

AMERICAN SHORT STORY MASTERPIECES

EDITED BY

Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks



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INTRODUCTION

The excellent becomes the permanent.
ARISTOTLE

When we began the work of assembling short stories for this book, one of our criteria—unspoken, but there nonetheless—was that a story's narrative interest would be one of the deciding factors in our selections. We also felt that we were not out to be democratic in our selections, or even representative. There was only so much space in the anthology after all, and a limit to the number of stories we could include. Decisions had to be made that were not always easy. But aside from this, however, we were simply not interested in putting before the reader further samples of what some have called "postmodern" or "innovative" fiction, and others have hailed as "the new fiction"—self-reflexive, fabulist, magical realist, as well as all mutations, offshoots, and fringe movements thereof. We were interested in stories that had not only a strong narrative drive, with characters we could respond to as human beings, but stories where the effects of language, situation, and insight were intense and total—short stories which on occasion had the ambition of enlarging our view of ourselves and the world.

A tall order, indeed. But isn't it true that with any great, or even really good short story (or any other singular work of literary art), just something like this does often happen? We think the thirty-six short stories included herein are ample evidence that it is possible for stories to produce such salutary effects; and in our selections we aimed for work that aspired to nothing less—stories of consequence that in some important way bear witness to our own lives. In any event, in light of our sensibilities and according to our criteria, time and again we found ourselves moved and exhilarated as we read and selected the work that follows.

It's our view, and one not held lightly, certainly not defensively, that the best short stories of the past thirty years can stand alongside the best of those of earlier generations—the several generations of writers represented, say, in *Short Story Masterpieces*, that excellent book edited by Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine. In its way, this present collection may be seen as a companion volume to that earlier book. Most important in this regard, the bias of this collection, as in the other, is

toward the lifelike—that is to say, toward realistically fashioned stories that may even in some cases approximate the outlines of our own lives. Or, if not our own, at least the lives of fellow human beings—grown-up men and women engaged in the ordinary but sometimes remarkable business of living and, like ourselves, in full awareness of their mortality.

In the last thirty years there was, on the part of many writers, a radical turning away from the concerns and techniques of realism—a turning away from the “manners and morals” that Lionel Trilling correctly saw as the best subject matter for fiction. In place of realism, a number of writers—writers of considerable skill and stature, some of them—substituted the surreal and the fantastic. A smaller and less-talented group mixed the weird and the far-out with a relentless and sometimes disquieting nihilism. Now it seems that the wheel has rolled forward again and fiction that approximates life—replete with recognizable people, and motive, and plot, and drama—fiction of *occurrence* and *consequence* (the two are inseparable), has reasserted itself with a reading public that has grown tired of the fragmentary, or bizarre. Fiction that asks that the reader give up too much—in some cases deny what reason, common sense, the emotions, and a sense of right and wrong tell him—is seemingly in retreat these days.

No one should be surprised then at the resurgence, not to say new dominance, of realistic fiction, that most ancient of storytelling modes. This book might be seen as a celebration of, and a tribute to, the lasting power of narrative short fiction. We further feel we have gathered together some of the best stories recently produced by this oldest of literary traditions, work that we like to think has as good a chance as any, and better than most, of withstanding “the tooth of time.”

A notable difference between *Short Story Masterpieces* and this book is that fully a third of the thirty-six stories in the earlier collection are by writers from England and Ireland. When we were establishing some ground rules to determine how we planned to go about selecting stories for this anthology, we decided early on to include works by American writers only. There was, we felt, plenty of significant work on this side of the Atlantic from which to choose. We also decided not to include stories by writers who were already included in *Short Story Masterpieces*. Thus, Peter Taylor, Eudora Welty, and John Cheever, some of whose best work was published after 1954 (the year *Short Story Masterpieces* appeared) were reluctantly left out.

In one respect, at least, it would seem that life was simpler in the literary world of the early 1950s: Warren and Erskine didn't have to talk about “postmodernism” or any of the other “isms”—including “realism.” They didn't find it necessary to explain the reasons that lay behind their choices, or articulate their taste and methodology. They simply discussed good and great stories—masterpieces, by their definition—and masters of the form. The word *masterpiece* meant something in

those days and signaled a benchmark of excellence that most readers (and writers) could agree on. No one had to debate the concept itself, or the wisdom of applying such a term to select examples of serious, imaginative writing. The editors found two dozen stories by American writers, spanning fifty years or more of American life and literary endeavor, and they put these stories alongside a dozen stories by their English and Irish counterparts of roughly the same period. They had their book. We limited ourselves to American writers only, as has been noted, and our selections cover thirty-three years—1953 to 1986, to be exact—surely the most climactic, and traumatic, period in American literary history. Traumatic, in part, because it has been a time during which the currency of narrative fiction has fluctuated wildly and been variously assailed from several quarters. Now is as good a time as any, perhaps, to try to reestablish the term *masterpiece* as it applies to singular stories with a narrative durability, within a discernible *narrative* tradition.

As we considered the merits of each story, we asked ourselves at how deep a level of feeling and insight the writer was operating. How compelling, and coherent, was the writer's *sincerity* (Tolstoy's word, and one of his criteria for excellence) toward his material? Great fiction—good fiction—is, as any serious reader knows, intellectually and emotionally significant. And the best fiction ought to have, for want of a better word, *heft* to it. (The Romans used the word *gravitas* when talking about work of substance.) But whatever one wants to call it (it doesn't even need naming), everyone recognizes it when it declares itself. When a reader finishes a wonderful story and lays it aside, he should have to pause for a minute and collect himself. At this moment, if the writer has succeeded, there ought to be a unity of feeling and understanding. Or, if not a unity, at least a sense that the disparities of a crucial situation have been made available in a new light, and we can go from there. The best fiction, the kind of fiction we're talking about, should bring about this kind of response. It should make such an impression that the work, as Hemingway suggested, becomes a part of the reader's experience. Or else, and we're serious, why should people be asked to read it? Further—why write it? In great fiction (and this is true, and we mustn't fool ourselves that it's otherwise), there is always the "shock of recognition" as the human significance of the work is revealed and made manifest. When, in Joyce's words, the soul of the story, its "whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance."

In his "Introduction to the Works of Guy de Maupassant," Tolstoy wrote that talent is "the capacity to direct intense concentrated attention on the subject . . . a gift of seeing what others have not seen." We think the writers included in these pages have done this, have directed "intense concentration" on their subject, seeing clearly and forcefully what others have not seen. On the other hand, considering some of these stories and their insistence on depicting the "familiar," we think

something else is just as often at work—another definition of “talent,” perhaps. We’d like to suggest that talent, even genius, is also *the gift of seeing what everyone else has seen, but seeing it more clearly, from all sides*. Art in either case.

The writers in this book have talent, and they have it in abundance. But they have something else as well: They can all tell a good story, and good stories, as everyone knows, have always been in demand. In the words of Sean O’Faolain, a contributor to the earlier book, the stories that follow have “a bright destination.” We hope readers will be affected by more than a few of these and will perhaps find occasion to laugh, shudder, marvel—in short, be *moved*, and maybe even a little haunted by some of the lives represented here.

—Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks

ABOUT THE EDITORS

RAYMOND CARVER is the founding editor of *Quarry West* magazine and the author of three short story collections, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and *Cathedral*. His poems have been collected in three volumes, *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water*, *Ultramarine*, and in *Fires*, which also includes short stories, an interview, and personal essays.

TOM JENKS is a senior editor at Charles Scribner’s Sons, an editor of *The Paris Review* and of *EQUATOR* magazine, and a former fiction editor of *Esquire*. He is also the editor of *Soldiers & Civilians*, an anthology of contemporary American short stories that reflect the influence of military values in our lives.

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JAMES BALDWIN

Sonny's Blues

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside.

It was not to be believed and I kept telling myself that, as I walked from the subway station to the high school. And at the same time I couldn't doubt it. I was scared, scared for Sonny. He became real to me again. A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less. Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was going to choke or scream. This would always be at a moment when I was remembering some specific thing Sonny had once said or done.

When he was about as old as the boys in my classes his face had been bright and open, there was a lot of copper in it; and he'd had wonderfully direct brown eyes, and great gentleness and privacy. I wondered what he looked like now. He had been picked up, the evening before, in a raid on an apartment downtown, for peddling and using heroin.

I couldn't believe it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn't find any room for it anywhere inside me. I had kept it outside me for a long time. I hadn't wanted to know. I had had suspicions, but I didn't name them, I kept putting them away. I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn't crazy. And he'd always been a good boy, he hadn't ever turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, so quick, especially in Harlem. I didn't want to believe that I'd ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out, in the condition I'd already seen so many others. Yet it had happened and here I was, talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of

them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than algebra could.

I was sure that the first time Sonny had ever had horse, he couldn't have been much older than these boys were now. These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone.

When the last bell rang, the last class ended, I let out my breath. It seemed I'd been holding it for all that time. My clothes were wet—I may have looked as though I'd been sitting in a steam bath, all dressed up, all afternoon. I sat alone in the classroom a long time. I listened to the boys outside, downstairs, shouting and cursing and laughing. Their laughter struck me for perhaps the first time. It was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children. It was mocking and insular, its intent to denigrate. It was disenchanted, and in this, also, lay the authority of their curses. Perhaps I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself.

One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds.

I stood up and walked over to the window and looked down into the courtyard. It was the beginning of the spring and the sap was rising in the boys. A teacher passed through them every now and again, quickly, as though he or she couldn't wait to get out of that courtyard, to get those boys out of their sight and off their minds. I started collecting my stuff. I thought I'd better get home and talk to Isabel.

The courtyard was almost deserted by the time I got downstairs. I saw this boy standing in the shadow of a doorway, looking just like Sonny. I almost called his name. Then I saw that it wasn't Sonny, but somebody we used to know, a boy from around our block. He'd been Sonny's friend. He'd never been mine, having been too young for me, and, anyway, I'd never liked him. And now, even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners, was always high and raggy. I used to run into him from time to time and he'd often work around to asking me for a quarter or fifty cents. He always had some real good excuse, too, and I always gave it to him, I don't know why.

But now, abruptly, I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at

me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child. I wanted to ask him what the hell he was doing in the school courtyard.

He sort of shuffled over to me, and he said, "I see you got the papers. So you already know about it."

"You mean about Sonny? Yes, I already know about it. How come they didn't get you?"

He grinned. It made him repulsive and it also brought to mind what he'd looked like as a kid. "I wasn't there. I stay away from them people."

"Good for you." I offered him a cigarette and I watched him through the smoke. "You come all the way down here just to tell me about Sonny?"

"That's right." He was sort of shaking his head and his eyes looked strange, as though they were about to cross. The bright sun deadened his damp dark brown skin and it made his eyes look yellow and showed up the dirt in his kinked hair. He smelled funky. I moved a little away from him and I said, "Well, thanks. But I already know about it and I got to get home."

"I'll walk you a little ways," he said. We started walking. There were a couple of kids still loitering in the courtyard and one of them said good night to me and looked strangely at the boy beside me.

"What're you going to do?" he asked me. "I mean, about Sonny?"

"Look. I haven't seen Sonny for over a year, I'm not sure I'm going to do anything. Anyway, what the hell *can* I do?"

"That's right," he said quickly, "ain't nothing you can do. Can't much help old Sonny no more, I guess."

It was what I was thinking and so it seemed to me he had no right to say it.

"I'm surprised at Sonny, though," he went on—he had a funny way of talking, he looked straight ahead as though he were talking to himself—"I thought Sonny was a smart boy, I thought he was too smart to get hung."

"I guess he thought so too," I said sharply, "and that's how he got hung. And how about you? You're pretty goddamn smart, I bet."

Then he looked directly at me, just for a minute. "I ain't smart," he said. "If I was smart, I'd have reached for a pistol a long time ago."

"Look. Don't tell *me* your sad story, if it was up to me, I'd give you one." Then I felt guilty—guilty, probably, for never having supposed that the poor bastard *had* a story of his own, much less a sad one, and I asked, quickly, "What's going to happen to him now?"

He didn't answer this. He was off by himself some place. "Funny thing," he said, and from his tone we might have been discussing the quickest way to get to Brooklyn, "when I saw the papers this morning, the first thing I asked myself was if I had anything to do with it. I felt sort of responsible."

I began to listen more carefully. The subway station was on the

corner, just before us, and I stopped. He stopped, too. We were in front of a bar and he ducked slightly, peering in, but whoever he was looking for didn't seem to be there. The jukebox was blasting away with something black and bouncy and I half watched the barmaid as she danced her way from the jukebox to her place behind the bar. And I watched her face as she laughingly responded to something someone said to her, still keeping time to the music. When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore.

"I never *give* Sonny nothing," the boy said finally, "but a long time ago I come to school high and Sonny asked me how it felt." He paused, I couldn't bear to watch him, I watched the barmaid, and I listened to the music which seemed to be causing the pavement to shake. "I told him it felt great." The music stopped, the barmaid paused and watched the jukebox until the music began again. "It did."

All this was carrying me some place I didn't want to go. I certainly didn't want to know how it felt. It filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with menace; and this menace was their reality.

"What's going to happen to him now?" I asked again.

"They'll send him away some place and they'll try to cure him." He shook his head. "Maybe he'll even think he's kicked the habit. Then they'll let him loose"—he gestured, throwing his cigarette into the gutter. "That's all."

"What do you mean, that's *all*?"

But I knew what he meant.

"I *mean*, that's *all*." He turned his head and looked at me, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "Don't you know what I mean?" he asked, softly.

"How the hell *would* I know what you mean?" I almost whispered it, I don't know why.

"That's right," he said to the air, "how would *he* know what I mean?" He turned toward me again, patient and calm, and yet I somehow felt him shaking, shaking as though he were going to fall apart. I felt that ice in my guts again, the dread I'd felt all afternoon; and again I watched the barmaid, moving about the bar, washing glasses, and singing. "Listen. They'll let him out and then it'll just start all over again. That's what I mean."

"You mean—they'll let him out. And then he'll just start working his way back in again. You mean he'll never kick the habit. Is that what you mean?"

"That's right," he said, cheerfully. "You see what I mean."

"Tell me," I said at last, "why does he want to die? He must want to die, he's killing himself, why does he want to die?"