

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SHORT FICTION

As Jorge Luis Borges once said, "Unlike the novel, a short story may be, for all purposes, essential." I began to collect books of short stories by modern and contemporary American authors during my sophomore year in high school, when my English teacher urged me to read a short piece of fiction written by Harold Brodkey. I found the piece, "Sentimental Education," intriguing enough to warrant purchasing the collection of short stories from which it was drawn, *First Love and Other Sorrows*. I read the other stories in the book over that Christmas break, some more than once, and felt a great deal of satisfaction afterwards because it seemed as if I had been able to firmly grasp each piece. Indeed, I found the stories to be vividly etched in my mind, for I could recall the various characters' names, the different settings, and what I determined to be possible thematic points. Due to the heightened sense of accomplishment I felt after having read these stories, I immediately decided to try to uncover more works like them.

Coinciding with my discovery of Brodkey's talent was a growing interest in my own writing, and the genre of short fiction to express it. As a freshman and sophomore in high school I had participated in several workshops in play-writing sponsored by Denver's Center for the Performing Arts, but the program, while enjoyable, had left me somewhat discouraged. I found both of the plays I had written in the workshops unfinished, evolving into three acts and then four, spiraling on and on until I realized neither would ever be completed.

While I found my interest in writing growing, I was having difficulty discovering a medium in which I could express myself. I needed to confine myself within a genre which would demand discipline and focus, characteristics all good fiction possesses. Brodkey's book gave me an idea: I would abandon play-writing and try to write short stories instead.

As my interest in writing short pieces of fiction has grown, so has my collection of short stories written by twentieth-century American authors. While English writers—James Joyce and Graham Swift among them—have of course contributed greatly to the genre of short fiction, when I began to take my own writing seriously I decided to concentrate on buying those collections put together by modern and contemporary American writers. I found that, as a fellow-American, I could more easily understand the worlds they were describing and the sensibilities with which their prose was imbued than I could the views of writers from different cultures and distant time periods. Thus I found my own writing aided more by the study of writers whose experiences were like my own.

For the remainder of my high school days I asked English teachers for recommendations of good short-story collections, and began to read the *New York Times Book Review*, which I found gave ample attention to those writers producing novellas and short stories. By graduation I found that I had amassed roughly thirty books in my field of interest, among them two by André Dubus, *The Times Were Never So Bad* and *The Last Worthless Evening*, John Updike's *Trust Me*, Peter Cameron's *One Way or Another*, and *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean. I enjoyed the short fiction of Raymond Carver the most and made a point of obtaining all of his collections which had been published: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, *Furious Seasons*, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and *Cathedral*. Not coincidentally, I have found Carver's work to have influenced my own writing the most.

As a freshman in the Creative Writing Program I found myself constantly encouraged by my instructors to read short stories written by contemporary authors who were being published and anthologized at that time, people like Tobias Wolff, Amy Hempel, and Margaret Atwood. I would mark those stories that appealed to me and

then go out and buy the collections from which they had been drawn. In this manner I obtained Joyce Carol Oates' *The Assassination*, David Leavitt's *Family Territory*, T. Coraghessan Boyle's *Whiskey River and Other Stories*, *Rock Springs* by Richard Ford, and many more. Last summer I added the most significant book to my collection yet, a signed, limited edition of Raymond Carver's *Where I'm Calling From*, published shortly before his death in the summer of 1988. Over this past Christmas break I found a first edition (complete with a dust jacket) of Ernest

Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, and only a few weeks ago I bought a first edition of Miles Wilson's *Line of Fall*, which recently won the John Simmons Short Fiction Award given annually by the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

I have continued to take creative writing courses through this year and, by attending various readings and dipping into the anthologies and periodicals kept in the library at 185 Nassau Street, I have been able to find new avenues by which to determine my future purchases. While the potential value of many of my books is questionable, there is intrinsic worth in almost all of the works I have bought, for I feel each one helps my own writing in a certain way. I also feel confident that much of what I am purchasing, being in my mind of excellent literary worth, will in the future be of some material value as well. Even if this proves not to be the case, I regard my book collection with great affection, regardless of its monetary value. Collecting short fiction written by twentieth-century American authors has given me the ability not only to sharpen my own skills as a writer, but also to read much of what I buy. While I doubt that I would have the time to read novels not connected with my academic pursuits, I find it entirely feasible to sit down at the end of the day and read one or two short stories, often the title story of one of the books or a particular piece that has been noted in a complimentary review, all of which give me a good sense of how that writer presents his or her world. In this manner I have found my collection of books to be very accessible, not mere ornaments but vehicles for ideas and prose with which I feel an intimate connection.

As my collecting continues, I hope to expand the sources from which I learn of good new fiction, as well as increasing the number of works in my possession written by the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald — writers among this century's most influential innovators in American short fiction. I view my collection as one that needs to expand backwards in time, thereby gaining greater continuity so that it can truly stand as a trove which measures the evolution of a literary genre Americans have embraced with unparalleled affection. In this manner I hope my collection will one day dip into the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, when Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Stephen Crane were all establishing the discordant contributions for what was to begin the unending evolution of a distinctive American literary voice in short fiction. By widening the historical gamut of my collection I hope to enhance its value as a barometer of the development of an innovative literary genre. At the same time I am confident my book-buying pursuits will continue to enhance my own endeavors as a writer who, in following the tradition of American short fiction, is trying to work within the limitations imposed by an art form that insists that only the essential be mentioned.

— DOUGLAS TREVOR