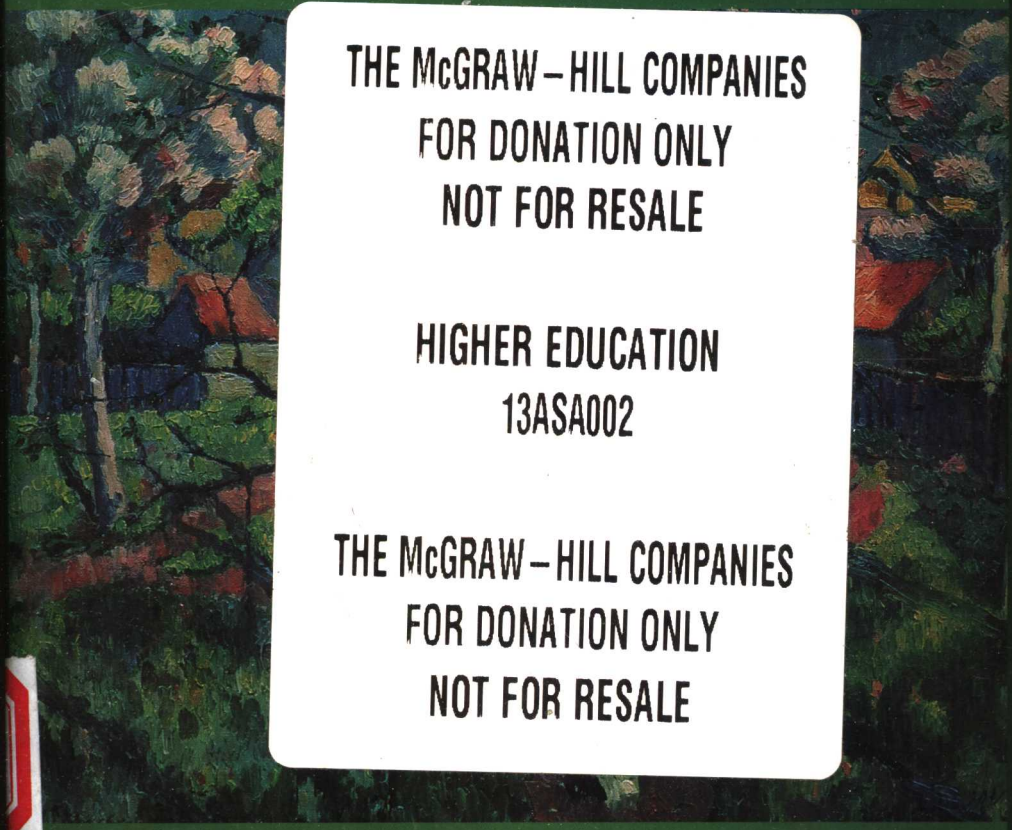
FICTION

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT STORY



JANE BACHMAN GORDON KAREN KUEHNER

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NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group
Lincolnwood, Illinois USA

Sponsoring Editor: Marisa L. L'Heureux
Product Manager: Judy Rudnick
Art Director: Ophelia Chambliss
Production Manager: Margo Goia
Cover art: Kasimir Malevich/SuperStock

Acknowledgments begin on page 767 which is to be considered an extension of this copyright page.

ISBN: 0-8442-5907-1 (student text)
ISBN: 0-8442-5908-X (instructor's edition)

Published by NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc.,
4255 West Touhy Avenue, Lincolnwood (Chicago), Illinois 60646-1975 U.S.A.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fiction : an introduction to the short story / [edited by] Jane
Bachman Gordon, Karen Kuehner.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-8442-5907-1 (Student text). -- ISBN 0-8442-5908-X
(instructor's ed.)
1. Short stories, American. 2. United States--Social life and
customs--Fiction. 3. Great Britain--Social life and customs-
-Fiction. 4. Short stories, English. I. Gordon, Jane Bachman.
II. Kuehner, Karen.
PS648.S5F53 1998
813'.0108--dc21 98-43044
CIP

890 VL 0987654321

Preface

For more than thirty thousand years, through drawing, sculpture, pantomime, dance, and language, human beings have told stories. The first stories were probably communicated through cave paintings, followed shortly by the pantomime and dance reenactments of tribal triumphs such as a successful hunt. An ancient Egyptian papyrus notes that the sons of the great pharaoh Cheops amused their father by telling him stories. In nearly all cultures a body of myths deals with such topics as the creation of the world, its peoples, and its phenomena. The oldest literary works of the western world, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* are long poems comprised of episodes similar in length to short stories and containing the legendary exploits of heroic Greek and Trojan superheroes. The parables of the Bible are essentially short or short-short stories; so, too, are fairy tales, fables, and folktales.

A story can be as simple as a joke or an anecdote or as complex as a short novel. If you think about it for a moment, your daily conversations are filled with stories, long and short, true or fictional. The stories you *tell* allow you to share your experiences with others, perhaps to instruct, entertain, frighten, or inspire them. The stories you *hear* enable you to learn about people and places different from you and yours and to compare your life with that of others.

What are short stories? And why do we human beings respond so eagerly to them? The answer to the second question is simple. Young or old, we want to know the answer to this question: "What happened next?" The answer to the first can also be simple: a short story is a short narrative. If it contains some five hundred words, it is usually categorized as a short-short story. If its length reaches fifteen thousands words, it may be considered a novella, a short novel.

The real answer to that first question, however, is not as simple as total word length. Edgar Allan Poe, often credited with creating the modern short story, described it as "a short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal." As a definition, that might be a good beginning, but it is incomplete. It doesn't begin to encompass the sophistication of most short stories. The majority of—and some say the best—short stories:

- *are "consciously made."* Many story ideas come from events in the author's life or from the pages of the daily newspaper. Instead of simply retelling what occurred, skillful writers often rearrange the chronology, change or combine characters, or move or invent setting—all to achieve some desired end.

- *have a formal structure.* The story has a form—a beginning, middle, and end.
- *exhibit causality.* The establishment of causes and effects reveals why characters act as they do and what the results of their actions are.
- *develop and end inevitably.* All actions, the happenings or the series of events in a story, should seem inevitable. This is particularly true of the ending.
- *establish an atmosphere.* The mood of a short story should complement the characters and their actions.

Poe recognized his description was incomplete. Writing in 1847, he asserted that the "skilful [sic] artist" does not fashion "his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain *single effect* to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such a tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect."

Stories can simultaneously convey experiences both individual *and* universal. Universal experiences are those that would be familiar to people from any period of time and in any country. They include being part of a family, growing up, finding one's place in the world, falling in love, overcoming obstacles, and/or accepting success or failure. Storytellers particularize experiences by creating characters who are specific, unique individuals. Storytellers dramatize a concrete struggle that their fictional characters encounter, then choose the resolution that would logically occur to those particular characters. The result is a narrative whose individual characters engage your interest and whose experiences often parallel your own. A skillful storyteller enables you to identify with one or more characters and to become concerned about their situation, intrigued by their actions, and perhaps instructed by the resolution of their conflicts.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ANTHOLOGY

In putting together this anthology, we had five primary goals:

- to enable you to learn about the basic elements of fiction and how these elements contribute to the creation of an artistic whole.
- to acquaint you with the wide variety of authors who write in English.
- to promote your awareness of the cultures represented by these writers.
- to provide you with an opportunity to apply your knowledge to the oral and written analysis of short fiction.
- to encourage you to respond to literature on both an emotional and an intellectual level.

STORY SELECTIONS

In selecting the stories for this anthology, we limited our choices to stories originally written in English. Certainly we do not suggest that those are the most worthy; the achievements of Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, Guy de Maupassant, Jorge Luis Borges, and others are rightly celebrated. But we wanted you to read words actually chosen by the author, not those of a translator—no matter how talented.

The stories emphasize writers of the twentieth century. In addition to such recognized writers as Willa Cather, Frank O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Sherwood Anderson, James Baldwin, James Joyce, and Zora Neale Hurston, the table of contents also acknowledges the contributions of modern women. The twentieth century has seen a flowering of female short story writers. We have also included African American, Asian American, Native American, and Hispanic American writers. Geographically, the table of contents ranges from the United States to Canada, the British Isles (Ireland, Scotland, and England), South Africa, and India.

Although we didn't keep an absolutely accurate count, we estimate that before making our final selections we read more than three thousand stories. The final stories met two criteria: *appropriateness* and *relevance.*

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into seven major sections. Each of the first six chapters focuses on one of the elements of fiction: plot, setting, character, point of view and tone, theme, and style and symbol. The seventh chapter is a showcase, presenting four stories by William Trevor. A glossary of literary terms follows the last chapter.

Each chapter features the following elements:

- **Discussion of Literary Elements.** Each of the first six chapters begins with a general discussion of the featured element. Pertinent literary terms appear in **boldface** type, followed by definitions.

- **Biographical Sketch.** Preceding each of the stories is a short biography of the author that includes relevant personal data as well as the titles and publication dates of important works. The sketch concludes with questions or suggestions a reader should consider while reading the story.

- **Footnotes.** Some readers see the footnoting of a work as an annoying disruption of the reading process. We disagree. Our experience suggests that many readers find it even more annoying to wonder about a word, a reference, or a foreign phrase. We have included a footnote for anything that might impede a reader's ability to understand the meaning of or nuance in a story.

- **Questions for Discussion.** The discussion questions following each story emphasize the element focused on in the chapter but are not limited to it. They also highlight

important issues in the stories. Questions about the various elements are cumulative; that is, questions in the chapter on setting will also include questions about plot; questions in the character chapter will also focus on plot and setting elements.

- **Topics for Writing.** Some suggested writing topics follow the discussion questions. Some tap into the reader's personal response to the story or the reader's personal experiences. Others focus on the short story element discussed. A few ask the reader to go beyond the immediate story and consider universal implications.
- **Synthesis Questions.** At the end of each chapter are questions that ask for consideration of more than one story at a time. Readers may consider these questions in a class discussion or write about them. Although the synthesis questions are specifically directed to the stories in a particular chapter, we encourage readers to continue to think about them as they move from one chapter to another. Their purpose is to encourage making connections between or among stories, to see similarities and differences, and to make judgments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Finally, the authors wish to acknowledge the kind encouragement and thorough professionalism of NTC editors Marisa L'Heureux and Fitzgerald Higgins and to thank the writers represented in this volume whose insights illuminate the human condition.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Plot

The term *short story* is a relatively recent one. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1837 collection of stories was titled *Twice-Told Tales.* Today, the term *tale* suggests a simple narrative, told in chronological order. In the past, a short work was sometimes called a *sketch.* Today, *sketch* implies the narration of only a single brief scene. When you tell a friend how you got an A on an English paper, you are telling an *anecdote*—a simple narrative told in an interesting way. What differentiates the short story from the tale, the sketch, or the anecdote is plot.

Plot has been defined as "an author's careful arrangement of incidents in a narrative to achieve a desired effect." In telling your best friend *what happened* when you tried to buy tickets for a concert, your narration might include losing your way, running out of gas, giving a friend a ride to work, paying $10 to park the car, standing in line for hours, and discovering at the box office that you didn't have enough money to buy the tickets. Although it would be a long, sad, or humorous story—perhaps entitled "My Rotten Day"—the narrative would not illustrate the concept of plot. One ingredient is missing.

CAUSALITY

A plot is a series of actions, often presented in chronological order, but the ingredient a plot has that a story lacks is *causality.* In a narrative with a plot, there is little that happens without a cause. For example, consider the following two events: The baby cried and the dog growled. There is no causal relationship suggested between these two events. The substitution

of one word, however, not only creates a complex sentence but establishes a relationship: Because the baby cried, the dog growled. To transform the concert ticket anecdote into a short story, a writer would need to state or imply causes for *why* he or she got lost, ran out of gas, and failed to have enough money to pay for both the parking and the tickets. Suppose that the writer's point in writing "My Rotten Day" was to portray the careless incompetence of the main character. If so, the writer would almost certainly omit mentioning the lift that the main character gave to a friend. Why? Because that action does not fit the incompetent character's image and would undercut the writer's portrait of an undependable and impulsive person.

CONFLICT

Even with the addition of causality, however, the concert ticket anecdote lacks another important ingredient. Traditionally, plots grow out of a **conflict**—an internal or an external struggle between the main character and an opposing force.

When a story includes **internal conflict,** the main character is in conflict with himself or herself. For example, the writer of the concert ticket anecdote might establish that the main character was not careless or impetuous but, subconsciously, did not want to attend that concert. What appeared to be careless actions actually were due to a war with self. In Chapter 1, both "Lives of the Saints" and "The Intruder" illustrate the internal struggle of a main character.

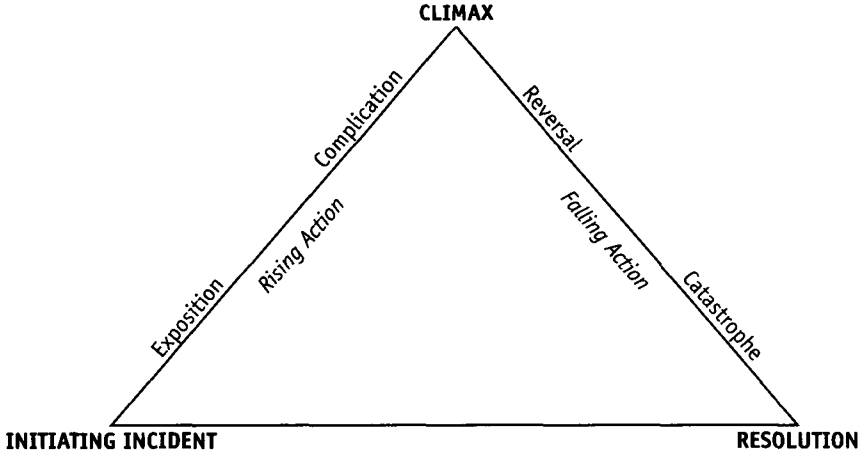
In contrast, an **external conflict** can occur between the central character and either another character, society, or natural forces, including Fate. The most common **external force** is another character. In Frank O'Connor's "First Confession," for example, the young main character is in conflict both with other characters and with society. In "Sweat," violence within their marriage pits wife against husband, while in "After the War" the main character's loathing for the French father results in a fierce conflict of wills. In "A Rose for Emily," Miss Emily conflicts with the society of a small town that finds itself alternately scandalized by and sympathetic toward her.

In Chapter 2, an example of external conflict with nature occurs in "The Wedding Gift." Two selections in Chapter 1—"The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" and "Sweat"—illustrate a main character's conflict with the force of fate.

PLOT STRUCTURE

One graphic way to describe the **structure,** or architecture, of a fictional plot is to envision it as a pyramid. Although Gustav Freytag developed the diagram on page 3 to illustrate the structure of ancient Greek and Shakespearean plays, it can be applied to nearly all narratives, including the novel and the short story.

Note the label *exposition* as used in the diagram. This term is important both to writing and to literature. Synonymous with *explanation,* exposition is one of the four



basic modes of expression; description, narration, and persuasion are the other three. Much of the world's everyday writing--reports, doctor's notes, memos, magazine articles—is exposition. In literature, however, **exposition** refers to the explanatory information a reader needs to comprehend the situation in the story. Exposition establishes the setting, the major characters and perhaps some minor ones, the situation, and any necessary background information about what happened before the story began. In the short story "Lives of the Saints," for example, the exposition establishes the California setting, introduces nineteen-year-old Milo Jukovich and his sculptor father, provides an overview of Milo's early life with the father who has never acknowledged him, and describes the effect this has had on Milo. Although exposition occurs primarily at the beginning of a narrative, it may occur throughout.

The **initiating incident** is the event that changes the situation established in the exposition and sets the conflict in motion. In Frank O'Connor's story, Jackie's blissful young life changes when he is sent to Mrs. Ryan to be prepared for his first communion.

In the **rising action,** various episodes occur that develop, complicate, or intensify the conflict. In movies, the word *action* usually suggests high-speed chases, adventurous deeds, or violence. In a story, an action can be any of those acts, but also it can be as subtle as a raised eyebrow, a hidden smile, or even an impulsive purchase.

Climax has been defined in a number of ways: the point of greatest conflict, the emotional high point, the turning point in the plot, or the point at which one of the opposing forces gains the advantage. A story's climax often requires the main character to choose some form of action that will either worsen or improve his or her situation. In "Lives of the Saints," the rising action involves a literal and figurative journey that climaxes in a sudden and unexpected revelation for Milo. In

"Everything That Rises," the conflict between Julian and his mother intensifies during the bus trip to the Y. The climax comes swiftly and inevitably.

The Irish writer James Joyce labeled the revelation resulting from the climax an **epiphany.** For Joyce, the term designated "an event in which the essential nature of something—a person, a situation, an object—was suddenly perceived." Milo's sudden insight or revelation climaxes "Lives of the Saints."

The events that follow the climax are known as the **falling action.** In novels, this section of the written work may be fairly long; in short stories it tends to be fairly brief. Approximately 10 percent of the total length of "The Intruder" comprises the falling action.

The falling action leads into the **resolution** or **denouement** of the story. The term *resolution* sometimes refers to all the events that follow the climax, including the denouement. *Dénouement* is a French word that means the "unknotting" or the untying of a knot. Some critics use it to denote the actual ending of the story—the final one or two paragraphs. Other critics think that the ending of a story should "tie up" all the loose ends in the story. (Although this may seem tidy and practical, it does not always represent what writers do.)

Laurence Perrine has suggested that there are three kinds of endings: happy, unhappy, and indeterminate. In a happy ending, the main character is the winner: the ugly duckling turns into a swan; the sleeping princess awakens at the kiss of the handsome prince; young Jackie in "First Confession" has a triumphant first encounter with an understanding priest. In an unhappy ending, the main character does not gain so spectacularly. In the Thomas Hardy story, for example, fate prevents a happy outcome. The indeterminate endings of many modern short stories are those that are neither happy nor unhappy. Given the horrors that have occurred during the last century, many twentieth-century writers are pessimistic or cynical about the human condition. Seeing life as, at best, ambiguous, they reject altogether the possibility of happy endings. Like Milo in "Lives of the Saints," the characters in many modern stories struggle to come to terms with life. And though they rarely triumph, they may be allowed to reach an uneasy understanding concerning the forces that oppose them.

Most readers prefer happy endings. We like to be reassured that our struggles will not be in vain, that good can triumph over evil. Yet there is a danger in such thinking—particularly if holding such an attitude blinds us to the facts of the story. Imagine a story, for example, about a Jewish man who lives in Germany during the 1930s, who has been involved in underground activities, whose activities are known to the Nazi authorities, whose colleagues have been arrested and imprisoned, and who is trying to escape to a neutral country. Is this story likely to have a happy ending? As the reader, you may want to see that character happy and free and living a contented life, but given the totality of his circumstances, a happy ending seems more than improbable. Indeed, logic suggests that a more realistic result of his choices and actions will be capture, imprisonment, and even death.

Have you ever finished the ending of a story and said to yourself, "I sure didn't see *that* ending coming!"? The American short story writer O. Henry was noted for the unexpected twists of his endings, but he was not always praised for them. Surprise endings are legitimate if the author has prepared you for them. An author may use the device of foreshadowing or the superior power of the opposing force or the nature of the main character to do so. However, when the solution to a conflict is completely unexpected, readers are likely to feel cheated. Such conclusions are sometimes referred to as **deus ex machina** endings—a term deriving from Greek drama in which the conflict could be resolved only through divine intervention. In such drama the actor portraying the god (*deus*) or goddess (*dea*) was actually lowered onto the platform stage by means of a mechanical device (*machina*) similar to a crane. Then, in front of the audience, the god or goddess briskly sorted out the problem and provided a solution. Today, unrealistic *deus ex machina* endings are considered forced or contrived, weakening a story's impact.

In summary, a plot has six structural components: exposition, initiating incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and the resolution or denouement. These components may be of varying length, although the exposition and rising action usually are the longest sections, while the falling action and resolution usually are the shortest.

TECHNIQUES IN STORYTELLING

Authors employ a number of techniques in telling their stories. They include flashback, foreshadowing, suspense, and coincidence. Their effective use in storytelling draws the reader in and compels him or her to follow the action closely.

The **flashback**—the presentation of material that occurred before the events of the story—interrupts the chronology and often provides important exposition. If a story begins in the middle of the action or at a moment of great dramatic intensity, the author needs to return to an earlier point in the events to update the reader. In movies, a flashback often is signaled by a slow fade or dissolve; in literature, an extra space in the text may signal a change from the present to the past. Flashbacks can occur in the narration or the dialogue, with one or more characters revealing information. "A Rose for Emily" contains flashbacks; in fact, the structure of this William Faulkner story is heavily based on the author's artful use of this device.

Another technique used by writers, **foreshadowing,** gives hints or clues that suggest or prepare the reader for events that occur later in a work. Foreshadowing can be done through setting, as in "Sweat," with the increasing heat foreshadowing the increasingly hot anger of both main characters; through action, as in "The Intruder," with Kenneth's careful cleaning of his gun, or in "A Rose for Emily," with Miss Emily's purchase of the arsenic; or through a character's thoughts or speech, as in "After the War," with Mr. Rameau's repeated references to the war.

Using the technique of foreshadowing, a writer can create **suspense**—the feeling of anxious anticipation, expectation, or uncertainty that creates tension and maintains the reader's interest. In "First Confession," for example, the events that temporarily prevent the young narrator from making his confession build suspense.

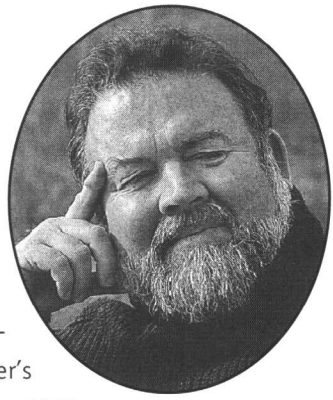
Finally, writers can use **coincidence**—the chance occurrence of two things at the same time or place—to denote the workings of Fate in a person's life. But this technique must be employed carefully. Coincidence can weaken a story if it seems too improbable; however, in a humorous story, far-fetched coincidences often accentuate or promote the comedy.

SUMMARY

This chapter introduction provides you with both concepts and terms to discuss the craft of a short story writer. The discussions of causality and conflict establish the essential principles on which narrative is based; the description of plot structure demonstrates *how* authors develop their stories; the discussion of techniques reveals how authors vary the chronology, provide hints of future action, sustain interest, and introduce the idea of chance or fate in the character's lives. With the exception of conflict, which illuminates the major issue of the story, your discussion of the concepts presented in this chapter will focus more on *how* the author crafted his or her story, not its meaning. Then, as you continue your study of the short story, you will realize that meaning emerges from the interaction between action and character.

THE INTRUDER

ANDRE DUBUS (B. 1936)



Andre Dubus was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana. After graduating from McNeese State College in 1958, Dubus was commissioned a lieutenant in the Marine Corps, where he began to write seriously. In 1964 he left the service and enrolled in the famed Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa. From 1966 through 1984, Dubus taught modern fiction and creative writing at Bradford College in Massachusetts. He has been a visiting professor at a number of colleges and universities, among them Boston University and the University of Alabama.

While at the University of Iowa, Dubus finished his novel *The Lieutenant* (1967). Although the actor Burt Lancaster bought the movie rights to the novel and hired Dubus to write the screenplay, the movie was never produced. The experience persuaded Dubus that screenwriting did not give him the challenge he wanted. With the exception of *Voices from the Moon* (1984), a novella, Dubus's subsequent publications have been essays or collections of short stories, a form he prefers. In addition to contributing stories to such periodicals as *Sewanee Review, Midwestern University Quarterly, Sage, New Yorker, Viva,* and *Ploughshares,* Dubus is represented in four editions of *Best American Short Stories* and in *O. Henry Prize Stories.* His short story collections include *Separate Flights* (1975), *Adultery and Other Choices* (1977), *Finding a Girl in America* (1980), *The Times Are Never So Bad* (1983), *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (1984), and *The Last Worthless Evening* (1986).

In July 1986, Dubus stopped to help the occupants of a disabled car on the side of the road. As he stood talking with the driver and a passenger, Dubus was hit by another car. His right leg was shattered and his left leg had to be amputated above the knee. Dubus spent the next