



The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2009

Laura Furman (editor), Viet Dinh (Contributor)

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A collection of the twenty best contemporary short stories selected by series editor Laura Furman from hundreds of literary magazines, **The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2009** features unforgettable tales in settings as diverse as post-war Vietnam, a luxurious seaside development in Cape Town, an Egyptian desert village, and a permanently darkened New York City. Also included are essays from the eminent jurors on their favorite stories, observations from the winners on what inspired them, and an extensive resource list of magazines.

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From Reader Review The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2009 for online ebook

Rebecca says

Loved "The Order of Things", not a fan of Slate's "Purple Bamboo Park" - her expat eyes miss a lot of Beijing.

Karima says

The award was first presented in 1918 and funded by the Society of Arts and Sciences.[1][2] As of 2012, the series editor chooses twenty short stories, each one an O. Henry Prize story. All stories originally written in the English language and published in an American or Canadian periodical are eligible for consideration. Three jurors are appointed annually. The jurors receive the twenty prize stories in manuscript form, with no identification of author or publication. Each juror, acting independently, chooses a short story of special interest and merit, and comments on that story.

The goal of the annual publication of The O. Henry Prize Stories is to strengthen the art of the short story. 20 stories are picked by three jurors from a variety of periodicals. All stories are either from the States or Canada. I got this collection because one of the jurors was Anthony Doerr I was a bit miffed by some of the selections and couldn't help but wonder what the criteria was that won them inclusion.

Most were not memorable, even though (possibly) well-written. A few that I WILL remember are :

- ~"This is Not Your City" by Caitlin Horrocks
- ~"And We Will Be Here" by Paul Yoon
- ~"Wildwood" by Junot Diaz

Harley says

Oh goody! Another annual series. Yesterday I went to Henderson's Books and bought two more volumes, 2006 and 1997.

It's interesting that these selections don't seem to overlap with the Best American Short Stories selections. So far in checking the table of contents of the three volumes I have, I've only run across one.

The most interesting story here is the Paul Theroux "Twenty-two Stories" because that's what it is. It's like a collection of microfiction, all the stories suggesting much more. It has me thinking about a "story" of my own that I might work on putting together.

I also enjoyed "Icebergs," a story placed in South Africa, and there's coincidentally a Nadine Gordimer story. "Darkness" is nicely odd, and "An Ordinary Soldier of the Queen" is decidedly so.

Laura says

Not a bad edition of the annual collection, but this is not one of the O. Henry Prize's best efforts. Several of the stories are very fine -- the standouts are "An Ordinary Soldier of the Queen" by Graham Joyce; "Icebergs" by Alistair Morgan; "Tell Him about Brother John" by Manual Munoz; and "Twenty-Two Stories" by Paul Theroux. But many of them left me either cold, shrugging my shoulders, or skipping them after reading the first third or so. Really, none of the stories submitted to the jury was any better than "The House Behind a Weeping Cherry," Ha Jin's middling effort here? I find that hard to believe. And don't even get me started on "The Bell Ringer" by John Burnside, a prolix, static affair that was slightly less interesting than a reading of the P-Q section of the Queens phone book. (I know, because I actually read the P-Q section of the Queens phone book right after I finished the Burnside story, just to perk me up a bit, and it worked like a charm.)

Anyhow, not a waste of time, but nothing that shouldn't be missed, either.

Melissa says

I enjoy reading short stories to indulge in more of the work by authors I like as well as to discover my next favorite writer. That being said, this year's collection left me a little lukewarm. I thought about abandoning it, but didn't think that seemed fair. (Kind of like when you're in school and you have to do a group project, and there are a few kids who pull their weight and have great stuff to offer and others ... well, not so much. The whole group shouldn't be judged on a few, and that's how I feel about this.)

It's a very multicultural collection. The 20 stories contained within are literally all over the map – from Egypt, to Cape Town, to war zones (there are several stories about war), to Washington State. I will confess to not having a dearth of multi-cultural reading in my repertoire, something I am not necessarily proud of and which I am trying to remedy by trying to broaden my literary horizons. (Another reason why I didn't want to abandon the book.) So, it is possible that my personal unfamiliarity with reading about certain places or cultures, or both, might have come into play regarding my appreciation of the stories, and I admit that.

That being said, I did like several of the stories, especially:

“The Nursery” by Kristen Sundberg Lunstrom
“Tell Him About Brother John” by Manual Munoz
“This is Not Your City” by Caitlin Horrocks

(maybe I should have just read the stories beginning with the letter T?)

“The House Behind a Weeping Cherry” by Ha Jin
“Twenty-Two Stories” by Paul Theroux

(damn, that “t” thing is really kind of weird, now that I look at the titles!)

My favorite line among all the lines in these stories comes from Andrew Sean Greer's story, “Darkness”:

“Astounding how life is, how it will shift ever so slightly and reveal something in the fold of its garment that

you hadn't noticed before, something there all along, how it will turn just like a person turns and show you a face you once had memorized amid the chatter of a tedious party, memorized as if for a test, and here it comes, years after you expected it: the test."

A nice bonus to this collection, as with others in this series, is the author commentaries at the end. They explain the origins of the stories and the inspiration behind them, which is always fun to read (at least, it is to me), and there's usually a little biographical info on the authors. (For example, "Tell Him About Brother John" started from a comment that a homeless man said to Mr. Munoz, proving that writing inspiration can be found anywhere and from anybody. And, thanks to the back section I learned that one of the authors lives within 45 minutes of my house!) There are also lists of the author's previous work and where his or her stories have been published.

With a few exceptions, many of the authors included in The Pen/O. Henry Prize Stories 2009 were new to me. Graham Joyce, Kristen Sundberg Lundstrom, E.V. Slate, John Burnside, Mohan Sikka, L.E. Miller, Alistair Morgan, Roger Nash, Manual Munoz, Caitlin Horrocks, Ha Jin, Paul Theroux, Judy Troy, Nadine Gordimer, Viet Dinh, Karen Brown, Marisa Silver, Paul Yoon, Andrew Sean Greer, and Junot Diaz all have stories in this collection.

If you're not into short stories or the works of the authors above, this may not be the collection for you. (I wouldn't recommend it for someone new to the genre or who wants to read more short stories.) But, if you enjoy the work of any of the authors above, then it is worth picking up a copy of this (borrow it from the library) to read their work.

Who knows, maybe there will even be a new favorite discovered in the process.

Wesley says

This book is a compendium of short stories from various author whose genres range from comedy to drama. I really enjoyed this book because of the fact that it allowed for wiggle room for the reader. By this I mean that if I did not like a certain story in the book, I could just find another one that suited my interests. Furthermore, I found most of the stories really easy to get into because of the fact that they were short enough to keep your attention and the plots were complex in their brevity. I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys short stories or who finds it hard to get into a novel due to its length.

Katie says

Furman has chosen stories that take place in such exotic locales as Africa, Asia, Europe, Scandinavia, and various borderlands. But an exotic setting is no excuse for the fact that in some of these stories *nothing really happens*. Thank goodness for those with physical action, such as the selections from Ha Jin, Andrew Sean Greer, and Caitlin Horrocks (who just happens to be a friend...hooray, Caitlin!).

As for the jury selections; while I appreciated the haunting, Shakespearean pacing of Graham Joyce's piece, chosen by both A.S. Byatt and Tim O'Brien, I was viscerally joy-infused by Anthony Doerr's pick, which featured a truly unique and energetic voice written to perfection by Junot Diaz.

David says

i'm not crazy about this years edition. it seems like in the selection process of this year's award winners preference was given to stories that deal with timely political issues. not that this is necessarily a bad thing, but political story after political story kills the variety that i look for in story collections and gets a little dull. reading this begins to feel like being beaten in the head by some leftist moral authority. maybe next year keith olbermann and rachel maddow can edit the volume... probably wouldn't turn out much different than this years edition.

Lacey N. says

The Pen/O.Henry Prize Stories are twenty short stories from literary magazines as well established as The New Yorker to the lesser-known Grain and Five Points. It's always risky to pick up a collection of short stories by various authors because, unlike collections by a single author, the quality across the collection isn't guaranteed. Different writers, different styles, different ways of telling a story can mean a wildly varied hodgepodge similar to those Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Jellybeans: one handful tastes like delicious cotton candy, popcorn at first and then you realize you're also eating the unappetizing snot and dirt beans too. Fear not: from Junot Diaz's lingering "Wildwood," about a daughter coming to terms with herself and her mother; to Andrew Sean Greer's "Darkness," about what is burned, and therefore lost, in a postapocalyptic world; to Marisa Silver's "The Visitor," about a young woman and her grandmother working to repair failed relationships, these stories are undeniably terrific from start to finish.

Thiszine says

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--review by Lacey Dunham

Maureen says

The Junot Diaz story was excellent, as expected. The rest were a mixed bag, but all were well-constructed with unique point of view.

Adele says

Many of this year's crop of stories are incredibly well-done and worthy of their place in this book. I wasn't in love with the prize-prize story (one that two of the three editors, AS Byatt and Tim O'Brien chose as their favorite) Graham Joyce's *An Ordinary Soldier of the Queen*. I mean, of course O'Brien picked it because it's about a British soldier who's suffered in the war in Iraq, and is possibly crazy and delusional (or no, wait! maybe he's really the only sane person left!) The story felt very done-before, by O'Brien and others, and it bothers me that Joyce himself hasn't actually been to war-- a distinction between him and O'Brien, which lends the latter credibility. Or maybe I just don't like war stories. I don't think I do. Often times I get bored, or, as in the case with Joyce's story, it's just a little hard to take from someone who hasn't experienced war firsthand. If you haven't actually experienced something, to some degree, it's just derivative.

My favorite stories were *Icebergs* (Alistair Morgan) *This is Not Your City* (Caitlin Horrocks) *Twenty-Two Stories* (Paul Theroux) *Darkness* (Andrew Sean Greer) and *Wildwood* (Junot Diaz). These stories share compelling narrative, are beautifully told, and all made me feel like I was reading something new, unlike something I'd heard before. Short story reading should be effortless-- it's not like tackling a gargantuan novel that starts off slow but gets better, and there's payoff for the dull bits. When I read a short story, I want to be taken by the first sentence, not notice how long it takes me to read, and be satisfied yet a little sad when it's over. The five stories mentioned meet this criteria in vastly different ways, and are the best in the book.

Tiny Pants says

I keep not reviewing books in a timely manner, so I'm not 100% sure on the exact date I finished this one. But after a decent streak of really enjoying annual short story anthologies once again, this O.Henry was kind of a dud. A lot that was familiar from other places, and nothing that I was really excited to re-read (though I did, being a habitual completer of tasks... er, non-dissertative tasks, that is).

Probably "Isabel's Daughter" (Karen Brown) was my favorite, because I always like that sort of creepy, dismal Americana. "This is Not Your City" has that flavor as well, though in a different way. I also liked Paul Theroux's "Twenty-two Stories," though it felt less like what it claimed to be than like a bunch of ideas for short stories that never got written (like when you hand in a piece about your own procrastination/writer's block in a creative writing class).

Mostly though I just wasn't feeling this one. Too many I'd read before ("Wildwood", "Darkness", "The House Behind a Weeping Cherry", "The Bell Ringer"), and too many others I more or less hated the protagonist or simply found the damned thing too depressing ("Purple Bamboo Park", "The Camera and the Cobra", e.g.). I don't know.

Starry says

I love short story collections that draw from many authors: they showcase innovative ways to shake up the story form, and each story is deliciously different from the one before it. This collection included some memorable pieces but also had several that didn't seem worthy of a writing prize. I especially liked Paul

Theroux's "Twenty-two Stories", Graham Joyce's "An Ordinary Soldier of the Queen", and Junot Díaz's "Wildwood".

Daniel Clausen says

There is no better way to learn about the craft of short story writing than to read some great ones. Great efforts all around. The standouts were "Nursery" "The Bell Ringer" "Icebergs" "Darkness" and "Wildwood."
