



Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories

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Here are 70 of the very best short-short stories of recent years, including contributions from such contemporary writers as Raymond Carver, Leonard Michaels and John Updike; a few modern masters such as Hemingway and Cheever; and an assortment of talented new young writers. Sudden Fiction brilliantly captures the tremendous popularity of this new and distinctly American form.

Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories Details

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Samir says

I just finished reading a collection of short stories in a book called sudden fiction by a range wide of authors. Such as by Langston Hughes, Robert Kelly, Tobias Wolff and more are included in this book.

I like the wide range of short stories in this book and I enjoyed reading each story because it leaves you with a different message but within that message it is the same lesson that each story tells you. I liked the style of writing too because it kept me into the book because it made me feel like I was in the story and watching these events happen. I recommend this book to people who enjoy reading a wide range of short stories and can draw a connection between short stories and life.

Claudia says

I wrote a paper on this when I was in high school. After that I tried writing Sudden Fiction of my own. I'm still writing it.

Peter says

Perhaps you have seen Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. If so, you will doubtless recall the scene in which Indiana Jones shoots the Mysterious Black Swordsman dead in two seconds instead of engaging in a protracted fight scene. And yet, despite the lack of drama, despite the fact that you don't see Indiana Jones defeat his foe with a cunning combination of bull whip, acrobatics, and fisticuffs, there's no doubt in your that he could do so, and that the reason he shoots him is because he's just that much smarter than every other action hero who's been in the same situation.

This book is Indiana Jones.

Colin says

I found gems in this collection, like Stuart Dybek's "Sunday at the Zoo," which takes barely a page to accomplish craziness, desperation, and hilarity.

Raymond Carver's "Popular Mechanics" flares up and chars the imagination in little more than a page and a half.

In the Afterwords sections, I also found several insights into the short-short story from Dybek, Tobias Wolff, Joyce Carol Oates, Paul Theroux, Russell Banks, Mark Strand, and several others.

For example, in one of the Afterwords, Joe David Bellamy writes, "Compression and concision have always

been part of the aesthetic of the American short story form. Some writers, perhaps spurred on by information overload of our time, began to experiment with just how far these values could be pushed without losing the minimum weight needed for a memorable dramatic statement."

Fred Chappel writes, "Unease, whether humorous or sad, is the effect the short-short aims at."

Charles Baxter: "It's a test of the reader's ability to fly, using minimal materials."

Baxter again: "It's not that people don't have attention spans. They just don't believe in the future, and they're tired of information."

Jessie says

This is the anthology that I read in college that has the story about the newlyweds and the neighbor and the birds! (The Quail by Rolf Yngve). I'm so freaking glad I remembered this, it was driving me insane.

Peter Colclasure says

The vast majority of these stories were bland, poorly written, and unmemorable. There were a few hidden gems however.

micah says

Another one I read for a university creative writing course. I love the potential of the form, but with the exception of a few gems, most of the selections in this anthology really did not do it for me, nor did I find much value in bits about the form at the end of the book. I couldn't recommend this one.

A.J. Howells says

This collection is worth a look if only for the fact that it's the first collection of "Flash Fiction" released to the public, before the term "Flash Fiction" came to describe these ultra short stories (all are between 500 and 1,500 words). In terms of the 70 stories, there are a lot of hits and a lot of misses, but that is to be expected in a genre attempting to get its wings. Some really good ones are:

- "Even Greenland" by Barry Hannah
- "Reunion" by John Cheever
- "Sunday in the Park" by Bel Kaufman
- "A Fable" by Robert Fox
- "Thank You, M'am" by Langston Hughes
- "Popular Mechanics" by Raymond Carver

- “The Hit Man” by T. C. Boyle
- “I See You Never” by Ray Bradbury
- “The Bank Robbery” by Stephen Schutzman
- “Tent Worms” by Tennessee Williams
- “Sitting” by H. E. Francis
- “Sunday at the Zoo” by Stuart Dybek
- “Noel” by Michael Plemmons
- “The Personal Touch” by Chet Williamson
- “The Visitation” by Tom Whalen
- “Tickits” by Paul Milenski
- “Any Minute Mom Should Come Blasting Through the Door” by David Ordan
- “Sleepy Time Gal” by Gary Gildner
- “A Lost Grave” by Bernard Malamud

All of the stories are simply snapshots: a few characters, a vague setting, no sense of resolution. Because of this, I find that they tend to stick in my mind better than much longer stories. More than a couple of the ones I listed above have already been re-read several times because of the magic they exude. Authors here are able to be explicit while being implicit, and this paradox works wonders. Read “Popular Mechanics” by Raymond Carver and try not to cringe, even though the story is overwhelmingly vague.

Also worth a look is the extensive index of the author comments on this burgeoning form.

The book took me a little longer than usual, which is odd considering the stories are so short. Unfortunately, the more boring stories tend to arrive in a string, but from a literary standpoint, none are worth skipping. Also, the really good stories force you to slow down, take your time, and savor what little is there.

Spike Gomes says

The collection edited by a creative writing professor of mine in college. I picked up the book back around then, but never got around to reading it until now, over 10 years later.

Honestly, I didn't like most of the stories in this collection, as they highlighted just about everything I hate about modern American literature. The high stylistics, devoid of real content. The obfuscate prose that pretends towards the profound. Completely unbelievable depictions of characters and situations that come across as what someone who never worked a blue collar job or lived in flyover country thinks blue collar people who don't live in hip cities think and act like. The stupid petty harping on suburbs and the people that live in them by a bunch of cosmopolitan elitists with English Department sinecures. Honestly, with most of these stories, there's no there, *there*, as Stein's old saw goes.

That said, there's some gems there, including some ones that stop and give pause, subtly written, with great nuance. "Roth's Deadman" for example. That said, this collection is about 10% gems, 20% "well, that was good", 20% "meh", and 50% "How the hell are these people famous for being writers?" Not really worth the time and effort.

Sorry Professor Shapard, you were a damn good creative writing professor, but honestly, your taste is a bit off.

Frank says

I'm a big fan of short stories and lately the short-short stories and flash fiction have grabbed my attention. These are wonderful little pieces. They often have an ominous feel to them and I times they give me the feeling you get when your trying to remember a strange dream you had but can't.

Kate says

this is an excellent book. teaching from it in the spring. ideal for our a.d.d. world. there's a brilliant updike story in here and normally i hate updike. and it's NOT "a&p"

Androo says

As with any anthology, there will be some sections that fall flat, while others astound. Sudden Fiction is more astounding than flat, and there are quite a few reasons why you should consider reading this collection:

The stories are short-short -- about 1 to 4 pages. You can breeze through ten before bed and feel quite accomplished (though you may want to take a break and digest some of the true zingers in this book).

The Afterwords section has blurbs from the authors of the stories trying to define the subgenre of the short-short story and its popularity -- so you may find yourself falling in love with a new way of telling stories.

For you aspiring writers out there, short-short fiction is a wonderful way to hone your skills as a writer since it focuses on the essentials of the story (you -must- be economical with your words to convey a story in a page or two). Of course, that means the subgenre brings with it a sort of special difficulty to it.

Kent says

Excellent! A fun end of the year read when I'm hopelessly scatter-brained anyway. Small snorts of literary genius. Little bursts of clear white light burning through the fog. Everyone should keep one of these on their shitter.

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

The rating is a compromise. The result of my conflicting sense that this is a landmark book that everyone interested in contemporary literature and professional writing should own--and well, the fact that I liked such a small percentage of these stories even a little.

On the must-read/own side, at the time this collection was put together (1986) the literary world saw an explosion of short-short fiction. As noted in the introduction, the great majority of these stories had been published within the last five years. As it happens, only 22 out of the 70 stories here were published before the 1980s, and over half of those were published in the seventies. Thus this collection was part of the whole debate about what are these things and what do we call them? (Ultimately, they've generally been called by a term the editors didn't adopt but mentioned in the Introduction--Flash Fiction--and they're ubiquitous these days on the literary scene.) Does the length by itself call forth a form different in quality than the ordinary short story? The stories in this collection run from less than 300 words to 1,500. Each story is only a few pages that can be read in less than five minutes. The authors include many celebrated literary names such as T. Coraghessan Boyle, Raymond Carver, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Bernard Malamud, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike and Tennessee Williams. The collection consists not only of these stories but nearly 30 pages of an Afterwards by editors and celebrated authors examining the theory and practice and definitions of the short story and particularly the short-short.

But then there's that of 70 stories, I liked little more than about one-tenth of them. This says more about my literary tastes (or some might feel, the lack of them) than the job the editors did. This is decidedly contemporary literary fiction. It has that sensibility and style. There is fiction that falls into that category I do love, but so much contemporary literary fiction comes across to me as sterile, pretentious and crass, and that's true of the vast majority of this collection. (Including by the way, Hemingway's contribution, "A Very Short Story," which coming from 1925, is the earliest entry in the anthology. Take a look at its last sentence.) It's as if today's literati would rather die than entertain, move or inspire. Almost all of these are decidedly downbeat and few have a twist, a surprise or a smile in store. The contribution by Ray Bradbury, "I See You Never" is the dullest story by him I've ever read. Yet, mainstream fiction these might be, so many seem gimmicky--see, for instance, "A Questionnaire for Rudolph Gordon." I can however, name 8 stories I know I'll remember for a long time. For the record, in the order they appeared:

John Cheever, *Reunion* (1962) - a wonderful character study about a son's experience with his father that reveals so much with just a few telling words.

Bel Kaufman, *Sunday in the Park* (1985) - for something so short and so seemingly trivial (an incident at a sandbox) this manages to have quite a punch.

John Updike, *Pymgmalion* (1981) - the title expresses perfectly the theme of this story about a man shaping his wife to his tastes.

Elizabeth Talent, *No One's a Mystery* (1985) - about the different expectations of a couple about their future--this manages to be cynical and hopeful at once.

Mary Robison, *Yours* (1981) - this does what few contemporary literary stories dare to--turn around and play with your expectations.

Langston Hughes, *Thank You, M'am* (1958) - does something else few contemporary stories dare to--create a memorable character you actually care about.

Raymond Carver, *Popular Mechanics* (1982) - not sure how to characterize this one. Prose poem? Magical realism? But while I wouldn't call it horror exactly, it has the chilling impact of the best in the genre. One of those, like "Pygmalion" I know I won't forget. Ever.

Chet Williamson, *The Personal Touch* (1983) - the humor might be a bit grim--but it's there. I almost

laughed out loud at the twist. And it *is* a twist.

So, as a collection of stories, most of which I'd want to read again and again, this fails. Yet it will stay on my bookshelf because I find there's much I've learned--and still could learn--about contemporary literature and writing fiction reading these.

Marie says

I don't know that there's much to say about the story collection, other than it's very complete. There are several classics, by big-name authors: Updike, Carver ('Popular Mechanics' is one of my old faves), Hemingway. Pretty much something for everyone, and you may well find something that you wouldn't normally look for.

Ray Bradbury's "I See You Never" is fairly traditional short story-like, and one of my favorites in this collection, but "A Questionnaire for Rudolph Gordon", which cleverly played with the childhood and the idea/concept of parents and memory, was not at all like most things called story—it's literally a questionnaire. And then there's "Class Notes", also nontraditional, but I got nothing from it at all.

Perhaps my favorite part of this collection is the "Afterwords" that includes discussions on the meaning of the form (whatever you want to call it) and, for that matter, what it actually *is*. Not least of all, what to call it. I love reading authors' more off-the-cuff writings. Here, these very short analyses (if you can call them that) feel almost like a conversation, not too formal, like they're working it out as they write.
