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the BEST
AMERICAN
MYSTERY
STORIES

SUE GRAFTON, editor

OTTO PENZLER, series editor

The Best American Mystery Stories 1998

Edited and with an Introduction
by Sue Grafton

Otto Penzler, *Series Editor*



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Foreword

FOR JUST HOW MANY years have we heard the publishing axiom that short story collections don't sell? When I was too young, too naive, to know this truth, I filled shelf after shelf with short story collections, unaware of my deviant behavior for engaging in this apparently unusual, if not outright bizarre, act.

Having continued down this awkwardly antisocial path for more years than it would be polite for anyone to enumerate to me, I am now struck by the fact that I have never had difficulty finding enough excellent collections (the work of a single author) and even more anthologies (stories by a variety of contributors) to satisfy my unending thirst. Can there be such generosity, such out-and-out *charity*, on the part of publishing houses to continue to publish these money-losing projects? If we are reading the same newspapers and magazines, with their endless lamentations about the strangulation of publishing houses by their new leaders, all accountants and lawyers still awaiting their first actual reading experience, that seems unlikely. Or — could it be? — short stories *do* sell.

When I consider the number of periodicals, anthologies, and collections I read to accumulate the best stories of the year, I cannot help but be cheered by the many markets open to short story writers. Nothing like the golden age before television, of course, but enough to ensure that any worthwhile piece of fiction will find a home.

While there are too few magazines specializing exclusively in the type of fiction contained in this volume, there are many main-

stream consumer publications that use some mystery fiction, just as there are many small literary magazines that might be a trifle too blue-blooded ever to consider a mere mystery story but are happy to feature a tale of passion, fear, violence, suspense, or revenge that results in murder or its attempt or its aftermath. Finally, recent years have seen a dramatic increase in anthologies of original mystery fiction. Adding it all up, we counted nearly six hundred mystery-crime-suspense stories published in the calendar year 1997.

It has always been my practice to define mystery fiction broadly as any story in which a crime, or the threat of a crime, is central to the theme or plot. This definition opens the door to much that is not structured as a classic detective story.

In the United States, the professional organization of authors who produce this type of fiction is called the Mystery Writers of America. Its English counterpart is the Crime Writers Association. The members of both organizations are writers of mysteries, or stories essentially told from the point of view of the detective in which an attempt is made to discover who committed a crime or, more often nowadays, why the crime was committed. Both also count among their members writers of crime fiction, which is largely told from the point of view of the criminal: we see the crime committed, generally understand why it has been done, and then wait to discover how or why it all unravels.

As Sue Grafton points out in her introduction, there seems to be a preponderance of crime stories in this volume. It has, it seems to me, become more and more difficult for detective story writers to find new motives, or new clues, with which to fool readers. Agatha Christie consumed more than her share of original plot notions, leaving a pretty skimpy carcass for those who followed. On the whole, there seems a wider range of opportunity in the areas of suspense and crime than in the tightly plotted story of observation and deduction, so it cannot be a surprise that the output of contemporary authors reflects that shift of direction.

As is the custom in the Houghton Mifflin series of distinguished anthologies, the series editor (in this case, me) does the preliminary reading and passes along the best fifty stories to the guest editor (in this case, Sue Grafton), who selects the twenty stories to be published, with the remaining thirty listed in an honor roll at the end of the volume. To further enhance the reading experience,

Introduction

THIS COLLECTION of short fiction might more properly be labeled the “Best American *Crime* Stories of 1998.” Regardless of the angle of attack, all of these stories feature crime in some form, either as the central driving force or as the anchor for other, sometimes disparate, elements. Certainly, the mix includes many stories constructed along the lines of the classic mystery, but there are unconventional approaches to the subject as well. In reviewing the many fine submissions, we were impressed with the ingenuity employed by writers whose styles and stratagems ranged from the formal to the offbeat. Almost without exception, crime here is the metaphor for human beings in distress, and violence, whether actual or implied, provides the compression chamber for the resolution of interpersonal hostilities.

These stories are exquisite studies in the complexity of human nature. Whether told from the point of view of the criminal, the victim, or representatives of law enforcement, each story touches on a facet of evil and, by implication, sheds light on its counterpart, good. Stanley Ellin has defined the mystery story as “short prose fiction that is, in some way, concerned with crime.” This definition, while serviceable, scarcely speaks to the varied techniques these writers utilize to achieve their effects.

The construction of the crime story requires the establishment of a world easily recognizable to the reader. Whatever the parameters of this fictional universe, the reader must, early on, accept its reality, regardless of how alien it may seem to the reader’s own. From the moment of this connection, the reader is led through a

dark and tangled wood to the light of revelation on the other side. At the end of the journey, the reader has experienced a shift in perception . . . the *ahh!* of understanding that gives a story its impact. It is the marvel of the short story that it can accomplish so much in so few words.

Ross Macdonald once said: "An unstable balance between reason and more primitive human qualities is characteristic of the detective story. For both writer and reader it is an imaginative arena where such conflicts can be worked out safely, under artistic controls." Crime is the battering ram that breaches our defenses, forcing us to acknowledge how vulnerable we are. Given the daily newspaper accounts of crimes committed in cities across America, we're forced to construct a wall of denial around us in order to keep functioning. How else could we dare to venture forth from day to day? Murder, assault, robbery, gang violence, muggings, random freeway shootings . . . these are the threats to our personal safety, dangers we must somehow find a way to keep at arm's length.

Crime fiction is the periscope that permits us to peer over the wall without having to deal directly with the horror beyond. The crime story allows us to scrutinize the very peril we're afraid to face. At the same time, crime fiction seduces us into acknowledging aspects of ourselves that we might prefer to repudiate. Through crime stories, we can wear the mask of the killer without risking arrest and conviction. Through crime stories, we can experience the helplessness of the victim without suffering real harm. Thus, the writer's imagination authorizes an examination of the felonious outer world and our own concomitant emotional transgressions without compromising our humanity or surrendering our staunchly held moral views.

The stories in this collection serve as a seismograph, charting the effects of violence on the world around us. Sometimes what's recorded is a brutal upheaval of the visible landscape, sometimes a subtle tremor occurring far below the surface. With the crime narrative, there is always the tension of not quite knowing when the next eruption will occur. Where suspense is created, we find ourselves subject to a heightened awareness, our comprehension of events distinctly sharpened by dread. Ordinary people are seen with extraordinary clarity. Extraordinary events are reduced to their baser components: greed, rage, jealousy, hatred, and revenge.

Since the biblical moment in which Cain killed his brother, Abel, we've seen the reflection of our Shadow side in the stories we tell. What can be darker than the taking of human life? What more illuminating than such a tale brought to consciousness? We've always been attracted to the sly charms of the crime story. Look at the list of best-sellers in any given week. Of the top ten best-selling books, close to half are devoted to crime and mystery. The form may vary from the legal thriller to romantic suspense, from the hard-boiled private eye to the police procedural, but the appeal is the same.

"Crime doesn't pay," or so the old saying goes, yet watching a fictional character violate the law is irresistible, not necessarily because we wish such misfortunes on our fellow humans, but because, through reading, we can watch the perpetrator's destiny unfold without penalty to ourselves. Watching others get caught gives us the delicious sensation of our own safe delivery from our inner lawlessness. Crime fiction, like a report of political chicanery, allows us to identify with evildoers while we cling to our innocence, stoutly maintaining our disapproval of such behaviors. We can safely condemn offenses we might (with sufficient temptation or provocation) be capable of committing ourselves, staying a comfortable distance away from our own blacker aspects. A crime story allows us to plead "not guilty" to the sins of any given character. *He* was caught, and we weren't. *She* crossed the line, while we remained on the side of right. Fiction points the finger at someone other than ourselves, and we feel giddy with relief. How else can we explain the universal fascination with trials and public executions? We want to see justice done . . . to someone else. We like to see the system work as long as it isn't operating at our expense.

From the lowliest of criminals to the loftiest of public figures, retribution seems to catch up with every miscreant eventually. And nowhere is iniquity, wrongdoing, and reparation more satisfying to behold than in the well-crafted yarns spun by the writers represented here. While we're plunged into the darkness by their skill and imagination, we're simultaneously reassured that we are safe . . . from ourselves.

SUE GRAFTON

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DAVID BALLARD

Child Support

FROM *New Mystery*

DEXTER HARRISON CURSED the biting wind as he pushed the blue baby carriage up the park path with one gloved hand and struggled to hold onto the tugging dog leash with the other.

It was even colder at the top of the hill, and Harrison growled a curse at Lex, his black Lab, for refusing to drop his chewed red Frisbee as Harrison tried to free the dog from his choker collar. As he locked the carriage brake and handed a baby bottle to his son, Adam, Harrison clenched his teeth and swore at his soon-to-be-ex-wife and her idiot attorney for withholding the promised cash settlement until Friday, when Harrison desperately needed \$16,000 today.

After shaking the Frisbee overhead like a tambourine to get the dog revved up, Harrison shouted, "Here we go, boy! Come on! Bet you can't catch this one!" Harrison whipped the Frisbee so hard into the wind it sailed toward an abandoned soccer goal at the north end of the park. Lex bolted after it. He caught it easily with an airborne lunge, ending with the enamel *crunch* of sharp teeth clamped into plastic. As Lex trotted back with the Frisbee, Adam waved a mittened hand from within the baby carriage and squealed, "Dog-gee!"

From behind, Harrison heard the muffled *whump-whump* of two car doors slamming far away. He turned and saw a black Mercedes with darkened windows parked at the curb. Two figures leaned into the wind as they walked up the hill toward him.

Pretending not to notice, Harrison glanced around the deserted park. The overhead lamps down by the tennis courts were not yet lit, despite the gloomy overcast sky. The gunmetal gray playground

equipment — the slide, a row of swings, and a tilted merry-go-round — sat neglected off to the east. The closest house with a porch light burning was across the street at the other end of the park, at least five hundred yards away. In front of him, Lex danced in anticipation, alert for another throw.

Without hesitating, Harrison threw the Frisbee again, and Lex flew after it, following the crimson arc of the Frisbee's flight as the wind angled it toward the merry-go-round. Like a pro, the dog timed the approach perfectly, caught the Frisbee inches from the ground without breaking stride, and rushed back for another throw.

Harrison glanced sideways at the two men slowly walking toward him. One was tall and skinny, while the other was broad and immense. They both wore long black coats tied at their waists, and their attention seemed focused on Harrison the whole time.

This must be it, then, thought Harrison. Time to pay the piper.

Harrison looked at his son in the baby carriage, bundled in his little blue parka. "You're my little rabbit's foot, Adam," he whispered as he bent down to take the Frisbee from Lex. "My lucky horseshoe. Nothing bad will happen. They only want to talk to Daddy. I'll just explain the delay. They'll understand."

Adam beamed up at his father and grinned. He was a magnificent eighteen-month-old little boy — bright and inquisitive, with round blue eyes and hair the texture of cornsilk. Harrison treasured his son more than any of his possessions, and so far Adam represented the only profit resulting from Dexter Harrison's dull and dreary marriage to Dr. Lynn Harrison.

As an attorney himself, Harrison had deftly whisked away temporary custody of their son from his wife. While he had been pondering a divorce, Harrison had spent months preparing a detailed and somewhat exaggerated chronology of all the abilities that made him a wonderful parent, while at the same time embellishing accounts of all of Lynn's shortcomings, lapses in judgment, and blunders. When Harrison filed for divorce, his attorney obtained an *ex parte* order from the judge granting Harrison temporary custody of Adam, all before any of the divorce papers were even served on Lynn. Harrison had capitalized on the fact that, while Adam spent weekdays in the most expensive day care in town, Lynn could arrange no baby-sitting for the evenings and weekends she was on call at the hospital, especially on such short notice.

Harrison had supported his wife financially while she was in medical school, and now she earned almost ten times what he did with his floundering personal injury practice. The property settlement had already been reached in principle, with Harrison to receive a large part of it in cash this morning. Lynn's attorney, however, had deliberately withheld the paperwork until Friday, probably out of spite.

I'll get even at the custody hearing tomorrow, thought Harrison. His own attorney had assured him that all of their witnesses were lined up and that preliminary signs were good that Harrison would win permanent custody of Adam. Harrison smiled at this thought as he regarded his son. The ultimate prize.

The wind carried the steady sound of boot heels slowly approaching. The two men were thirty feet away.

Still composed, Harrison took the Frisbee from his dog's mouth and let loose with a mighty throw. Lex pounded the ground after it as if his life depended on it. The dog's head bobbed like a greyhound's as he raced to get under the Frisbee before it floated to the ground.

That dog sure loved to run. As a sporting dog, Lex understood and appreciated the thrill of the chase, the electrifying rush of pursuit. He savored the hunt and the kill, even though his target may be only a softball, or a piece of flying plastic.

Lynn, on the other hand, simply had no imagination, no sense of adventure. She preferred her heavy medical books and mildewed chess manuals to the frenzied excitement of a race or the wild exhilaration of a home game.

Chess was boring. It was static, monotonous and simply uninteresting. Harrison would rather invest his leisure time tackling a high stakes poker game or watching a small fortune build at the track. The promise of the big payoff surged through Harrison like adrenaline. Although it was sometimes painful to lose money — and yes, a lot of it on rare occasion, Harrison insured against loss by placing only intelligent and calculated bets.

How was he supposed to know that last year's Super Bowl champion would lose on Sunday to an expansion team?

Lex returned with the Frisbee just as the two men stopped in front of the baby carriage.

The tall one had the sunken sockets and bulging eyes of a fish, as if he spent days in the dark staring into a television screen. As

he peered into the baby carriage and smiled, decayed yellow teeth seemed to burst from his mouth. His lips were circled by an untrimmed goatee that made Harrison's own face itch when he looked at it.

Harrison gripped the vinyl handle of the baby carriage, trying to appear casual. Just keep breathing, he thought to himself. This is just like being in court.

"Cute little boy you got there, Mr. Harrison. Never seen a finer lookin' little kid. Wouldn't you agree with me, Mr. Corillian?"

The shorter man said nothing. He was massive and squat, like a sumo wrestler sizing up an opponent. Thick arms, thick neck — even his eyelids were thick slabs of flesh almost squeezing shut his eyes in a menacing squint. Tight ridges of chocolate skin rippled down the back of his scalp and into a blue turtleneck as he looked first to his right, and then left in smooth, fluid movements, checking out the surroundings.

"Yes," the taller man concluded, as he clapped moist hands together for emphasis. "This is one snapper of a lad."

Watching out of the corners of both eyes, Harrison quietly said, "Yes, I know."

"That is a boy in there, ain't it?" the tall man continued. "Kinda hard to tell when they're that little, you know? Boys, girls, they're more or less the same at that age, don'tcha think?"

Harrison suddenly felt crowded as he gripped the carriage handle tighter. "Who the hell are you guys? What do you want?"

"Ooooh, hey! Calm down, Sport. Don't get all stimulated. By all means, introductions are most certainly in order. This, as you now know, is Mr. Corillian. He's not very sociable, so I wouldn't expect him to hold out his hand and shake."

The taller man thrust out his own blistered hand to compensate, his naked wrist and forearm jutting out from inside the leather sleeve. "Call me 'Fish-Hook.' Pleased to meetcha, Mr. Harrison."

As if to punctuate his introduction, he produced a long, rusty fish-hook from inside his sleeve after Harrison refused the handshake, and began teasing at lacerations in his palm with it.

Harrison swallowed. This definitely was not developing well.

"What did I tell you, Mr. Corillian, we would find our Sport out here playing games. What sort of games do you like to play, Mr. Harrison? I'll bet Hide-and-Seek is one of your favorite games."

Harrison's legs felt like bee hives. He looked over hopefully at Lex, still wagging his tail and waiting for someone to throw the Frisbee. No help there.

Harrison swallowed his initial panic and continued to pace his breathing, gaining control. He could take charge of this situation, with the right approach. He had done it a thousand times before, with a reluctant witness on the stand, or a suspicious client unsure of legal procedure. It was just a matter of setting the tone, controlling the conversation, directing the course of negotiations, and maintaining superiority over these opponents.

"I take it," Harrison opened, "that you two are here representing the interests of Mr. Shaw."

"You take it very well," said Fish-Hook, who then savagely punched Harrison in the stomach.

Harrison's grip on the carriage handle withered as he folded over and sucked wind. Lex whined in confusion and dropped the Frisbee, but he kept wagging his tail, ready to resume play.

"I don't have the sixteen thousand," Harrison managed after a moment with his hands on his knees. "Look, I expect to get at least ten times that much in my divorce settlement. It's just that the papers haven't come through yet."

Fish-Hook arched one eyebrow and glanced down at Mr. Corillian, who shook his head.

"This is very bad, Mr. Harrison," Fish-Hook said, "but such is not our concern. You will have to talk to our employer."

"But I can't —"

Harrison stopped as he noticed for the first time another figure walking up the park path. The man was huge.

Where Mr. Corillian was thick and massive, this man was all fat. His face was pink and completely hairless, with splashes of red stinging his cheeks. His gray eyes were intelligent and playful, and his blubbery smile was impish. A hearing aid was virtually lost in the expansive folds of one ear, and his face ended in an abundance of chins overlapping like snow drifts into his buttoned overcoat. He waddled as he walked, with his right hand poised out in front of him, as if he were carrying a phantom cane.

When the fat man spoke, his voice was gruff, but friendly. "Mr. Harrison. We had an agreement. I am somewhat disappointed."

"Look, I thought I would have the sixteen thousand this morn-