The Best American Short Stories 2017

Meg Wolitzer (Editor) , Heidi Pitlor (Editor)

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"[A] terrific and surprising collection of tales by a diverse group of writers . . . Count on them to transport you." —*USA Today*

The Best American Short Stories 2017 will be edited by Meg Wolitzer, who is "almost crushingly insightful; she doesn't just mine the contemporary mind, she seems to invade it" (*San Francisco Chronicle*), making her the perfect person to helm this literary time capsule of a collection.

The Best American Short Stories 2017 Details

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Lis says

I liked Jess Walter's story in this so much I wrote him a fan letter about it. He wrote me back. It made my year.

Maxwell says

I say this when rating any short story collection or anthology, and that is: it's difficult. Because in a collection like this, featuring 20 stories from 20 authors, there are bound to be ones you love and ones you hate and some in between. And this one is no exception. Overall I found this collection to be not as collectively strong and compelling as last year's, but the ones I liked, I really liked. I would say there were 8 standout stories for me, 10 that were average, and 2 I disliked. And as always, I've found a few new-to-me authors to go look up and read stuff from now which is always a joy of reading these collections.

My favorite stories were (top faves in bold—go read these if you can!):
-**"Famous Actor"** by Jess Walter
-"Last Day on Earth" by Eric Puchner
-"Ugly" by Mary Gordon
-**"Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain"** by Danielle Evans
-"Campoamor" by Patricia Engel
-"Hog for Sorrow" by Leopoldine Core
-**"God's Work"** by Kevin Canty
-"Are We Not Men?" by T.C. Boyle

Bruno says

Maidencane - Chad B. Anderson ★★
Are We Not Men - T. C. Boyle ★★★
God's Work - Kevin Canty ★★★
A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness - Jai Chakrabarti ★★
Arcadia - Emma Cline ★★★★
Hog for Sorrow - Leopoldine Core ★★
Campoamor - Patricia Engel ★★★★
Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain - Danielle Evans ★★
Ugly - Mary Gordon ★★★★
The Midnight Zone - Lauren Groff ★
The Chicane - Amy Hempel ★
Tally - Noy Holland ★
Gabe Dove - Sonya Larson ★
Let's Go to the Videotape - Fiona Maazel ★
Ancient Rome - Kyle McCarthy ★

Last Day on Earth - Eric Puchner ★
Novostroïka - Maria Reva ★★★
Telemachus - Jim Shepard ★
Gender Studies - Curtis Sittenfeld ★★★
Famous Actor - Jess Walter ★★

Anne Earney says

I love that the stories in this year's collection are mostly by women, but the story that stood out most to me was "Telemachus" by Jim Shepard, about a British submarine in WWII. Well, about characters on the submarine, but it's the sub itself that sticks in my memory.

I also enjoyed "Gabe Dove," "Hog for Sorrow," and "Novostroika."

Tyler says

Such a strong collection of writing, bravo to guest editor Meg Wolitzer! What I love most about short stories, especially great ones, is the ability to generate a reaction from the reader in a much smaller framework. It was a joy to discover new authors through this collection as well! Some of my favorites include:

"Gender Studies" - Curtis Sittenfeld
"The Midnight Zone" - Lauren Groff
"Arcadia" - Emma Cline
"Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain" - Danielle Evans
"Gabe Dove" - Sonya Larson
"Famous Actor" - Jess Walter

Daryl says

I'm a sucker for this series of anthologies, and I've read more by a number of authors I first learned about in the short story series. This one got off to a slow start for me. I very much liked the opening story by T.C. Boyle ("Are We Not Men?"), though I've been sort of meh about a lot of his stuff. Then I didn't much love anything in the collection until "Ugly" by Mary Gordon, which I liked a lot. Apparently authors in the last half of the alphabet really did the trick for me in 2016, as I dog-eared these stories after that early drought:

- "Ancient Rome" by Kyle McCarthy
- "Last Day on Earth" by Erick Puchner
- "Novostroika" by Maria Reva
- "Gender Studies" by Curtis Sittenfeld
- "Famous Actor" by Jess Walter

None of these made me think "I must go out right away and acquire all of this author's work" but I found these worthwhile or fun. Others in the collection ranged from "pretty good" to "meh" to "well 25 minutes sure did go by while I read that."

Michael says

These collections are highly subjective, but I really connected with editor Meg Wolitzer's emphasis on stories that feature a "turn" (not a "twist!") and post-election anxiety. Out of the 20 stories in this collection, I can honestly say there were only about 4 I didn't jibe with. But there are riches aplenty, including:

"Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain" — a story I erroneously assumed would be Arthurian in nature, but which is a contemporary tale of fear and loss over the course of a color-coded wedding weekend.

"Gabe Dove" — a woman is thrown back into the dating pool and is forced to evaluate her prejudices.

"Let's Go to the Videotape" — a widowed father and his son make it big on America's Funniest Home Videos, leading both to lean into social media as a form of grief therapy.

"Gender Studies" — a professor of the titular subject has a one night stand with a Trump supporter.

"Famous Actor" — another one night stand that mixes hilarious film criticism with genuine pathos.

Many others, like "Maidencane," "A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness," "Hog for Sorrow," "Ugly," "The Midnight Zone," and "Last Day on Earth" are just as distinct and memorable. My favorite collection since 2012.

John says

A very solid collection of stories. They are robust and full of action. There is also a lot of sex, which seems a stark change to some years collections, which are Puritan.

As always, these are graded on a tough curve.

Maidencane by Chad Anderson - 4: An interesting choice to use the second person to tell the story. It works.
God's Work by Kevin Canty – 5 : Wonderful! So much packed into a little story. Great, complex characters making powerful choices. What else is going on in Clara's life?
Are We Not Men? by T C Boyle - 4: Fun! A wonderful jab where society seems to be going. Maybe a touch too intricate.
A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness by Jai Chakrabarti - 3.5: A sad and powerful story. Struggled with the first half.
Arcadia by Emma Cline - 3.5: Good, just missed being great. A small something lacking.
Hog for Sorrow by Leopoldine Core - 4.5: Depressing as hell, but very good.
Campoamor by Patricia Engle - 3:5: Another near miss.
Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain by Danielle Evans - 4: The characters are wonderful, but the story takes a couple of leaps that I could not follow.
Ugly by Mary Gordon - 4: Didn't turn out the way I wanted, but I liked it.
The Midnight Zone by Lauren Groff - 3: The writing was overly complex and did not pull me in.
The Chicane by Amy Hempel - 2.5: A miss for me.

Tally by Noy Holland - 2.5: So very short, with little to offer.
Gabe Dove by Sonya Larson - 3: A nice story, but nothing special.
Let's Go to the Videotape by Fiona Maazel - 4: Sad and poignant.
Ancient Rome by Kyle McCarthy - 4: Another story very reflective on the culture today.
Last Day on Earth by Eric Puchner - 3: In the middle I thought it was going to become great, but didn't
Novostroika by Maria Reva - 4: Wonderfully absurd.
Telemachus by Jim Shepard - 3: Interesting circumstances, but a bit ordinary.
Gender Studies by Curtis Sittenfeld - 4: Very timely. Captures 2016 very well.
Famous Actor by Jess Walter - 4.5: Deep and satisfying.

Andy Miller says

It's a tradition for me to look forward to reading the annual collection of best American short stories. It exposes me to styles and genres I don't normally read and balances stories from favorite, established authors and new writers that I haven't heard of before. I often end up ordering books from new authors that are introduced to me in this collection. This year I'm ordering books by Danielle Evans after reading "Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain" in the 2017 collection.

The story is told by Rena, who travels the world as a world traveler. She comes to a small town for a wedding themed on Noah's ark, where the bridal party dresses the entire weekend in a color code and the bridge and groom come from fundamentally religious families. Rena is only invited because she had met the groom in Africa years earlier and famously took a photo of him in the midst of their being stranded in a country due to political unrest. The story begins with a patronizing tone from Rena, but as it proceeds the wedding party characters develop depth. The reason for Rena's disdain for fairly tale weddings is revealed in flashbacks to her sister's fairy tale wedding and the sister being shot by the groom shortly after that wedding. The story continues with a drunken hookup, a groom's cold feet and a very nice surprise from the bride at the end.

"Are we not men" by TC Boyle is an example of a story I would not ordinarily read, I so dislike dystopian stories. But this story set in a future where genetic engineering has created pets, grass, and even kids made to order focuses on universal human themes of fidelity, honesty, and loneliness.

"God's Work" has a unique perspective. It is told by a teen age Jehovah's Witness who loves his mom and is true to his faith even when embarrassed by it, even when he longs for the normal life of the other high school students. Things take a turn when his mom go the door of the home of an attractive girl from his high school who would be considered out of his league. But surprisingly, she shows interest in the church, going to church meetings and adapting to the church's modest dress codes. The sad ending makes the boy's Jehovah Witness's life seem enviable.

"Arcadia" is set on an organic farm that is run by a brother and sister and told from the perspective of the sister's live in boyfriend. The sister had essentially been raised by her brother who suggested the boyfriend move in and work on the farm. The sister starts attending community college and tries to develop a normal life in contrast to the anything but normal relationship between brother and sister.

"Hog for Sorrow" paints a realistic perspective from a top tier college drop out who has turned to prostitution, partly for money and partly for an escape from earlier life. The emptiness of the lifestyle and the johns who buy sex is expertly shown.

The ending of "Ugly" is surprising and arguably disappointing. A young HR exec for an growing national company leaves her Manhattan home to go to a branch in a small Midwestern city to fix some personnel issues. Her initial dislike of being away from Manhattan and her boyfriend and being in a provincial town slowly gives way to an appreciation for the town, a new friendship, and a developing taste for "real" furniture and "real" beauty. At the end of the assignment her condescending boyfriend drives to the town to pick her

up and allows her to compare the two lifestyles.

"Let's go to the Videotape" starts with a sympathetic portrayal of a single dad raising his son who is still suffering from injuries suffered in the accident that killed the wife and mother. The dad enters a cute videotape of his son in a tv contest and with the videotape's success, the dad seems to slowly lose sight of what had been important in raising his son.

"Novostrokia" is a stark story that uses an apartment building whose heating needs fixed as a way to show the nightmare of living in a bureaucratically corrupt, decaying Communist run Eastern European country of the past.

My second favorite story in this collection was "Gender Studies" about a feminist professor going to a conference to meet with other professors of Gender studies. On the cab ride to the hotel she meets a young, Trump loving man who represents so many things the professor abhors. But a lost license and bad judgment leads to a sexual interlude between the two against the back drop of her conference and feminist study friends. The incident shows more nuance to each character than the stereotypes that start the story

There are other great stories in this collection which I highly recommend

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Courtney says

I loved this collection, curated by the ever-fabulous Meg Wolitzer, and was especially delighted to see inclusion one of my favorites, Mary Gordon.

Andrea says

Favs from this one: Lauren's Groff's "The Midnight Zone," Sonya Larson's "Gabe Dove," Mary Gordon's "Ugly" and Maria Reva's "Novostroika."

Alan says

excellent so far, dipped in and read Canty's God's Work, Chakrabarti's A Small Sacrifice for Enormous Happiness, Groff's The Midnight Zone, and Holland's Tally. Great stuff...

...Not all stories were 5 star but there was enough of a hit rate to give it 5 overall. Highlights for me were Danielle Evans' 'Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain' which was glorious, The aforementioned Groff - really gripping, Maria Reva's funny, hard to take in account of living in post Soviet Ukraine, Curtiss Sittenfeld's sardonic tale of a Gender Studies tutor's encounter with a Trump supporter, and Jess Walter's fabulous 'Famous Actor'.

Haley says

I really am a fan of the Best American Short Stories series - it's nice to read a review of the year's stories (especially from publications that I otherwise wouldn't access), I always discover new authors to read, and the changing annual guest editor gives each edition a unique lens. In this case, I don't think that what pleases or interests me in a short story aligns with what pleases/interests guest editor Meg Wolitzer in a story. While

I found something thrilling and had strong positive reactions to the majority of the stories in last year's collection, most of the stories in this year's edition left me feeling very "eh."

My favorite story by far in this edition was "Ugly" by Mary Gordon (published in the Yale Review), a stunning story of aesthetics and identity that I found absolutely heartbreaking. I also very much enjoyed the stories by Lauren Groff ("The Midnight Zone") and Curtis Sittenfeld ("Gender Studies"), both of which are available online via the New Yorker. (Groff and Sittenfeld are both authors I have read previously and enjoyed). While Sittenfeld's story (about a one night stand with a Trump supporting van driver) didn't impact me emotionally, I loved loved loved it intellectually for the reminder that opposing partisans are people too. The story that I disliked the most was T.C. Boyle's "Are We Not Men?", which I found to be a trite commentary on gene-editing technology.

The other stories I liked included "Gabe Dove" by Sonya Larson, "Richard York Gave Battle in Vain" by Danielle Evans, "Tally" by Noy Holland, and "Ancient Rome" by Kyle McCarthy.

Pete says

All but one captivated me. Okay, maybe two. One I found unreadable. But 18 of the 20 I found so very unique, these believable slices of life, each so different from one another. This series always seems to reinspire my love for the short story, a love that I discovered only a few years ago.

Mary Soderstrom says

My family always gets me the latest version of this venerable series for Christmas. I always read the selection, but I must say that in recent years I've been disappointed. The stories just didn't speak to me, and I began to wonder if this was due to my changing tastes, the whims of the guest editor or a lack of good stories being published.

But this year, I'm delighted. So far I've read four of them (they're so good that I'm rationing them, one a night) and they have been excellent. This is doubly a surprise because the guest editor is Meg Wolitzer, whose novel The Interestings I found tedious. The problem with it, I think, is that it is too long, but that's another story.

To get back to the stories that Ms. Wolitzer selected here, however: so far they are varied, wonderfully written in several voices, and truly interesting. Looking forward to this evening to read the next.