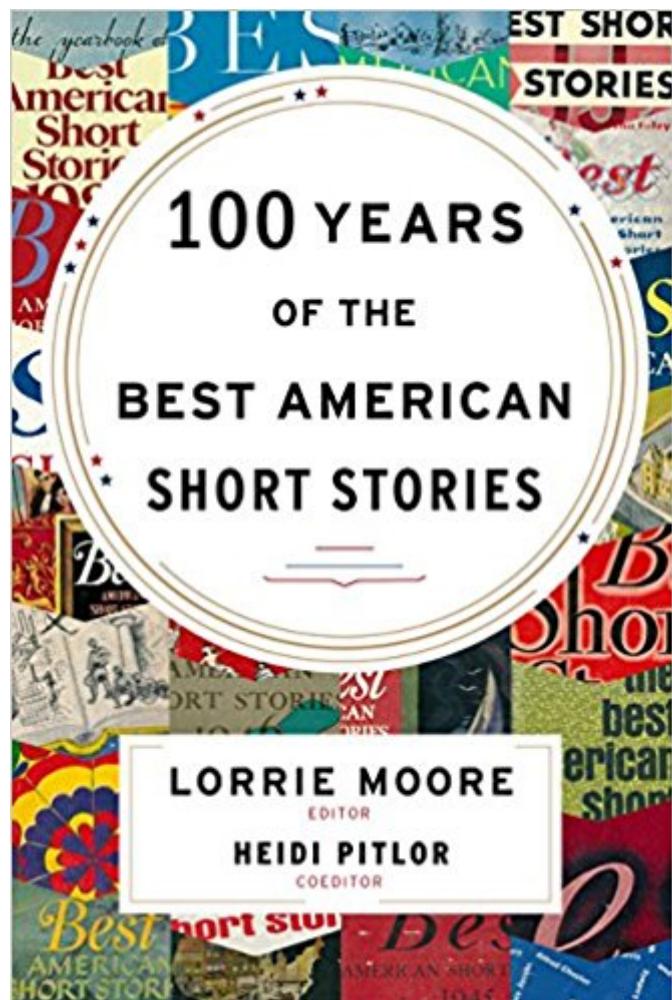


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100 Years Of The Best American Short Stories



Synopsis

The Best American Short Stories® is the longest running and best-selling series of short fiction in the country. For the centennial celebration of this beloved annual series, master of the form Lorrie Moore selects forty stories from the more than two thousand that were published in previous editions. Series editor Heidi Pitlor recounts behind-the-scenes anecdotes and examines, decade by decade, the trends captured over a hundred years. Together, the stories and commentary offer an extraordinary guided tour through a century of literature with what Moore calls “all its wildnesses of character and voice.” These forty stories represent their eras but also stand the test of time. Here is Ernest Hemingway’s first published story and a classic by William Faulkner, who admitted in his biographical note that he began to write “as an aid to love-making.” Nancy Hale’s story describes far-reaching echoes of the Holocaust; Tillie Olsen’s story expresses the desperation of a single mother; James Baldwin depicts the bonds of brotherhood and music. Here is Raymond Carver’s “minimalism,” a term he disliked, and Grace Paley’s “secular Yiddishkeit.” Here are the varied styles of Donald Barthelme, Charles Baxter, and Jamaica Kincaid. From Junot Díaz to Mary Gaitskill, from ZZ Packer to Sherman Alexie, these writers and stories explore the different things it means to be American. Moore writes that the process of assembling these stories allowed her to look “thrillingly not just at literary history but at actual history – the cries and chatterings, silences and descriptions of a nation in flux.” 100 Years of The Best American Short Stories® is an invaluable testament, a retrospective of our country’s ever-changing but continually compelling literary artistry. LORRIE MOORE, after many years as a professor of creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is now the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. Moore has received honors for her work, among them the Irish Times International Fiction Prize and a Lannan Foundation fellowship, as well as the PEN/Malamud Award and the Rea Award for her achievement in the short story. Her most recent novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, was short-listed for the 2010 Orange Prize for Fiction and for the PEN/Faulkner Award, and her most recent story collection, *Bark*, was short-listed for the Story Prize and the Frank O’Connor Award. HEIDI PITLOR is a former senior editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and has been the series editor of The Best American Short Stories® since 2007. She is the author of the novels *The Birthdays* and *The Daylight Marriage*.

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Customer Reviews

This collection of short stories proclaims to be the best American short stories of the past 100 years. It takes a lot of hubris to cull and choose stories published over a century and state, with surety, that these surpass all others in quality and attributes. The book is edited by Lorrie Moore, whose short stories I sometimes gravitate towards and sometimes don't connect with. The co-editor is Heidi Pitlor who edits an annual short story collection. On the whole, the stories selected for this collection are good, some are superb, and others left me shaking my head in puzzlement as to why they were included. It's easy to pull things apart but, for this review, I will focus on those stories I loved, some of which I may have read previously and others that are new to me but I will never forget. The collection is arranged chronologically and there is a short description of each time period with a focus on the types of stories that were prominent during that era. I found this helpful and learned a lot about what was published and who might have been influenced by whom. There are a total of 39 stories, the first published in 1917 and the last published in 2014. Of the 39, seven stand out high above the rest. A few of these are old friends and some of them I have never read before. Edna Ferber's story, 'The Day Old Dog', published in 1917, is very different from other stories of hers that I've read. It tells about a man's deathbed promise to his mother and, because of this promise - to take care of his sisters until they marry, he loses his own chance to marry and have a family. He continues to have dreams of the life he may have led but they dissipate as time forces him head to reality. Nancy Hale published 'Those Are As Brothers' in 1942. I had never heard of her before reading this story. Written in the aftermath of World War II, the concept of shared terror is

explored, along with the power of strength and connection. James Baldwin published 'Sonny's Blues' in 1958. It is about two African-American brothers who grow up in Harlem and appear to go in very separate directions after World War II. What touched me most in this story is its examination of the connections made without words - some through music, some through the collective unconscious, and some through inner promises we make to ourselves. Mona Simpson published 'Lawns' in 1986. It is a brilliant exploration of the impact of sexual abuse on an adolescent girl. As a clinical social worker, I have not read anything that comes close to examining the inner world of a child/woman trying to make sense of an irrational life. In 1995, Jamaica Kincaid published a story called 'Xuela'. In it, the birth date of an infant from Dominica corresponds to the day of her mother's death. The child spends her life wondering what her mother might have been like, what is the true essence of her father, and what comprises her own sense of self. 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank' is one of my favorite short stories. Published in 2012 by Nathan Englander, it addresses a 'ritual game' that exists in many Jewish families. In this game, the family discusses who would be entrusted with their care and the care of their children if the Nazis ever came to power again. In this story, two couples get together and the game leads to a startling realization for one of them. 'Diem Perdidi' by Julie Otsuka, published in 2012 is another one of my favorite stories. 'Diem Perdidi' means 'I lost the day' in Latin. This story is the most poignant and poetic in the collection. Narrated in first person, the reader is privy to the losses and gifts of dementia. The stories in this book cover a variety of themes and topics. There does not appear to be a political bent, which I appreciate, and the 'political correctness' which is present in so much of today's collections does not appear to be present. For this, too, I am also thankful. It is obvious that the editors spent much time and thought choosing these stories and there are some gems in this collection.

Lorrie Moore and Heidi Pitlor who compiled this collection have undertaken a rather ambitious task: To select a representation of presumably the best stories of the last 100 years. The task becomes even more daunting when you consider the college textbook industry offers dozens of similar anthologies. My definition of an amazing story is that in one reading it has the weight of a novel, the complexity, density, and texture that you might find in a 300-page book. Such stories are evident in this collection: 'The Enormous Radio' by John Cheever, 'The Whole World Knows' by Eudora Welty, 'Stand Here Ironing' by Tillie Olsen, 'Sonny's Blues' by Sonny Baldwin, 'The Conversion of the Jews' by Philip Roth, 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' by Flannery O'Connor, 'Pigeon Feathers' by John Updike, 'Will You Please Be

Quiet, Please? by Raymond Carver, "Friend of My Youth" by Alice Munro, "Communist" by Richard Ford, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank" by Nathan Englander, "The Semplica-Girl Diaries" by George Saunders. There were some glaring omissions. For a collection that represents the last 100 years, I'd want to see "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor, "The Rich Brother" by Tobias Wolff, and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" by Raymond Carver. It seems the canon stories of some of the authors have been omitted in place of lesser-known ones, perhaps because the editors either thought their story selections were superior and/or they wanted the book to have some freshness to it and not simply recycle the greatest hits. I think their strategy is successful. The collection is both fresh and contains dozens of stories that have the weight of a novel inside them. Perhaps Lorrie Moore is too modest to include one of her own stories in this collection. She needs to be in here. One of those novel stories I defined earlier is embodied by her masterpiece "Real Estate" from her collection *Birds of America*. I wish that story were in this collection. In any event, this is a very successful compilation and I would consider using it for one of my college classes.

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