

Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Short Story Collections

BY ELIZABETH GONZALEZ JAMES



ONE OF THE INDIRECT CASUALTIES of the declining magazine market has been the short story. With the exception of the *New Yorker* and a select few others, general-interest magazines no longer publish short fiction, leaving an uncertain future for stories. Every few years, they are declared officially dead and immediately pronounced alive and thriving by outraged fans, which leaves readers to wonder, “How can stories be dead?”

Short stories are also the only major literary form that must constantly justify their own existence against the pernicious charge that they lack the depth and breadth of novels. Writers who focus solely on short fiction—such as Alice Munro and, until the publication of his first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), George Saunders—often work against a loud chorus demanding longer and, as it is implied, more serious work. Critic Adrian Chen demands in a 2013 article that Saunders “write a goddamn novel already,” that “the novel is the Super Bowl of fiction writing, and any

fiction writer who hasn’t written one is going to be relegated to runner-up in the annals of literary history” (*Gawker*).

And yet the reality is that short story collections top best seller lists and win prizes. John Cheever wrote four novels, but it was his collection, *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978), that won the Pulitzer in 1979. In its glowing review of Saunders’s fourth story collection, *The Tenth of December* (2013), the *New York Times Magazine* declared it was “the best book you’ll read this year.” The short stories of Philip K. Dick have been an endless boon to scriptwriters: “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale” (1966), “The Adjustment Team” (1954), and “The Minority Report” (1956) were all his creations, and new adaptations of his work are sure to be greenlit for the foreseeable future.

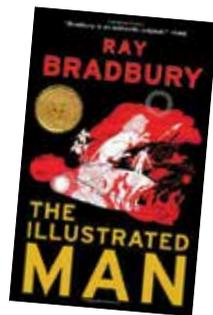
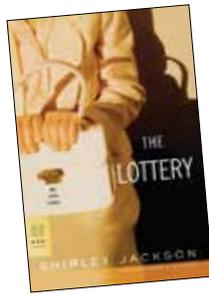
As short story master Lorrie Moore puts it, “A story is a noise in the night ... surprising and not entirely invited. [Storytelling] crashes in and lifts us out of the many gated

communities of the mind. It animates (rather than answers) a question or two" (*Literary Hub*).

In this overview of short story collections, we will focus on the 20th century, touching briefly on some classic collections and moving into contemporary masters. This is only a small sample of a vast and varied canon. Poe, Fitzgerald, Nabokov, and Hemingway all published volumes of stories, to say nothing of Dickens, Kafka, Garcia Marquez, Tolstoy, Achebe, Murakami, and others. Short stories are published in every genre—romance, science fiction, horror, fantasy, Western, and many hybrid combinations. They can be enjoyed on a beach or a train, during a lunch break, or while waiting to pick up children from school. We've presented a range of voices and styles in the hope that naysayers or novices will be tempted to pick up a story, invite the noises of the night, and be lifted out of their minds, if only for 15 minutes.

We start our overview with an author who will be familiar to anyone who attended high school in the United States after the 1950s: Shirley Jackson. Her horror masterpiece, "The Lottery," is one of the most anthologized stories of all time and continues to disturb ninth graders into the new millennium. *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1949) contains Jackson's most famous story, about a farm community drawing lots to see who among them will be stoned to death to ensure a good harvest. But the explicit brutality of "The Lottery" stands alone in a collection otherwise devoted to the disquieting aspects of midcentury life: racism, alienation, mental health, parenting, and more. Jackson's critical eye and deft touches of comedy mixed with horror demand that her readers confront their own inhumanity, especially when complacency is so tempting.

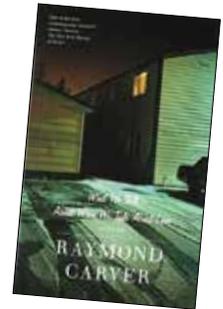
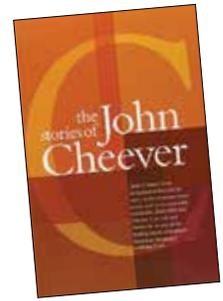
No American science fiction writer dreamed of the future in brighter colors than Ray Bradbury. *The Illustrated Man* (1951) collects 18 stories that explore what happens when technology and people collide. This conflict enters the home in "The Veldt," a story of parents who suspect that the hologrammatic nursery they've purchased for their children is rendering them, as parents, obsolete. Book banning prefigures *Fahrenheit 451* by a couple of years in "The Exiles," the story of a colony on Mars peopled by authors banned on Earth for seditious themes, including Poe, Shakespeare, and Ambrose Bierce. But lest you think Bradbury's work is all rockets and authoritarianism, his work is also imbued with a deep vein of nostalgia for an idealized, Norman Rockwell-inspired America. Bradbury's genius is seeing how the two worlds—the past and the future—overlap and coexist.



"It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, I *drank* too much last night." Thus opens John Cheever's masterpiece, "The Swimmer," and it perfectly illustrates the world Cheever observes and chronicles: what happens when the sunny veneer of upper-middle-class life is pulled back to reveal disillusionment and desperation. Described by Elmore Leonard as "the Chekhov of the suburbs," *The Stories of John Cheever* (♦ PULITZER PRIZE, NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD, NATIONAL BOOK AWARD; 1978) was a huge inspiration for Matthew Weiner as he was writing his hit television series *Mad Men*. Fans of the show will find parallels between the fictional world of Don Draper and stories such as "The Five-Forty-Eight," "The Sorrows of Gin," and "The Enormous Radio," about a couple who discover that their brand new radio allows them to spy on their neighbors.

After Ernest Hemingway it is possible that no writer has been imitated more than Raymond Carver, and his collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) shows why. In this slim volume of 17 stories, Carver concerns himself with the aftermath of broken relationships and the feeble attempts at repair by people hobbled by alcohol or anger or depression or all three. Like Hemingway, Carver is not given to lush descriptions and florid speeches—his characters speak plainly or do not speak at all. The iconic title story will be familiar to anyone who saw the movie *Birdman*, and the title itself has been altered and used tongue in cheek by many writers, including Nathan Englander (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* [2012]) and Haruki Murakami (*What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* [2008]).

In her debut collection, *Self-Help* (1985), Lorrie Moore skewers the tenets of pop psychology and "in so doing finds a distinctive, scalpel-sharp fictional voice that probes, beneath the ad hoc psychic fixit programs we devise for ourselves, the depths of our fears and yearnings" (*New York Times*). With titles such as "How To Become a Writer," "The Kid's Guide to Divorce," and "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)," Moore exposes the inherent inadequacies of breezy self-help titles, while creating rich and relatable characters negotiating tricky modern relationships. She also often writes in the second person, which produces an interesting

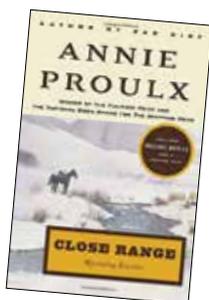


effect in “How To Be an Other Woman”—it is no longer a character in a story who falls for a married man, but you!

Complex relationships also figure prominently in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995) by Octavia E. Butler, although for this Hugo Award–winning and Nebula Award–winning science fiction writer, nonhumans figure prominently in the narrative. In the title story, which won the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award, a colony of refugee humans has escaped Earth and settled on an alien planet. They live in relative peace and enjoy the aliens’ protection—with the stipulation that males of child-bearing age must carry the aliens’ eggs and must undergo a horrifying extraction process. In “Speech Sounds,” a virus has eliminated humankind’s ability to speak, and people must communicate by using rudimentary hand signals. And, in “Amnesty,” Noah must convince her fellow humans that living in symbiosis with their recent alien colonizers is preferable to the bleak economic prospects facing Earth.

George Saunders is one of America’s greatest living short story writers, and his success comes, in large part, from the empathy with which he treats his characters. *Civil-WarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), his first short story collection, introduces themes and character types that recur throughout all his collections: mainly middle-class men and women living in a not-too-distant future who have not reaped any rewards for their toils. His stories are fabulist and satirical, and most in this collection take place in theme parks, a setting that allows Saunders to poke fun at the blurred lines between past and present, between fantasy and reality. In the title story, the narrator is a “verisimilitude inspector” for a Civil War-themed park, and as the title suggests, events quickly spin out of control. As roving teen gangs threaten park guests, management’s solution is to arm a murderous Vietnam veteran. Meanwhile, a family of actual Civil War-era ghosts hug the periphery, as the dejected narrator does little to stem the tide of absurd events. ZZ Packer has said of Saunders, “Not since Twain has America produced a satirist this funny.”

Moving from the artificial landscapes of failing theme parks to the very real mountains and plains of Wyoming is *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999) by Annie Proulx. Aside from her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), Proulx is best known for her novella, “Brokeback Mountain,” contained in this collection. Like Cormac Mc-

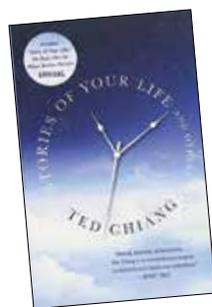
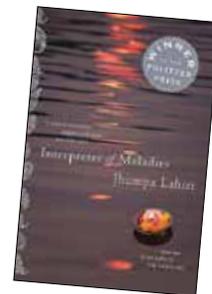


Carthy, Proulx has no interest in the mythologized West and presents an unforgiving environment that punishes those people unlucky enough to have been stranded in it. Ranchers, cowboys, bull riders, and bar girls—the people in these stories either can’t find refuge from the outside or never even try. “All the travelin I ever done is goin around the coffeepot lookin for the handle,” declares one character in “Brokeback Mountain.” In prose described as gritty and hard-bitten, Proulx risks succumbing to her own darkness. “But as a Wyoming resident herself, Proulx invests her masterful stories with an earthy wit and aching, redeeming compassion” (*AV Club*).

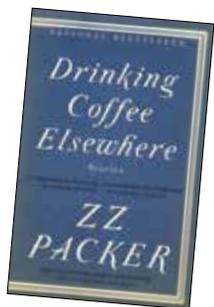
Jhumpa Lahiri has made a career of exploring the dislocation faced by immigrants fleeing political chaos and traversing the globe from India to the United States. In her debut story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (♦ PULITZER PRIZE, HEMINGWAY FOUNDATION/PEN AWARD; 1999), Lahiri allows old and new worlds to collide in interesting and provocative ways. In “This Blessed House,” Sanjeev and Twinkle, a newly married couple, have moved into a new house in Connecticut and begin finding biblical paraphernalia stashed around the home, an attempt by the previous occupants to proselytize their successors. Food also figures prominently in the collection. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” the wife of a mathematics professor, now living in America, takes care of a little boy every afternoon. She tells him about her life in faraway Calcutta, while she chops vegetables and re-creates sensuous dishes from her childhood, and it is her lust for a certain kind of fish that finally forces Mrs. Sen to attempt to drive—a decision that she will come to regret.

Ted Chiang is an unusual science fiction writer in that many of his stories take place in the past rather than the future. The first entry in *Stories of Your Life and Others* (2002) is “The Tower of Babylon,” a retelling of the Tower of Babel myth in which a stonecutter is tasked with climbing to the top of the world and cutting a doorway into Heaven. Chiang even describes ancient stonecutting techniques that could have been used to breach the floor of Heaven. “He writes the science fiction that would have existed in an earlier era, had science existed then” (*New Yorker*). “Story of Your Life,” Chiang’s most famous story, was adapted into the 2016 film, *Arrival*. It follows the attempts of a linguist to communicate with aliens who’ve arrived on Earth. Chiang spent five years learning linguistics himself before he attempted to write the story, which poses many questions, including, “Is free will simply an illusion?”

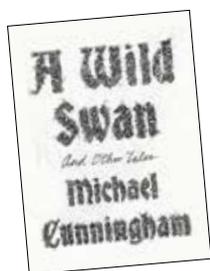
ZZ Packer has won just about every award that a writer can win, but she has yet to produce a second book. *Drink-*



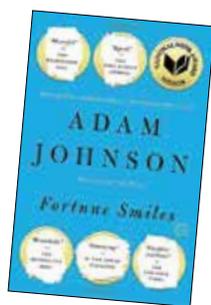
ing Coffee Elsewhere (2003) is her debut collection of stories about outsiders, people who wish they were somewhere else, or were someone else altogether. “Brownies” tells the story of a Brownie troop of black girls who come into conflict with a Brownie troop of white girls, until an ingenious plot twist forces the girls to reevaluate their motives. The title story features the unlikely friendship that forms between two freshmen at Yale. “The story’s natural warmth and unresolved tensions envelop you,” wrote the *Guardian*. “[Packer] tackles her narratives with unswerving confidence, taking liberties with time and space, diving into a story at any point she fancies ... and it works.”



Michael Cunningham, best known for his masterpiece *The Hours* (1998), brings his sharp eye and even sharper tongue to his collection of reimagined fairy tales, *A Wild Swan and Other Tales* (2015). Cunningham enjoys creating variations on source material—*The Hours* was inspired by Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*; *The Snow Queen* (2014) was inspired by the Hans Christian Andersen tale of the same name—and he uses iconic plots and characters to springboard into very unfamiliar territory. The witch from “Hansel and Gretel” has been forced into her gingerbread house by exorbitant rent in the village. The “children” she lures into her home are more likely in their late teens, brought there by a lonely old woman in the hopes of receiving some much needed attention. “Were you relieved, maybe just a little,” Cunningham asks, “when they lifted you up ... and shoved you into the oven?”



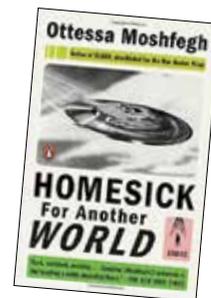
Don’t let the cheerful title or the brightly colored book jacket fool you: the headline on *NPR*’s review of *Fortune Smiles* (♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD; ★★★★★ Nov/Dec 2015) by Adam Johnson describes the book as “Brilliant, but never easy.” *Fortune Smiles* is a difficult book to read. Where other writers might choose to look away from some of the most disturbing facets of life—death, sexual abuse, torture—Johnson not only looks but lingers, immersing himself in people who do horrible things, constrained by who they are and how they were made. He chooses as his subjects a mother dying of cancer, an East German prison warden,



North Korean defectors, a child pornographer. The world he describes is “gleefully bleak” (*New York Times*) but “great literature isn’t about making the reader comfortable; it’s

about coming to terms with the truth, whether it’s beautiful or ugly” (*NPR*).

Ugliness is familiar, comfortable territory for Ottessa Moshfegh. In her story collection, *Homesick for Another World* (2017), one finds stories “peopled with self-obsessed, almost comically unlikable characters and buoyed by a guffawing nihilism, a sense of humor as black as a bleeding ulcer” (*Los Angeles Times*). Moshfegh’s stories may be unsatisfying for readers looking for closure or neat endings, since readers are instead given penetrating glimpses into the different ways people are broken. In “Bettering Myself,” an alcoholic high school teacher sidesteps epiphany and concludes the story while sitting at a bar in the middle of the day eating pickled onions. “An Honest Woman” features a lecherous old man who finally succeeds in getting his much younger neighbor into his house and onto his lap, only to receive a verbal beating more painful than years of rejection. Epiphany and meaning are as elusive to the reader as to Moshfegh’s characters. “Instead we are given a pimples-and-all image, how she seems to believe we all might, in our darkest moments, see ourselves” (*Los Angeles Times*).



Further Reading

- DUBLINERS** | JAMES JOYCE (1914)
- PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER** | KATHERINE ANNE PORTER (1939)
- COLLECTED FICTIONS** | JORGE LUIS BORGES (1999)
- THE COMPLETE COSMICOMICS** | ITALO CALVINO (1968)
- WELCOME TO THE MONKEY HOUSE** | KURT VONNEGUT (1968)
- THE THINGS THEY CARRIED** | TIM O’BRIEN (1990)
- THE BRIDEGROOM** | HA JIN (2000)
- A THOUSAND YEARS OF GOOD PRAYERS** | YIYUN LI (2005)
- THE BIRTHDAY OF THE WORLD AND OTHER STORIES** | URSULA K. LEGUIN (2002)
- THE BOAT** | NAM LE (2008)
- THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK** | CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE (2009)
- MIDDLE MEN** | JIM GAVIN (2012)
- DEAR LIFE** | ALICE MUNRO (2012)
- VAMPIRES IN THE LEMON GROVE** | KAREN RUSSELL (2013)
- TENTH OF DECEMBER** | GEORGE SAUNDERS (2013)
- THE TSAR OF LOVE AND TECHNO** | ANTHONY MARRA (2015) ■