

# The all-American short story

Bill Broun

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A bold new collection moves from the hot cauldron of the South to the urbanity of the north and west

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THE NEW GRANTA BOOK OF THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY

Edited by Richard Ford

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What exactly is American about the American short story these days? The question is not addressed directly in this astute, all-new update of

1992s Granta Book of the American Short Story but, considering the books title, how can it be ignored? The gratifying result here suggests it wasnt not by a long shot despite the editors insistence, in his fine introduction (nearly worth the purchase price alone), that there remains less evidence than ever that American stories are fated to be stylistically, thematically, generically different from another nationalities. Richard Ford, the Pulitzer Prizewinning novelist and short-story writer, brings a deceptively unassuming vision to his task of editing the anthology. His efforts are quietly wonderful.

In the original, 1992 volume, which he also edited, Ford recognized a distinct un-settlement simmering in the forms practitioners, a fertile lack of doctrinarianism which emerged as some of the intense artistic battles of the 1970s and 80s reached détente. Today, in a context shaped by recent seismic shocks (9/11, Katrina, Middle Eastern wars, George W. Bushs Presidency) to traditional American confidence, Ford says that he hears very little aesthetic ruckus in our dialogue over fiction, and suggests we stand distant from any legitimate and new aesthetic movement. Accordingly, his forty-four choices for inclusion in this new edition (beginning with Eudora Welty's Ladies in Spring) may strike some readers as offering few risks, despite the fact that Ford often uses words such as audacity, bravura and daring to define what makes an individual short story great. And it is true enough that even the youngest talents here, such as Adam Haslett and Nell Freudenberger, werent exactly plucked from some edgy literary underground filled with the smoke of clove cigarettes and the clatter of heroin syringes. The newer authors are more likely to have been educated in the Ivy League and to have appeared first in publications such as the New Yorker and the Yale Review.

Still, this gathering is never short on boldness or urges to turn over fresh artistic soil. Any mainstream anthology of American short fiction from the mid-twentieth century onwards which proffers the unrepresentative but marvellous Errand as its Raymond Carver taster seems to be wanting to say something. Like several of the selections here, this nineteenth-century-set homage to Chekhov, written by the great minimalist known for tales of boozed-up working men in the Pacific Northwest, comes from a vast unexplored periphery of the American short-fiction canon.

And there is daring to spare: the John Cheever selection, the brief, brilliant Reunion, accomplishes in three pages what many entire novels strive and fail to capture: the utter destruction of a father-and-child relationship through insecurity, egoism and alcoholism, something Cheever expertly etches in concrete terms. He put his arm around me, and I smelled my father the way my mother sniffs a rose. It was a rich compound of whiskey, after-shave lotion, shoe polish, woolens, and the rankness of a mature male. While the shoe polish and woolens may be very mid-twentieth-century, the pain of loving an imperfect father is not. Like many of the choices here, Reunion is one of those slightly secreted gems, a nearly but not quite forgotten tour de force, perhaps read just once, maybe twice, long ago; it is not the first story that comes to mind as

representative of Cheever, but rereading it, one is astonished it hasn't been anthologized more widely.

The same pleasurable realization comes again and again in *The New Granta Book of the American Short Story*. In general, Ford's choices chart, chronologically, a contrapuntal movement in American literature out of that hot cauldron of story, the South, then northwards and westwards to urbanity. *The Artificial Nigger* by Flannery O'Connor, which has undoubtedly and unfairly suffered from neglect because of its politically incorrect title, is arguably her finest story; O'Connor herself seems to have thought so at one time. It presents an odyssey in miniature about a racist rural grandfather's attempt to educate his susceptible grandson in the ways of the world during a journey to the big city (in this case, Atlanta). The poignancy of the old man's dreadful efforts to inculcate a wisdom of the ages climaxes in a typically O'Connorean moment of spiritual abjection, all against a pre-Civil-Rights-era backdrop which defines the American Southern grotesque. This kind of historically instructive and artistically motivated model of the form deserves notice today, but the story (which appeared in the influential *Best American Short Stories* series in 1955) rarely appears in college literature textbooks, where the imperative to create easily digestible and representative packages for huge university survey classes drives editorial decisions. This is the kind of situation in which a commanding artist-editor such as Ford, working with a literary publisher, can make headway: rescuing tales from marginality, if not obscurity, and, as Ford puts it, honouring established writers whose work continues to renew itself. In the case of some of the perpetually underappreciated authors Ford favours, such as Richard Yates (*Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired*) and Donald Barthelme (*Me and Miss Mandible*) the sort of writers often more praised than read any appearance in a new anthology merits applause.

Marginality doesn't necessarily mean experimentalism in this book. Indeed, a mannered literary temperance seems to underpin Ford's choices, and it makes good sense: at a time when, as he puts it, our high-speed sensation of event occurs faster than we can transact it imaginatively, fiction needs to be grappled with on well-established terrain that honours tradition without choking innovation.

One of the small triumphs of this book is that it reminds us of the difference between literary and political conservatism. Several very traditional story types appear here, including bruisers such as Robert Stone's *Helping* and Andre Dubuss's *Killings* which are classic examples of the stripped-down tough-guy story that emerged in America in the 1970s and 1980s, and which remain atavistic, guilty celebrations of a fiction-writing ethos with origins in Hemingway and, before him, Chekhov.

None of this means the collection lacks creative energy. The volume dreams its way improbably around what Ford calls the noisy, terrifying, and extremely plausible world of headlines and news broadcasts. *The Management of Grief* by the Calcutta-born writer Bharati Mukherjee, a prescient tale centred on the Toronto Indo-Canadian community's reaction to the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182, provides an imaginative scheme for this process, as Ford himself points out. The central focus of events is distant – an exploded airplane off the Irish coast – but what occurs back in North America warrants fictional meditation. The protagonist, Mrs Bhava, loses her husband and two sons in the terrorist strike, yet she finds herself tending calmly to others' needs and finally discovers significance, if not solace, in the rituals of collective anguish. Towards the end of the story, as she walks through a park in Toronto, her unimaginable loss seems to beckon to her:

"Something in the bare trees caught my attention. I looked up from the gravel, into the branches and the clear blue sky beyond. I thought I heard the rustling of larger forms, and I waited a moment for voices. Nothing."

Moments later, however, the voices of her lost family do call to her, one last time: Your time has come, they said. Go, be brave. The larger forms Mukherjee imagines are the terrible and beautiful things that shake and twist our worlds. Showing how we need both to envisage, and to stride beyond, them is ultimately what Mukherjee's story and this book do so well.

The selection also throws bright new light on writers often presented by critics in an unduly habitual manner. Mary Gaitskill isn't typically discussed as a political satirist, but *A Romantic Weekend*, about a sad S&M affair taking place, as it happens, in Washington DC, reads freshly here, and the implications seem unmistakable: as a male figure veers from fantasies of jamming his fingers into his lover's vagina, bashing her head against the floor, and going home to his wife (who makes him supper), a pornography of violence and good, clean Washington values sit in uneasy proximity.

Some of the best pieces are stories by younger authors, giving the lie to any notion that American fiction has grown

complacent: Sherman Alexies carnal tale (The Toughest Indian in the World) of a motel encounter between two Native American men ends on a dazzling note of poetry; Junot Diazs claustrophobic depiction of two dealers in urban New Jersey (Aurora) reads as if it drifts out of a narrative crack pipe, but it possesses a quirky cogency.

The decision to exclude work by certain key writers must have agonized the editor. Neither Bobbie Ann Mason nor John Edgar Wideman appears here, nor does Cynthia Ozick, somewhat surprisingly. It may have been crass for Ford to include one of his own powerful stories of lonesome western grifters, but their significance cannot be overlooked. One also misses a few of Americas more inventive storytellers, such as Allan Gurganus and David Foster Wallace. Ford tends also to steer clear of the fiction of precocious, self-referential irony of the McSweeneys/Dave Eggers vein; older short-fiction pioneers, Robert Coover and William Gass, both of whom enriched the 1992 volume, are sad but reasonable deletions. The New Granta Book of the American Short Story, as the publisher says, is meant to complement, not replace, the older edition.

At times, the stories almost relentless depictions of unique, often subcultural communities makes one wonder whether Americas writers have grown too cellular in their outlooks, too navel-gazing. Some of the selections, such as Devotion by the impressively mature Adam Haslett and Lucky Girls by Nell Freudenberger, consciously reach beyond that inwardness, but it surfaces as a concern elsewhere here. Julie Orringers disturbing Stars of Motown Shining Bright, for instance, which follows the conflict of two Jewish young women who fall for the same bad boy, appears to take place in a kind of parallel Midwestern universe pared down to stark, anonymous suburbs; but instead of depicting a distinctive teenage milieu in a satisfying way, it comes across as simply incomplete. It is true that Orringer is trying to bring narcissistic teenagers to life, but portraying narcissism fictionally does not mean that our vision, as readers, should be blinkered, yet this is how her story feels. Even a work as unimpeachably stunning as George Saunderss CivilWarLand in Bad Decline posits a cosmos with little porousness. Perhaps all great fiction, on some level, needs to do this. But, if nothing else, now is not a time for Americas writers to grow overly self-involved. By and large, this splendid anthology not only acknowledges, but demonstrates that.

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