

The 20th-Century American Short Story

THREE AUTHORS, THREE GENERATIONS

BY ROB Tocalino

The reasons why the short story has come to be a peculiarly American form can seem self-evident. We are an industrious people with short attention spans. And, as with jazz, we aspired to cast off the onerous mantle of European classicism and find the unique timbre of our national voice. In America, we also value concision, novelty, risk taking, and hearty diversion. The short story provides them all.

Yet ask anyone in publishing, and he or she will claim that short stories do not sell. Scan down a “top-ten” list, and, with the exception of an occasional movie tie-in (*Brokeback Mountain*, originally a short story by Annie Proulx) and an alarming number of Stephen King’s tales, you’ll find nary a collection of shorts. Among major periodicals, only the *New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, and *Atlantic Monthly* continue their longstanding tradition of publishing stories regularly.

So if short stories don’t make money—a very un-American trait—then why is the short story considered by many to be a particularly American form?

Well, let’s follow the money—what many critics believe was the main motivation for the form’s early popularity. But the motivation was not all crass commercialism, for when Edgar Allen Poe reviewed Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice Told Tales* in *Graham’s Magazine* in May 1842, Poe, the editor of the magazine, first praised Hawthorne’s story collection and then called the “short prose narrative” second

best to the prose poem. After all, it only “require[ed] from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal.” By contrast, the “ordinary novel is objectionable. . . . As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality.” But in “the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. . . . During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control.”

Notice how Poe starts by complimenting Hawthorne’s exemplary use of the form. Then focus on what Poe is really saying. What is this? The *perfect* form? It will take only an hour, two tops, to enjoy the second highest artistic form known to man? If *Graham’s* carried short stories in every issue and Poe was responsible for elevating its circulation, what else to do but call attention to the regular appearance of such an exalted form right there in the pages of *Graham’s*?

American literature scholar Joseph Urgo expands on the value of the short story in his article “Capitalism, Nationalism, and the American Short Story” (*Studies in Short Fiction*, Fall 1998). First, he addresses the issue of economy and claims that the American short story and the founding of the popular literary magazine evolved hand in hand. And, “[u]nlike the novel, which may trace its roots to the private epistolary form, or the poem, whose roots are as old as the human voice, the short story has a money trail.” Urgo also notes that the short story had much to do with bringing America’s “multiplicity of folkways together.” The short

stories of Bret Harte and Mark Twain shaped a brilliant vision of the West for easterners hungry to understand the size and scope of their burgeoning country. In America, we build fences to peer over them, and the short story served as the perfect voyeuristic peek, first into mining camps and immigrant communities and up-and-coming religions and eventually into the backyards of our own neighbors. The short story, then, was not only a moneymaker; it was also a vehicle for Americans to understand their larger nation.

Of course, above all Americans like a winner, a characteristic Edward J. O'Brien understood intuitively when he introduced *The Best American Short Stories* in 1915. The proliferation of periodicals early in the century created a need for an annual vetting device, and O'Brien's series, in print continually since 1915, offered the perfect summation of a year's output. More than just a "best of," however, it provided, and continues to provide, a mirror of our deepest national concerns and trends.

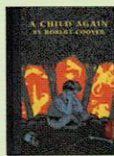
No longer an engine of commerce, by the 1970s the short story had become a critical ground for young writers to hone their craft and for veterans to continue exploring the kaleidoscopic varieties of American life. The form also moved away from the commercial realm toward the academic sphere. Today, the pages of *The Best American* series and the *O. Henry Prize Stories*, among other collections, are dominated by contributions from literary journals, many funded by universities. The audience for short fiction has become increasingly more specialized, a trend partially explained by author Tobias Wolff in a 1996 interview with *Salon.com*. Noting that the best short stories are not constructed like novels—many lack clear endings and are often ambiguous—Wolff claimed that short stories "are very demanding in their own way," and, as a result, "most people find them disappointing."

In her introduction to the 1983 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*, Anne Tyler wrote, "The most appealing short story writer is the one

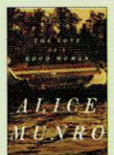


KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

OTHER SHORT-STORY WRITERS TO CONSIDER . . .



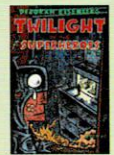
ROBERT COOVER (1932–): Often classified as metafiction, or fairy tales for adults, Coover's work captures the fantastic with a realist's eye. This is no magical realism, however, but a world where the stuff of myths and fairy tales is deadly serious. His newest work, *A Child Again* (2005), breathes new fictional life into Casey at the Bat, Little Red Riding Hood, and Puff the Magic Dragon.



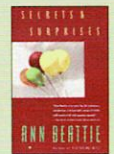
ALICE MUNRO (1931–): We'll stretch our definition of *American* to include our neighbor to the north. Munro is regularly lauded as one of the premier writers of our day, in any form, but her devotion to and mastery of the short form makes her continued success that much more impressive. In his 1998 *New York Times* review of *The Love of a Good Woman*, Michael Gorra noted that "[h]er work has a motion that seems as natural as walking." Munro explores ordinary people's—mostly women's—personal travails and journeys.



JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON (1943–): Though he has largely shifted his focus from fiction to the essay and the memoir, McPherson's two collections of short stories (one of which, *Elbow Room*, won the 1978 Pulitzer Prize) remain essential reading. Using a broad assortment of narrative techniques and geographical settings, McPherson ruminates on the many manifestations of intolerance in America, prompting no less a writer than Ralph Ellison to call McPherson "a writer of insight, sympathy and humor." See *Hue and Cry* (1969) and *Elbow Room* (1977).



DEBORAH EISENBERG (1945–): The jurors for the 2000 REA Award for the Short Story said that Eisenberg's fiction "peels back the carapace of the visible world to reveal the secret layers and levels, the wonders of the parallel universe that underlie ordinary reality." In her new collection, *Twilight of the Superheroes* (★★★★ May/June 2006), she emerges with a 9-11 story that the *Christian Science Monitor* claims is the first to "avoid the bog of clichés" that surrounds the attack.



ANN BEATTIE (1947–): Beattie submitted 22 stories to *The New Yorker* before the venerable magazine finally published one. Soon she was a regular fixture in the magazine, which published many of the stories in *Distortions* (1976) and *Secrets and Surprises* (1978), her first two collections. Best known for these minimalist tales of the lethargic, drug-hazed 1970s, Beattie has continued to develop her technique and produce fiction of astonishingly consistent quality. *Where You'll Find Me* (1993) is the mature work of one of her generation's great chroniclers. ■

who's a wastrel. He neither hoards his best ideas for something more 'important' (a novel) nor skimps on his material because this is 'only' a short story." While we cannot provide a comprehensive survey of short fiction in the United States, the following profiles introduce three wastrels—authors whose contributions to American letters bear no relation to the length of their work, only to their uniform quality and adherence to our most cherished national qualities—novelty, risk taking, and individualism.

Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980)

Katherine Anne Porter is often labeled as a southern writer. But since she has often been lumped with William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty (an acquaintance of Porter's), her reputation has declined: her fellow southerners' fame has eclipsed Porter's own 27 short stories, three short novels, one long novel, and other writings. While many of Porter's most accomplished fiction takes place in her native Texas, her wanderlust, piercing eye for the contradictions of human nature (including self-betrayal), astute psychological insight, and crystalline prose rank her among America's finest writers. Her legacy, wrote Robert Penn Warren in the *Saturday Review* (December 1980), "bears the stamp of a personality distinctive, delicately perceptive, keenly aware of the depth and darkness of human experience, delighted by the beauty of the world and the triumphs of human kindness and warmth, and thoroughly committed to a quest for meaning in the midst of the ironic complexities of man's lot."

Born in 1890 into a venerable but faded Texas family, her mother's death delivered two-year-old Callie Russell Porter (she changed her name to Katherine Anne after her first divorce) into the care of her grandmother. "Aunt Cat," as she was called, provided a model of independence and self-sufficiency that would inspire Porter throughout her life.

After her grandmother died in 1901, Callie hopped from boarding school to part-time work and then into the arms of John Henry Koontz at the age of 16. The abusive marriage lasted eight years, but the divorce didn't end Porter's pain. After lighting out from Texas, she suffered tuberculosis and a case of the Spanish Flu, which later inspired her story, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

Through the 1920s Porter traveled back and forth between New York City and Mexico, where she worked as a journalist and teacher. She first gained notice for her fiction when the *Century* published "María Concepción" in 1922, a story set across the Rio Grande. An astonishing debut drawn from Porter's experiences as a disillusioned Communist in Mexico, it was chosen for *The Best Short Stories of 1922*. The honor inaugurated nearly two decades of critical acclaim, a period that saw the publication of the collections *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (1930), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels* (1939), and the highly autobio-

graphical Texas short stories that were later collected in *The Old Order: Stories of the South* (1955).

A Guggenheim Fellowship awarded in 1931 allowed Porter to engage in her wanderlust between the wars and to travel between Europe, Mexico, and the United States. Similar restlessness marked her marital life as she married, and divorced, three more husbands before 1940. Vicissitudes of fortune plagued Porter, and she turned to screenwriting, teaching, and the kindness of friends to make ends meet.

It was during this tumultuous period that she began work on her lone major novel, *Ship of Fools*, a work that she struggled with for over 20 years. About a German passenger ship returning to Germany from Mexico and an inquiry into the origins of human evil, it was published in 1962 and brought her a fleeting taste of fortune. Four years later, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* won her the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She was also nominated three times for the Nobel Prize in Literature. These honors confirmed the opinion of critics who placed her name in the company of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and Ernest Hemingway.

SELECTED MAJOR STORIES

These stories are all found in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*.

"MARÍA CONCEPCIÓN" (1922)

Though it was her first published story, developed with material gleaned from her Mexico experience, Porter displays a precocious understanding of the politics of violence and a gift for elucidating the complexity of cultures. Betrayed by her husband, the title character seeks brutal vindication for his transgression.

"PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER" (1939)

In this short novel, originally published in *The Southern Review*, Porter uses the raw material of her life to construct a vivid, heartbreaking tale of wartime disillusionment. The story alternates between stream-of-consciousness dreams and an omniscient viewpoint. Miranda Gay, a young Southern reporter, suffers from a bout of influenza near the end of World War I, when a young soldier risks his life to come to her aid. Miranda, a character who appears in a number of Porter's stories, is often cited as the author's autobiographical persona.

"Miss Porter brilliantly evokes the horror of the time—the din of propaganda, the moral blackmail of the Liberty Bond salesmen, the almost suffocating claustrophobia of a life cramped down within its narrowest limits. As far as the eye can see, there is nothing but war." CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD, *THE NEW*

REPUBLIC, 4/19/39.

"THE LEANING TOWER" (1941)

A warm-up for her novel *Ship of Fools*, "The Leaning Tower" displays a narrative complexity born from Porter's knack for

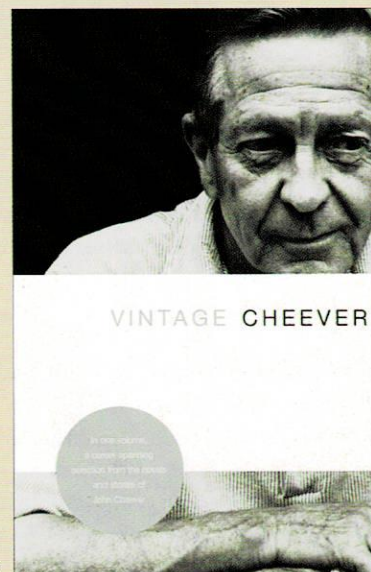
characterization and a preternatural foreboding of World War II. The story, concerned with the rise of Nazism, features a Berlin boarding house where a young American artist finds himself in the nightmarish calm between the world wars.

John Cheever (1912–1982)

John Cheever's appearance on seven out of the eight DVD-ROMs of the recently released *Complete New Yorker* testifies to his literary longevity. Though he disliked the tag, for decades Cheever was the *New Yorker* short story: urbane, wry, polished, and awash in existential ennui. His fictive suburb of Shady Hill was a region that many of his readers knew well—from the outside, at least. The manicured lawns, prescribed values and manners, and obedient pets obscure the existential angst of its inhabitants—conditions that gave the creator of such anxiety the epithet "Chekhov of the suburbs." But while Cheever made suburbia—a symbol of emotional emptiness—a prototype of human behavior, he never lost affection for his cocktail-party set. As John Updike wrote, "[M]any people have written about suburbia, and only Cheever was able to make an archetypal place out of it, a terrain we can recognize within ourselves, wherever we are or have been. . . . [N]o one else satirized with such tenderness its manifold distinctions of class and style, or felt with such poignance the weary commuter's nightly tumble into the arms of his family" (*New Yorker*, 7/12/82).

Though he could be mistaken for one of his own upper-middle-class characters, Cheever knew both sides of the suburban ideal. His father, a wealthy manufacturer in Massachusetts from a solid WASP line, suffered a great financial reversal in the Depression and abandoned his family. Soon after, Cheever was expelled from the prestigious Thayer Academy for poor grades. This incident launched his literary career at age 18, when Malcolm Cowley published a fictionalized version of his expulsion in the *New Republic*. Though Cheever didn't publish another story for another three years (or return to school), he remained remarkably productive for the rest of his life, publishing 180 stories, of which 141 appeared in the *New Yorker*.

Cheever lived what might be considered an ordinary life. He married, served in the military during World War II, moved to Ossining, New York, taught briefly



at Barnard, the University of Iowa, and Boston College, had three children, and summered in New Hampshire with his family. Yet, just like his characters, he came face to face with his own shortcomings. His posthumously published journals reveal a man riddled with guilt over his alcoholism and bisexuality, themes alluded to in his writings.

Cheever wrote four popular novels (*The Wapshot Chronicle* won the 1958 National Book Award), along with screenplays for MGM Studios and television. Ironically, his acclaimed novels brought more visibility to his short fiction. His 1978 collection, *The Stories of John Cheever*, won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the American Book Award. "These stories," Cheever commented, "seem at times to be stories of a long-lost world when the city of New York was still filled with a river light, when you heard Benny Goodman quartets from a radio in the corner of the stationery store, and when almost everybody wore a hat." Their timeless appeal lies in Cheever's detached look at morality, melancholy, love, sadness, failure, and life-changing crossroads.

SELECTED MAJOR STORIES

These stories are all found in *The Stories of John Cheever*.

"THE SWIMMER" (1964)

Neddy Merrill's quest to make his way home by way of his neighbors' swimming pools reveals itself as an exercise in delusion. Though the plot suggests a madcap, eight-mile romp through the fashionable suburbs of Shady Hill, Cheever's thematic development and subtle atmospheric tweaks build towards a heartbreaking crescendo. Critics consider this story one of the author's masterpieces.

"The story has mythic echoes—the passage of a divine swimmer across the calendar toward his doom—and yet is always only the story of one bewildered man, approaching the end of his life, journeying homeward, in a pair of bathing trunks, across the countryside where he lost everything that ever meant something to him." MICHAEL CHABON, SALON.COM, 9/30/96.

"GOODBYE, MY BROTHER" (1951)

Perhaps one of the most brutal stories in Cheever's oeuvre and considered one of his greatest achievements, "Goodbye," told in the first person, relates the narrator's relationship with his youngest brother during a summer spent on an island off the Massachusetts coast. But as the grown children and their families reunite, deep fissures in their relationships surface.

"THE COUNTRY HUSBAND" (1954)

◆ O. HENRY AWARD

When his plane undertakes an emergency landing, Francis Weed, a middle-aged family man, returns home to Shady Hill expecting some sympathy. Instead, the Weeds are caught up in their own travails, so Francis turns to the fragile arms of his children's 18-year-old babysitter. Once again,

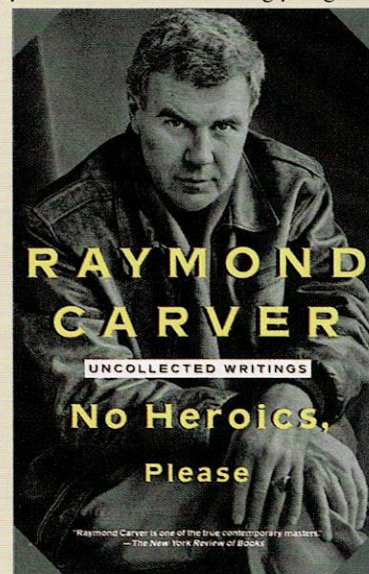
Cheever strips away happy appearances to reveal pathos, longing, and despair.

For greater insight into the author's life, try *The Journals of John Cheever*, *The Letters of John Cheever*, or his daughter Susan Cheever's memoir, *Home Before Dark*.

Raymond Carver (1938–1988)

Like his native Oregon, Raymond Carver often seems to have clouds above his brawny head. This persona was partially established by the gloomy face that greets the world from the cover of his posthumous collection, *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). But even more, it is reinforced by the decidedly downbeat, even ominous, tone of much of his acclaimed fiction. "It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine—the source of artistic delight as Nabokov would have it," Carver said (*New York Times*, 2/15/81). If Cheever chronicled the despair lurking beneath suburban affluence, Carver, in his realist, minimalist style, cast a tense eye toward the working poor, marginalized people, and those suffering from sadness and loss. His subjects and "dirty realist" style revitalized the short story, proving that observations of lumber mills, trailer parks, and "real-life" situations could inspire short literary classics. His pared-down style also leaves much open to interpretation. His fiction is "so spare in manner," observed literary critic Frank Kermode, "that it takes a time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition is represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch."

The subdued tone of his fiction mirrors his turbulent life. Born in Clatskanie, Oregon, to a father who worked in a sawmill and a waitress mother, Carver grew up amid poverty, domestic violence, and his father's alcoholism—conditions he would later exploit in his fiction. By the age of 21, Carver was married with two children. Through the late 1960s and early 1970s he worked to support his family with odd jobs throughout the Northwest and California and wrote short stories—short by necessity, as he juggled writing with work. He struggled with alcoholism, but was determined to hone his craft. "Short stories, like houses—or cars for that matter—should be built to last," he said. "They should also be pleasing, if not beautiful, to look at, and everything inside them should work."



Though he had published some poems while completing his college degree in Northern California and the program at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Carver only found success as a writer when his first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), was nominated for a National Book Award. During this same period Carver quit drinking, married poet Tess Gallagher, received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and returned to the classroom, now as a professor—and as one of the new “writer-academics”. Besides poetry, he published two more short story collections to critical acclaim, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) and *Cathedral* (1983), which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize. Both collections established Carver as one of America's finest writers. Despite his success, Carver never acknowledged whether his editor, Gordon Lish, had significantly influenced the almost surreal minimalism that made Carver's prose so unique. He preferred to humbly credit Lish's editorial skills and let the stories speak for themselves—fiction that creates meaning through its very form.

SELECTED MAJOR STORIES

These stories are all found in *Cathedral*.

“A SMALL, GOOD THING” (1983)

♦ O. HENRY AWARD

When an eight-year-old boy is struck comatose by a car the morning of his birthday, the baker enlisted to make his cake repeatedly calls the house with increasingly threatening messages. The story, originally published as “The Bath” in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, was significantly revised and expanded by Carver for *Cathedral* and presents a strong argument for his own abilities as a writer. The optimism of this story, Carver claimed, marked a turning point in his career.

“WHERE I'M CALLING FROM” (1983)

The tale-swapping reminiscences of two recovering alcoholics prompt the narrator to reach out to the loves in his life. With this story, Carver turned away from the bleakness of his early stories to find a glimmer of hope at the end of the detox-center hallway. Carver's experience with his and his father's own alcoholism inspired his examination of these characters' inner lives.

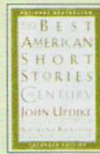
“[The story] possesses an unsentimental yet tender awareness of the world his characters have lost. It is easily the best story in [Cathedral], and makes me think that if he confronted his subject he might in fact manage to turn the alcoholic into Everyman.” THE HUDSON REVIEW, SPRING 1984.

“CATHEDRAL” (1983)

A visit from his wife's old blind friend finds a jealous, insecure husband battling his own handicaps. As solid, vast, and awe-inspiring as its architectural namesake, the title

story of Carver's final collection finds grace and transformation in a simple act of empathy. Critics consider “Cathedral” Carver's masterpiece. ■

GREAT SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS



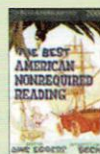
THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES OF THE CENTURY | COEDITED BY JOHN UPDIKE (WITH LONGTIME SERIES EDITOR KATRINA KENISON): This collection goes a long way toward comprehensiveness.

Most of the big names are here (O. Henry to O'Connor; Hawthorne to Hemingway) with the notable excisions explained by the editors' attempt to represent each decade evenly. In all, an essential and entertaining time line of the American short story. And don't forget the annual editions in the series!



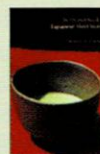
THE SCRIBNER ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY SHORT FICTION Fifty North American Stories Since 1970 | EDITED BY MICHAEL MARTONE AND LEX WILLIFORD: Brief biographies of each author

precede their selections, making this 50-story collection a nice primer to the modern short story since 1970. The selections, which include work by Carver, Annie Proulx, and Lorrie Moore, give credence to claims that the end of the twentieth century was a renaissance for short fiction.



THE BEST AMERICAN NONREQUIRED READING | EDITED BY DAVE EGGERS: For a look at the vanguard of American (and international) short fiction, pick up the annual installment of this new series from the publisher of the *Best American*

series and Dave Eggers, the editor of *McSweeney's*, an influential literary journal. Though some of the journalism is less than essential, the short fiction, featuring writers like Zadie Smith, George Saunders, and Rattawut Lapcharoen-sap, is always intriguing.



OXFORD SHORT STORY SERIES: Although we have focused on American short stories in this feature, the form by no means originated or became the property of North America. Oxford has published *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories*, edited by A. S. Byatt (1993), *Classic Irish Short Stories*, edited by Frank O'Connor (2003), *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*, edited by Theodore W. Goossen (2001), and the *Oxford Anthology of the Brazilian Short Story*, edited by K. David Jackson (2001). ■