirties, when this girl suddenly announced to a group of us, "*I haven't lost anything at the M.C.C. That's something you boys can bet your daddy's bottom dollar on.*" We were gathered — four or five couples — about one of the big wooden beer-garden tables with an umbrella in its center, and when she said that, all the other girls in the party went into a fit of laughter. It was a kind of giggling that was unusual for them. The boys in the party laughed, too, of course, but we were surprised by the way the girls continued to giggle among themselves for such a long time. We were out of college by then and thought we knew the world pretty well; most of us had been working for two or three years in our fathers' business firms. But we didn't see why this joke was so very funny. I suppose it was too broad for us in its reference. There is no way of knowing, after all these years, if it was too broad for our sheltered minds or if the rest of the girls were laughing at the vulgar tone of the girl who had spoken. She was, you see, a little bit coarser than the rest, and I suspect they were laughing at the way she had phrased what she said. For us boys, anyhow, it