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THE BEST
SHORT FICTION
FOR 1985

THE
**EDITORS'
CHOICE**

NEW AMERICAN
STORIES VOLUME II

CHOSEN BY AMERICA'S
TOP MAGAZINE EDITORS

COMPILED BY

GEORGE E. MURPHY, JR.

THE
EDITORS'
CHOICE:
NEW AMERICAN STORIES
VOLUME II



COMPILED BY
GEORGE E. MURPHY, JR.

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NOMINATING MAGAZINES

Antaeus, 1 West 30th Street, New York, New York 10001

The Atlantic Monthly, 8 Arlington Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02116

Cosmopolitan, 224 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019

Esquire, 2 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10016

The Georgia Review, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602

Harper's Magazine, 2 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Mademoiselle, 350 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10017

The Missouri Review, Department of English, 231 A & S, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri 65211

Ms., 199 West 40th Street, New York, New York 10018

The North American Review, 1222 West 27th Street, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

The Paris Review, 45-39 171st Place, Flushing, New York 11358

Playboy, 919 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60611

Ploughshares, Box 529, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Redbook, 230 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017

Seventeen, 850 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022

Shenandoah, Box 722, Lexington, Virginia 24450

Tendril, P.O. Box 512, Green Harbor, Massachusetts 02041

TriQuarterly, 1735 Benson Avenue, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60606

Vanity Fair, 350 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10017



INTRODUCTION

The Editors' Choice: New American Stories, Volume I, was an experiment, an alternative design for a new anthology of stories. The collection was the result of a simple, though previously untried, idea: I asked the fiction editors of both commercial magazines and select independent literary journals to nominate what they felt were the stories they were most pleased to have published that year. The response of readers, reviewers, editors, and authors has been overwhelming—as well as gratifying. The experiment, it seems, was a success. As such, it brings me even greater pleasure to introduce *Volume II*.

To avoid the possibility of overlapping authors or themes, and to create as varied and eclectic a collection as possible, I asked each of the nominating editors to contribute as many as three stories, from which one would be selected. Making the selections, editors said, is a very difficult task. Many tried to choose stories which, to them, represent the editorial ideal of their publications. Others chose to endorse talented new writers whose work they found striking and exceptional. As *The Atlantic's* editors noted, "Since we don't publish stories we don't think are among the best we've seen, we hate to single out any one of them as the 'best' for that year. Even so, we're always pleased when we have the chance to introduce a new

and able writer, and so don't mind calling attention to work we think particularly original and distinctive."

Reading the various magazines' nominations, I was struck by both the high quality and enormous diversity of short stories being published. Arriving at the final decisions for this anthology was a difficult task. Yet I believe that each of the stories gathered here is among the very best of 1984. As in *Volume I*, I'm delighted to include new work from well-known writers as well as from lesser known, younger writers.

Included here is the last published story of John Gardner, whose untimely death halted what many consider to be one of the most significant literary careers of recent decades. Here, too, are stories from such well-established authors as Margaret Atwood, Andre Dubus, and Trevanian, as well as first published stories from Robert William Antoni, Kurt Duecker, Lisa Interollo, Ilene Raymond, and Brent Spencer.

From the stark desperation of Beth Nugent's "City of Boys" to the antic humor of James Howard Kunstler's "The Rise, Fall and Redemption of Mooski Toffski Offski," from the poignant realization in Gayle Whittier's "Turning Out" to the satirical twists of Martha Bayles' "The "New Yorker" Story," this is indeed a wide-ranging collection.

For sure, a notable change is occurring in terms of the popularity of short fiction, a trend that *Newsweek* recently recognized and referred to as "A Silver Age of Short Stories." More collections of stories are slated for publication by major publishing houses in 1985 than has been true in years. As well, there is a wider acceptance of the notion of short stories as an art form which, in terms of precision and impact, may, at its best, be closer to the poem than to the novel. As Raymond Carver recently said, "A well-made short story is worth any number of bad novels." And it is the well-made short story we are all hoping to find, the story which, to paraphrase W. H. Auden, "closes like the click of a well-made box."

I think you will find such stories in this volume.

George E. Murphy, Jr.
Key West, Florida
April 1985

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ROBERT WILLIAM ANTONI

TWO-HEAD FRED AND TREE-FOOT FRIEDA

FROM THE MISSOURI REVIEW



I LOVED ZOE because she helped raise me, because she let me pinch her breasts when my mother wasn't around, and because she told me she ate Barbados rat for whooping cough. I loved Jook Jook because he helped raise me, because he let me sip from his rum bottle when my father wasn't around, and because he told me he ate Whatlin's Island iguana for grimps. I'd never been to Barbados, never been to Whatlin's Island, never seen an iguana, but I'd seen enough rats to prepare myself for sudden death should I ever get whooping cough or grimps.

"Who dat pretty young gal you all bring wid you dis time?"

"Zoe?"

"I ain' know she name, but dat gal get tottot fa so!"

"What are tot-tots?" I asked.

Jook Jook laughed. "Boobie, boy." He let go the tiller to squeeze a nipple of mine between a thumb and forefinger of each hand. "Tottot is tittie."

"That's Zoe with the tot-tots," I said. "She's our maid."

The thought of spending a month of my summer vacation at Deep Water Cay was anything for me but exciting; this was only the first day. The island was tiny, desolate, sandfly-

infested, and surrounded by sea. The bigger I grew, the smaller Deep Water Cay shrank. I cannot tell you how small an island two miles long and fifty yards wide can feel to an eleven-year-old. It would require the full measure of my persistence and whatlessness to find any excitement on the rock. I had lots of time on my hands; ideas were already taking shape in my head.

"So how do you like Zoe, Jook Jook?"

"I ain' know she yet. How long she work wid you fambly?"

"She's lived with us since Christopher and I were babies."

"How come you nevah bring she here before?"

"She always wanted to stay at home. Besides, our house here is too small."

"She Bahamian?"

"No. She's from Trinidad."

"Oh-ho."

"She even eats rats!"

"Dat musie why she so pretty."

"And has those nice tot-tots!"

The only good reason to come to Deep Water Cay, as far as I was concerned, was to see Jook Jook. He would come across from McClean's Town to do odd jobs for my father, and sometimes to take Christopher and me with him fishing, conching, and misbehaving. Jook Jook was the greatest conch and woman jooker in all the world. For years he'd taken the title of King Conch Jooker at the Conch Jooking And Slop-ping Contest held at McClean's Town every Boxing Day. For even longer, Jook Jook had been sought after by every woman from Pelican Point Village to End Of The World Rock and farther.

"How's that three-legged woman from White Sound doing?"

"She be fine. Except now she get corn on she big toe."

"Which one?"

"Middle foot, I tink it is."

"How's she ride her bike then?"

"I ain' know."

"If it was one of her outside feet, that'd be fine."

"No mattah. She still ridin' good 'nough."

"How's her toe jam business?"

"Goin' strong."

"Did you ever buy any of her toe jam, Jook Jook?"

"Fa what? I not 'fraid a no jumbie, dat I needs to stink up meself wid Tree-foot Frieda toe jam."

Jook Jook stood on the bench in the back of his boat steering, and I sat looking up at him. The tiller had an extension of shaved pine limb attached by a couple of hose clamps. Every Bahamian dinghy had the same extension, the same hose clamps: for some reason they could never sit and steer. Jook Jook seemed a giant as I looked up at him. He was in his late thirties, muscular and handsome. He was wearing an old pair of my father's white pants which he'd cut off into shorts. Jook Jook had not let the ends fray, but had hemmed them neatly. He owned the only block house in McClean's Town, which he'd built himself. Besides the King, Jook Jook was known as *de one wid de concrete house*.

Christopher sat quietly in the front of the boat looking at the water google-eyed; my brother was the only ten-year-old I have ever come across who deeply appreciated nature. I'm sure he even found pleasure in coming to Deep Water Cay. Christopher could sit and admire an entire sunset without getting bored; I'd look for about thirty seconds, then for a bird to throw a rock at.

Jook Jook's Abaco dinghy had a tiny diesel engine which pattered and puffed away as seriously as a locomotive, propelling us at no miles an hour. The boat was very heavy and built of hand-hewn pine boards in the Abaco way: the boards were not sealed; when wet they expanded to become watertight. If an Abaco dinghy went into the water dry, it would sink. Jook Jook always spoke of his boat as though it were one with the water. He had inherited the dinghy from his father and, even though it was slow and old-timish, he refused to part with it for a Boston Whaler and a Johnson outboard.

"So how's your dog doing, Jook Jook?"

"He be fine."

"Does he still fight over his food?"

"I done solve dat problem."

"How?"

"I find out one like fish, one like macaroni pie. So I give he bowl a each."

"Good idea."

"But still big big problem when people give he bone."

"Really?"

"Z-bell give he bone las' night, an' almos' get eat alive."

"Z-bell should have known better."

"Fa true. Only a fool gon give Two-head Fred one bone."

Jook Jook had taken me to the sunken jeep, and a dozen little white croakcrows were already trying their best to swim in the water sloshing about in the bilge. None had been speared cleanly through the head, and some trailed a silver and purple ribbon from their stomachs; I was hardly strong enough to pull back my Hawaiian sling, far less aim at a fish. That was why Jook Jook took me to the sunken jeep. It lay on its side in about ten feet of water, and the fish would be huddled in the front seat. I could float on the surface, pull back the sling, and let the spear fly through the window on the driver's side. Sometimes I'd get two at once. Only when I speared the rusted metal would I have a problem, and I'd have to make several dives before I could dislodge it. Like most Bahamians, Jook Jook refused to go into the water when there was no need; he could sit in the dinghy and catch three times as many fish as I could spear. He'd told Christopher and me he'd never learned to swim, and if he ever fell into the water we'd have to save him, but we were not sure we could believe him. Christopher did not care about spearfishing; he'd stay in the boat and play with the croakcrows, throwing back the stronger ones while I wasn't looking. When we got home we'd give the little fish to my father, and he'd fry them up for himself and Jook Jook. The two would sit down to feast for an hour, picking them apart bone by bone.

Jook Jook weaved his way through the intricate channel which ran between the sandbars on the western end of Deep Water Cay and the small mangrove island off the point. If you didn't take the channel, you had to go a mile out to sea to get around the reef. Every time my father tried to negotiate the channel in our Whaler he ran aground off the mangrove island; we'd all have to get out and push. Jook Jook had once told Christopher and me that the island was unnamed, and so we

had made a flag out of a pair of my father's boxer shorts and christened it Pain-in-the-butt Island.

As we rounded the point, our little house came into view, perched on the hill and shining in the sun. The bright red shutters and black trim were my father's attempt to make the original gray house a bit more quaint. The eccentric Lord Brooksfeld had had the house built during the days of colonialism, when the Queen had offered him the tip of the island for his fiftieth birthday. But Lord Brooksfeld had come from England only once to be bitten from head to toe by sandflies, and to swell up like an enraged porcupine. The tiny house remained vacant for several years until my father bought it from Sir Max Hashkins, sweet-skinned sovereign of the second generation, complete with an assortment of first-aid creams, mosquito nets, and a case of imported, giant-sized cans of Bedbug Bully. Our skin, however, was of a tougher making, and we began to come to Deep Water Cay on weekends and for a month each summer.

The rest of the family and Zoe were still asleep, and the house was without activity; Jook Jook had awoken Christopher and me an hour after sunrise to go fishing with him.

We began to make our way slowly along the beach in front of our house. The morning breeze was strong enough only to ripple the water, and the sun hung just above the horizon laying pieces of light on the water around us, like long, unbroken strips of orange peel floating on its surface. In the distance bright sparkles popped like jumping beans.

"Where are we going now, Jook Jook?"

"I hadie check some me traps."

"Where?"

"Lightborn's Cay."

"Then what?"

"Den we gon get some conchs."

"Then do you think I could do some more spearing?"

"We gon see. Day still young."

After Deep Water Cay came Sweeting's Cay before Lightborn's; it would take at least an hour to get to Jook Jook's traps. I decided to go sit with Christopher on the front of the boat.

Christopher's legs hung over the bow with his feet dragging in the water. I sat next to him and let my feet hang the same way.

"Are you making blood?" I asked.

He nodded.

If you held your toes just below the surface of the water and pointed them exactly right, purple bubbles formed and it looked like blood oozing out. The trick was to keep your toes the same distance below the surface as the boat moved through the water, and so to maintain a constant flow of blood.

I stared down at my feet. "Did you know Three-foot Frieda has a corn on her big toe?"

"That's great."

"Aren't you going to ask which big toe?"

"There isn't any Three-foot Frieda."

"That's not the point," I said.

"What is?"

"Forget it."

We continued making blood.

"I've got a great idea," I told Christopher.

"What?"

"I think Jook Jook likes Zoe."

"Yeah."

"He thinks she's pretty. *Especially* her tot-tots."

"What's that?"

I smiled. "Boobie, boy. Tot-tot is tittie!" I reached over and squeezed his nipples.

"Cut it out, faggot." He shoved me away. "So what's your idea?"

"You know how Jook Jook's the world's greatest jooker?"

"So?"

"So how'd you like to see him in action?"

"I've seen him clean millions of conch."

"I mean *jooking*, stupid. Maybe him and Zoe will do it, and we can trail 'em and watch!"

"Trail them where?"

"I don't know. Wherever people go to do that stuff."

Christopher concentrated on his toes again.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"I think your idea is dumb, and I'm not interested in spying on anyone. It's not right."

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

We went back to our toes. I managed to keep mine bleeding for about a full minute.

"Did you see that one?" I asked.

"Yeah. Pretty good."

"You really don't like my idea?"

"No. It's wrong."

"What people don't know can't hurt 'em."

"That's not the point," Christopher said.

"What is?"

"Forget it."

I kicked my feet up hard, filling the air in front of us with a spray of water. The motion of the boat carried us into it, showering Christopher and me.

"Thanks a lot," he said.

"Any time." I got up to go back to Jook Jook, climbing over a jumbled pile of fish netting and a big sheet of tarpaulin used as a tent when Jook Jook went on long fishing trips.

"How far to the traps?" I asked.

"We be dere jus' now."

"The shallow ones?"

"Shallow trap furs'."

I looked around to see where we were, but couldn't tell. "Where's Lightborn's?"

Jook Jook pointed at a bright sandbar which interrupted the rocky coast to our left. I remembered the beach at the end of Lightborn's Cay. Behind it, in the distance, I found a couple of television antennas and the water tower belonging to Sweeting's Cay Village, where the island curved behind Lightborn's.

"Do you want me to dive down and check the traps?" I asked.

"Tink you here fa you good looks?"

"Are they shallow enough?"

"Some be. If not, I haul dem."

"How soon will we get there?"

"Soon soon."

I put on my diving gear. The world looked odd through the mask: small and distant in the center, stretched and curving toward me at the edges. I tilted my head back to look up at the clouds, and felt as though I were speeding up to meet them. I unfolded my wings and rolled my head from side to side. My mask began to fog up. Jook Jook tried to wipe a circle clean on the glass, but the fog was on the inside. He leaned closer.

"What you doin' inside dere, boy?"

I took the snorkel out of my mouth. "I don't know."

"Good ting I ain' bring no rum today."

"How come?" My voice sounded nasal in the mask.

Jook Jook laughed. "You done kaponkle up. I give you rum, no tellin' what you might do."

"No way. I know how to hold my rum."

"You evah drink more den a sip?"

"Not really." I put the snorkel back in my mouth.

Soon we got to the first float marked JJ. Jook Jook picked me up and tossed me overboard. I pulled myself down to the trap along the float line, stopping once or twice to purge my ears. The trap was empty. I swam up, told Jook Jook, and he lifted me out of the water into the boat. I checked all the shallow traps, just beyond the first reef, in fifteen or twenty feet of water. Most were empty. One had a margate fish and a couple of yellowtails. Afterwards, Jook Jook checked the deeper traps off the second reef. He didn't have to haul them all the way up; Jook Jook could tell whether the traps were empty by lifting them a few feet off the bottom, checking the weight, and feeling for the vibration of the fish moving about in the traps. He could have checked the shallow traps easily enough by looking through his glass, but he made it clear that that was my job. One of the deep traps had a large Nassau grouper, and Jook Jook hit it over the head with his bootoo before he threw it into the bilge.

On our way back to Deep Water Cay Jook Jook stopped at a grassy patch for conch. Christopher and I jumped overboard. Jook Jook cut the motor and let the dinghy drift with the tide. While we dove up conch and threw them into the boat, he removed the conch from their shells and cleaned them, throwing the empty shells back into the water. Sometimes I

hung onto the side and watched, amazed at his fluidity and speed. I admired nothing in the world so much as Jook Jook's ability to jook and slop a conch. After we'd filled two old paint buckets with conch, Jook Jook lifted Christopher and me into the dinghy, and we started off again.

"Where to now?" I asked.

He smiled. "I ain' know."

He headed for the gap between Sweeting's Cay and Deep Water Cay. He steered between the islands, and then along the mangrove on the northern side of Sweeting's Cay. Suddenly he turned the boat hard into the mangrove trees and cut the engine.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I ain' know."

"You'll crash into the mangrove!"

"Bes' duck you head den, boy. Hear, Christoph?"

We all crouched below the gunnel. The dinghy skidded between two huge clumps of mangrove, and the leaves and branches brushed our shoulders as the trees swallowed us up. Beside us, thick brown banyans arched out of the water as eerie as charmed snakes. Above and around us, only bright leaves. I lifted my head and found we'd entered a kind of interior river which weaved its way through the mangrove. The trees nearly enclosed us, here and there a patch of sky showing through. The world hidden by the mangrove trees was cool, silent, and secret. Everything was still. Even the current which carried us along was invisible. The blues and greens were as bright as stained glass.

"Up here!" Christopher called, and I climbed forward.

Fish darted away from the bow and buried themselves, creating puffs in the mud where they entered. On the surface needle fish slashed back and forth. Along the sides, among the mangrove banyans, hundreds of snappers and grunts swam in slow procession.

We drifted with the current for about half a mile, shoving off the mangrove trees where the stream twisted. Jook Jook grabbed a branch, walked toward the bow as the current swung the stern around, and tied the anchor line to a mangrove limb.

"What are we doing now?" Christopher asked.