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ANN BEATTIE

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SHANNON RAVENEL

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# *The Best* AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1987

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Selected from  
U.S. and Canadian Magazines  
by ANN BEATTIE  
with SHANNON RAVENEL

*With an Introduction by Ann Beattie*

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON

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## *Publisher's Note*

The *Best American Short Stories* series was started in 1915 under the editorship of Edward J. O'Brien. Its title reflects the optimism of a time when people assumed that an objective "best" could be identified, even in fields not measured in physical terms.

Martha Foley took over as editor of the series in 1942. With her husband, Whit Burnett, she had edited *Story* magazine since 1931, and in later years she taught creative writing at Columbia School of Journalism. When Miss Foley died in 1977, at the age of eighty, she was at work on what would have been her thirty-seventh volume of *The Best American Short Stories*.

Beginning with the 1978 edition, Houghton Mifflin introduced a new editorial arrangement for the anthology. Inviting a different writer or critic to edit each new annual volume would provide a variety of viewpoints to enliven the series and broaden its scope. *Best American Short Stories* has thus become a series of informed but differing opinions that gains credibility from its very diversity.

Also beginning with the 1978 volume, the guest editors have worked with the series editor, Shannon Ravenel, who during each calendar year reads as many qualifying short stories as she can get hold of, makes a preliminary selection of 120 stories for the guest editor's consideration, and selects the "100 Other Distinguished Short Stories of the Year," a listing that has always been an important feature of these volumes.

In the ten years that have passed since then, there has been

growing interest in the short story, and the form itself has grown. The range of approaches and techniques and stances it attracts is ever broader. And so is its audience. In response to this anthology's increasingly enthusiastic readership, this year's volume introduces a new feature. Each of the authors of the twenty stories selected by the guest editor has been invited to describe briefly how his or her story came to be written. Most have accepted what is clearly a challenging assignment, and their short essays appear at the back of the volume in the "Contributors' Notes" section.

The stories chosen for this year's anthology were originally published in magazines issued between January 1986 and January 1987. 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; and (3) publication as short stories (novel excerpts are not knowingly considered by the editors). A list of the magazines consulted by Ms. Ravenel appears at the back of this volume. Other publications wishing to make sure that their contributors are considered for the series should include Ms. Ravenel on their subscription list (P.O. Box 3176, University City, Missouri 63130).

## *Introduction*

IT'S OFTEN BEEN SAID that short stories are so popular now because they are an ideal form for our time. This is said in the same spirit, it seems to me, as announcing that finger food that can be eaten in one bite is preferable at cocktail parties. Similarly, a large group of people seem to believe Andy Warhol's proclamation that "in the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes." My own feeling is that in the future, still only a chosen few will be noticed, and then — if they're lucky — for fifteen minutes. I do believe that television has altered our ideas about concentration, yet at the same time we must have wanted that: the beast in the jungle has been replaced by the Betamax in the bedroom.

But if everyone, everywhere, can concentrate so briefly, those are not the people I've met as I've taught and given readings and been interviewed. I don't meet people who, if they read one story and are impressed by it, don't read another by the same author. It would be ridiculous to assume that they are resistant to reading many stories sequentially. I don't find that they think that stories, being shorter, are more accessible than novels. While academics may debate What's-a-poem/What's-a-story/What's-a-novel, very few readers are confused by this. I think that they have a gut reaction to the different forms, and that they know what they're reaching for just as well as the writer knows, right away, whether something he or she wants to express is best cast as poetry or prose. All are distillations, but chronological time is very important. There is the time of the

story (Lee K. Abbott's "Dreams of Distant Lives" exists in the present moment, in the time that it takes to tell the story), but as time unfolds, and as the character remembers, the story expands. Connoted time, the implications of any situation, may take us far and wide. But first we have to be willing to take a journey. We have to make an imaginative leap in the first place, taking time out to risk that words may, at least to some extent, change our world.

In his introduction to last year's *Best American Short Stories*, Raymond Carver wrote that stories have more in common with poetry than with the novel. I agree with that, and often wonder why so many people who have presented themselves as commentators on the so-called resurgence of the story have concerned themselves so much with the external, literal world in which the story transpires and have ignored the writers' use of language. In an essay in the January-February 1987 issue of *American Poetry Review*, C. K. Williams writes, "We are taught that it is associative necessity which determines metaphor, but this is not the case. It is actually the ability of the poet to *dissociate*, to reach into the realm of chance, to fuse the unlikely with the undeniable, which determines the intensity of metaphor." I think that sensitive readers know that, and don't assume that analogies were plucked like glistening plums and added to, or superimposed on, the narrative.

Writers are held in high esteem (leaving aside the pop-press presentation of writers: all those articles that condescend to writer and audience alike, in which the writer's advance is stated and there is an accompanying picture of the writer in the kitchen, holding a whisk, as proof that he or she can whip up a nifty dessert) because they are thought of as adventurers, of sorts: divers into metaphors and parachutists over distant lands of discontinuity. And the reader, one hopes, comes to be convinced not that it is an uncomplicated world, but that there is something important in the disparities and complexities. Indeed, the writer may be disassembling and finding oddities beneath what might have passed for coherence. In the best writing, though, what emerges becomes too convincing to appear concocted.

For the writer, finding a theme is one thing (it requires pa-

tience, originality, and faith) and presenting it compellingly and convincingly is another. Beyond our vision, what we have is language — the written word. The right word can provide enormous resonance or succinctly suggest any number of complexities (for example, Tim O'Brien's use of the word "encyst"). Yet the writer has to be extremely precise as well as innovative: it is necessary to be careful because people are resistant; they encounter a barrage of language every day. Some of it is self-inflicted. (We *can* turn some of it off; apparently the average American is as dedicated to his remote control switch as cave-men were to their clubs.) Much of the rest of the noise has to do with the current belief that everything and everyone needs discussion. Poets and fiction writers, as far as I know, don't feel this way. They realize that what they are providing is extraneous to matters of absolute survival; they know that they have to deliver things sneakily or they will not arrive at all; they have no grand point to make, or they would have written an essay in the first place. They want to persuade. They want to get their way. They are grown-up children, with greater skills.

But the times are difficult. No doubt some of the current overtalking is revisionist: a reaction against the touchy-feelie philosophy that predominated a couple of decades ago, and at the same time a return to a stratified, hierarchical society in which self-appointed authorities deliver the word (and usually a product) to the masses. Almost everything takes the form of an exposé, but while facts may be exposed, little is revealed about the beauty and wonder of our existence. Those who are not actively involved in announcing and proclaiming seem to be getting increased respect. (Consider the boom in the art market, where words are not the medium at all and, as well, where there is a reappearance of narrative painting.) While it is not yet the day of the poet, there are still a considerable number of people who are turning away from instant analysis and toward the implications of art. The analyzers are not in the business of being surprised (*Saturday Night Live's* parody of news reporting is a good example of alleged objectivity), but surprise is what good writing is all about, and readers are attuned to it. Something ineffable about the quality and texture of what they read lets them know when the writer has been surprised, and the sheer



energy of that surprise conveys itself in the writing. I do not forget my shock — and how entirely impressed I was — when, for example, I first read Mary Robison's story "Yours," and learned what the doctor wanted to tell his wife about people who had not quite enough talent. Or the sock-to-my-stomach word, that absolutely perfect one word, with which Raymond Carver concluded his story "What Is It?" — doubly brilliant, because while the reader finds himself or herself sad, pronouncing the word "gleaming" makes the muscles move so that the mouth is smiling. This year, I read Madison Smartt Bell's story with fascination and dread, simultaneously tantalized by the events and as done-in as the character by their implications. It was like being on a roller coaster. I had to enjoy the ride I was being taken on, but at the same time it shook me up a little too much. Other times, the writer's timing was perfect. I had forgotten that things were not in sharp focus, so convincing was the guiding narrative that was moving me through Kent Haruf's story "Private Debts/Public Holdings," that when the sentence — surely banal out of context — appeared that read, "She was wearing slacks and a loose green blouse," my eyes widened with surprise. It might as well have been neon-green, or the wildest thing imaginable. She was *real*. Of course!

Stories are fabrications, mimetic enough to convince, off-kilter enough to carry weight. It's often the spark that convinces us and not the fire, in this world where facts are too often manipulated into meaninglessness. As I see it, writers are willing to take a chance; they like to tempt fate a little. Few writers — even those with outlines and copious notes — sit down to doggedly prove anything. Rather, they like to see if they can shake themselves up, if there are questions that can be raised, narrow roads that may widen. Flannery O'Connor's remarks about things needing to exist literally in a story before they can exist figuratively are quite telling about the process: what exists must exist persuasively, in its own right (hard enough to do), and only then can it enlarge into a metaphorical existence. And then it is not that something *is* a metaphor, but that a melding has occurred, a true transformation has resulted, and things are now joined, not to be separated. Of course the intelligent reader, however impressed, does not care to believe that there

is one truth. That is why the perceiver turned to art to begin with. Like the whispered secret that becomes, in repetition, something entirely different, the remembered story, through time, becomes a worry bead transformed into a boulder. It is the writer's task to suggest that something is inevitable — which is of course a difficult thing to do in a world in which not much is inevitable. The starting points, the basic *givens*, are often so strange that it is difficult to imagine what the correct theorem should be that might apply, say, to Joy Williams's characters' predicaments in "The Blue Men." Abstracted, her world looks to me like the peninsula of Florida that becomes neither rectangular nor triangular, so that it seems entirely appropriate that the car ride at the end takes the course it does. In some of these stories, such as John Updike's exhilaratingly sad "The After-life," what is strange is in the process of being discovered, for character and reader alike, as both move through time. Craig Nova's story begins, in effect, at the end. Lee K. Abbott's story implodes.

The visual — paintings, photographs — come at us, at least on the surface, all at once. There is, on some level, simultaneity. Time is frozen. But in a story, we may hear a voice before we associate it with a character, have no idea of the character's world even if we can assess him or her, and the ending is not foretold as we begin the story. To some extent, when we read fiction, we're sleuthing to get the facts, and we have to have good instincts so that we don't get thrown off. I think that with most stories — this group, at least — we're not meant to anticipate what we're moving toward. The stories are mysteries to which we will be exposed. The sureness is in the writing. Look at the first paragraph of Mavis Gallant's story "Kingdom Come." Someone is clearly in charge of telling us a story; the suspense is in the substance of the things observed, not in our inability to become attuned to the method of delivery. Looking at Mavis Gallant's story, and at Kent Haruf's, and at Craig Nova's, I suddenly realized that when the tone established the narrator as competent and in charge — when there was clearly an authority — the tone of a fairy tale never seemed far away. In retrospect, I'm sure that Craig Nova realized that "The Prince" might well have begun: "Imagine this: in a land far away . . ."

But in some ways, it seems even more compelling, and more shocking, to realize that we are reading a fairy tale that refuses to be a fairy tale. Nova's story becomes a kind of comment on the genre. And it is surprising to realize how powerfully that genre reflects our times.

I spent years being puzzled by people — people who were well acquainted with my work — who would come up to me at readings or receptions and say, with a gleam in their eye, "Wait till you hear *this*," and then proceed to tell me some shocking story. Usually their delivery was very good: the punch line came unexpectedly, and hit hard. These people wanted me, at the very least, to see the world as absurd, wicked, grotesque, and chaotic, often with some depravity thrown in. Then they had a back-up story that substantiated even grimmer truths than their first story. Considering that early on I was writing (with few exceptions) about what seemed to me in many ways to be sadly *un*-provocative people, people who were meant to provoke the reader because they were themselves having trouble understanding or articulating their despair, I wasn't quite sure why tales of horror were seen by my informants as a necessary sort of secret salute. Then I realized that I was thinking about it too hard, personalizing it; it wasn't really the subject matter of my stories, but an assured delivery that made people think that I needed shaking up. That I needed it for their satisfaction at seeing me squirm and, paradoxically I suppose, as reinforcement for me. It was a while before I realized that *any* storyteller will be seen as a person playing a game: we're holding out — we know what happens, right? (Wrong, most often. I'll hazard a guess that Ralph Lombreglia forgot the swimming pool himself until it had to appear again, and even that Kent Haruf didn't know which dance would be Jessie's last.) People who meant to entertain me by shocking me thought I was taking something literal — actually, this was a compliment, because they took an improvisation for the real world — and making it hypothetical. Since this has largely been true of what's been going on in the society at large (with the proliferation of explicators), I was just a convenient and temporary public figure to get even with or to try to outguess.

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. How exactly should Joy Williams's characters act in response to their largely inherited world? In Craig Nova's story, how alienated is the prince, and how might he become better adjusted? In Tim O'Brien's story, how should Lavender's death have been dealt with? These stories pose questions — they mean to pose questions — but it is not just a sly fade that the writers do after implying that there are problems. They try to have their vision radiate metaphorically. They put in the mouths of characters unlikely solutions so that we may think about more likely ones. Because the world assumes a status quo, and because writers don't believe this, my questions above end up sounding silly. Yet a lot of critics still condescend to writers and their readers by assuming (although they will do almost anything to avoid saying this in its primitive form) that answers should be apparent after an experience. Perhaps there should be balance, texture, and the right sound of language to go along with the material — perhaps these things, and others, might make a story transcendent — but finding the exceptional way to articulate the ordinary is a significant task. Even ordinary things confuse us.

Poets and painters and fiction writers may offer a channel for rediscovery. The ongoing state of things is such that as soon as we arrive in one place, something necessitates our moving on to another. Parking meters are profitable for this reason. There isn't a story in this collection that doesn't contain or express anxiety. Reading them, you'll go to funerals, fight a war, come close to drowning, slip on the stairs in the dark, careen around in a car out of control, lose your kingdom, wonder whether your children are safe, and consider electrocution. In terms of shock value, of course, none of these stories outdoes the daily newspaper. Neither do they seem to be exciting adventure stories, except perhaps in paraphrase. Instead, they present strong revelations about ordinary, private matters. There are things that get whispered about that writers are there to overhear. Shadows behind the curtains that can be brought into focus. It's a serious

business, writing and reading stories; we sense, as we do in times of need, who our friends are. There is a poem that I'm very fond of by Gregory Orr. At its conclusion there is a trapped fly (no apologies to Flannery O'Connor needed; no one will doubt its simple existence) that functions, as well, as the perceiver's projection and also as a metaphor. It reminds me how much art matters — how much trust we put in it, how vulnerable we can become.

READING LATE IN THE COTTAGE

There aren't that many pages left.  
I'm getting nervous; what if  
the author means to surprise me  
by leaving the last twenty blank?  
Now all sounds disturb me:  
embers letting fall on the hearth  
their heavy grey petals;  
cattle outside, tearing the grass  
with their teeth; and close by,  
the screech of the luminous  
insect trapped in the lightbulb.

In the stories I selected, I found questions that disturbed me, implications I had not thought of, and observed living humans illuminated by art. I picked the stories, I suppose, for the same reason I have picked people and places (when I have been the one to choose). I picked them because they surprised me.

ANN BEATTIE

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SUSAN SONTAG

## *The Way We Live Now*

FROM THE NEW YORKER

AT FIRST HE WAS just losing weight, he felt only a little ill, Max said to Ellen, and he didn't call for an appointment with his doctor, according to Greg, because he was managing to keep on working at more or less the same rhythm, but he did stop smoking, Tanya pointed out, which suggests he was frightened, but also that he wanted, even more than he knew, to be healthy, or healthier, or maybe just to gain back a few pounds, said Orson, for he told her, Tanya went on, that he expected to be climbing the walls (isn't that what people say?) and found, to his surprise, that he didn't miss cigarettes at all and reveled in the sensation of his lungs' being ache-free for the first time in years. But did he have a good doctor, Stephen wanted to know, since it would have been crazy not to go for a checkup after the pressure was off and he was back from the conference in Helsinki, even if by then he was feeling better. And he said, to Frank, that he would go, even though he was indeed frightened, as he admitted to Jan, but who wouldn't be frightened now, though, odd as that might seem, he hadn't been worrying until recently, he avowed to Quentin, it was only in the last six months that he had the metallic taste of panic in his mouth, because becoming seriously ill was something that happened to other people, a normal delusion, he observed to Paolo, if one was thirty-eight and had never had a serious illness; he wasn't, as Jan confirmed, a hypochondriac. Of course, it was hard not to worry, everyone was worried, but it wouldn't do to panic, because, as Max pointed out to Quentin, there wasn't anything one could do except wait



and hope, wait and start being careful, be careful, and hope. And even if one did prove to be ill, one shouldn't give up, they had new treatments that promised an arrest of the disease's inexorable course, research was progressing. It seemed that everyone was in touch with everyone else several times a week, checking in, I've never spent so many hours at a time on the phone, Stephen said to Kate, and when I'm exhausted after the two or three calls made to me, giving me the latest, instead of switching off the phone to give myself a respite I tap out the number of another friend or acquaintance, to pass on the news. I'm not sure I can afford to think so much about it, Ellen said, and I suspect my own motives, there's something morbid I'm getting used to, getting excited by, this must be like what people felt in London during the Blitz. As far as I know, I'm not at risk, but you never know, said Aileen. This thing is totally unprecedented, said Frank. But don't you think he ought to see a doctor, Stephen insisted. Listen, said Orson, you can't force people to take care of themselves, and what makes you think the worst, he could be just run down, people still do get ordinary illnesses, awful ones, why are you assuming it has to be *that*. But all I want to be sure, said Stephen, is that he understands the options, because most people don't, that's why they won't see a doctor or have the test, they think there's nothing one can do. But is there anything one can do, he said to Tanya (according to Greg), I mean what do I gain if I go to the doctor; if I'm really ill, he's reported to have said, I'll find out soon enough.

And when he was in the hospital, his spirits seemed to lighten, according to Donny. He seemed more cheerful than he had been in the last months, Ursula said, and the bad news seemed to come almost as a relief, according to Ira, as a truly unexpected blow, according to Quentin, but you'd hardly expect him to have said the same thing to all his friends, because his relation to Ira was so different from his relation to Quentin (this according to Quentin, who was proud of their friendship), and perhaps he thought Quentin wouldn't be undone by seeing him weep, but Ira insisted that couldn't be the reason he behaved so differently with each, and that maybe he was feeling less shocked, mobilizing his strength to fight for his life, at the mo-