

INTRODUCTION TO BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES OF 2012

By Tom Perrotta

When I was a little kid, there was only one pizzeria in my hometown of Garwood, New Jersey, an unassuming place called Nick's on North Avenue. The pizza was excellent, so good that it completely validated the breathtaking boast printed on the takeout box, alongside an illustration of an insanely proud, somewhat pudgy, presumably Italian chef: YOU'VE TRIED THE REST, NOW TRY THE BEST!

One day, though—I must have been seven or eight—my father decided to check out a pizzeria in Cranford, the next town over. I drove with him to pick up our order, and was shocked—incensed, really—to discover that this unfamiliar establishment had the audacity to make the exact same claim as Nick's.

“Hey, wait a minute,” I complained. “This can’t be the best. Nick’s is the best.”

“It’s a matter of opinion,” my father told me. “Nobody can say for sure which one’s better than the other.”

I was troubled by this explanation, especially when my father added that pretty much every pizzeria in the New York area used the same box, with the same goofy-looking chef and the same rhyming slogan on the cover. It was totally illogical, not to mention unfair to Nick’s, which I was pretty sure *was* the best pizza in the world. Though I had to admit, once we got home and started eating, that the pizza from Cranford was actually pretty tasty, and possibly even delicious.

Like the best pizza, an anthology of the *Best American Short Stories* is nothing if not a matter of opinion. In this particular case, the operative opinions are my own, though heavily influenced by those of Heidi Pitlor, the Series Editor, who selected the long list of stories that I then winnowed down to the twenty included in this volume.

So where, you might ask, do my opinions come from? What are the esthetic values underlying my decisions? I realize, of course, that not everyone’s dying to know. Many readers—maybe even most, I’m not going to kid myself—will skip

this introduction and head right to the stories themselves. It's possible that some of them have read my work and think they already have a pretty good idea of where I'm coming from. It's also possible that they've come to trust the Best American series, and don't worry too much about the tastes and biases of the individual editors. Or maybe they're just hungry to read some good fiction, and would prefer not to get bogged down in a discussion of pizza boxes and recent literary history. That's okay with me—I'm pretty sure they won't be disappointed. By any standard, this year's batch of stories is pretty damn good.

But let's just stipulate that you're reading this introduction because you do care about what went into the quixotic task of selecting the twenty *Best American Short Stories* out of the multitude published during the course of 2011. You may simply be curious, interested in getting to know your editor a little better (in which case, I'm flattered), but you may also be skeptical or even mildly hostile, wondering what gives me—gives anyone, for that matter—the right to impose his or her personal tastes on the American reading public.

Who, I hear you wondering, does this guy think he is?

Since you asked, let me start with the basics. I'm a straight, white, middle-aged guy from the suburbs, married with two kids. Kind of boring on paper, and maybe not that much more exciting in the flesh. Does that matter? If so, how much? To

what extent are my preferences as a reader determined by the boxes I check on a census form?

You tell me.

I'm not going to deny the importance of race or gender or age or sexual orientation, claim that I've somehow managed to transcend my circumstances, or achieve some zenlike state of detachment where these facts about me no longer count. I went to graduate school in the 1980s, absorbed my share of literary theory and identity politics. I understand that I'm always reading as a straight white man, even when I think I'm not or wish I wasn't, and that some cultural reflexes are so deeply ingrained we forget they're there. So it's entirely possible—inevitable, even—that my reactions and choices have been conditioned by unconscious biases, by *who I am* rather than by the objective qualities of the fiction I'm purporting to judge. If a critic suggests that this anthology reads like it was assembled by a heterosexual caucasian male born during the Kennedy administration, I would have to plead no contest, and throw myself on the mercy of the court.

But that can't be the whole story. A reader has to be more than sum of his or her demographically determined reflexes. Like most writers, I actually do possess a literary esthetic, a set of well-defined preferences that I bring to the table whenever I encounter a work of fiction. To give you an idea of where these

preferences originated, and how they function in real life, it might be helpful for me to talk a little about two of the most significant American writers of the past thirty years, Raymond Carver and David Foster Wallace.

I first read Carver in 1983. I was a senior in college, a working class kid at Yale, moving uneasily between what felt to me like two very different worlds. I knew I wanted to be a writer, but I was confused about my potential audience. Was I supposed to write for my professors, who seemed to think that Thomas Pynchon was the greatest living American novelist, or should I be writing for the people I'd grown up with, the ones whose stories I was hoping to someday tell? What about my parents, who hadn't gone to college, and hadn't even heard of Pynchon? Where did they fit in? These were the kinds of questions that were floating, half-formulated, in my mind when I picked up Carver's first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, and read the opening lines of the story, "Fat:"

I am sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita's
and I am telling her about it.
Here is what I tell her.
It is late of a slow Wednesday when Herb seats the fat
man at my station.

The story is short and cryptic, part workplace anecdote, part fable, about a melancholy compulsive eater gorging himself at a diner, and the strange compassion he elicits from his waitress, who is telling the story to an uncomprehending friend. Later that night, when the narrator's boyfriend—a heartless chef named Rudy—forces himself on her in bed, the narrator experiences an even deeper moment of connection with her overweight customer:

I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all.

It's hard for me to describe the excitement I felt when I read that story, and the ones that followed. It felt like Carver was offering an answer to my personal dilemma, proving it was possible to write sophisticated literary fiction about ordinary people in language that was both authentic and accessible. When I learned that Carver had written some of his stories while working as a night-shift janitor at a hospital, I decided that I'd found my role model, a true working-class hero.

Carver taught Creative Writing at Syracuse University, so that was where I went to graduate school two years later. Unfortunately for me, he retired right before I arrived, but I was lucky enough to work instead with Tobias Wolff, at the time an up-and-coming short story writer (he hadn't yet published *This Boy's Life*, the now-classic book that would make him famous and revitalize the genre of literary memoir). Fairly or not, Carver and Wolff were both closely associated with a literary movement known at the time as minimalism or Dirty Realism, a style that combined pared-down, plainspoken writing with hardscrabble subject matter. I had no doubt that it was the most exciting thing happening in American fiction, and was thrilled to be so close to the center of that particular universe.

During my time in grad school, the Syracuse English Department also happened to be a hotbed of Marxist and post-structuralist literary theory—Althusser, Lacan,

Derrida and the like—the kind of dense, jargon-filled criticism that seemed like a foreign language even after it had been translated into English. It was mind-boggling and comical at the same time, a supposedly revolutionary form of discourse that would have been utterly incomprehensible to the working-class people it aimed, in some mysterious way, to liberate. My exposure to this arcane academic dialect only deepened my commitment to the clarity and concision I found in Carver’s work, his willingness to speak in a language everyone could understand.

I left Syracuse after an eventful three years, equipped with a set of core beliefs about fiction that has remained with me ever since: I like stories written in plain, artful language about ordinary people. I’m wary of narrative experiments and excessive stylistic virtuosity, suspicious of writing that feels exclusive or elitist, targeted to readers with graduate degrees rather than the general public, whatever that means. I sometimes think of this as a blue-collar or populist aesthetic, but it’s probably better to think of it as democratic, part of an American vernacular tradition that includes Twain and Crane, Cather and Hemingway, Hammett and Chandler, and stretches all the way back to Emerson (“The roots of what is great and high must still be the common life”) and Whitman (“Nothing is better than simplicity”).

For the most part, I think these ideals have served me pretty well. They’ve helped guide and inspire my own writing—both my choice of subject matter and the

kinds of sentences I write—and focus my reading, too. But they’ve also caused me to misunderstand, or at least underestimate, writers who work from a different set of assumptions and values.

This was certainly the case with David Foster Wallace, now widely considered to be the most important writer of his (my) generation. When Wallace published his magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, in 1996—it was mostly written in Syracuse, by the way, that unlikeliest of literary meccas—I couldn’t help but see him as the anti-Carver, long-winded and erudite, more familiar with tennis camps and elite colleges than diners and hospitals. I found it all too easy to dismiss him as a self-indulgent postmodernist, a throwback to 1970s maximalists like Pynchon and Gaddis, the old guard that I believed Carver had supplanted. In some ways I was right: Wallace shared the outsized ambition, intellectual confidence, and stylistic boldness of his predecessors, their willingness to write exhausting, unapologetically cerebral novels that were vehicles for ideas rather than stories, riffs rather than characters. Unlike a lot of readers, I was irritated rather than charmed by the sprawling footnotes, Wallace’s refusal to let you forget his presence (or his genius) for even a page or two. To my mind, his postmodern pyrotechnics were the fictional equivalent of a rock-god guitar solo that goes on for so long you can’t even remember what song you’re listening to; all you can do is shake your head in weary, worshipful amazement. The Carver school was closer to indie rock, I thought, the songs tight and unpretentious, the line between the musicians and fans so blurry it sometimes vanished altogether.

It took me a long time to get past these objections and see that Wallace wasn't simply picking up where Pynchon and Gaddis had left off. It was the brilliant and wide-ranging essays in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* that changed my mind, helped me to understand that Wallace wasn't really a fiction writer in the traditional sense. Like Norman Mailer, he was more of a free-floating intelligence, a cultural observer whose methods and obsessions enabled him to notice things that were invisible to the rest of us, and to diagnose the peculiar sickness of the age. No matter what he was writing—story, essay, novel—he was engaged in the same overarching project, attempting to document and embody a crisis in postmodern consciousness, the human personality breaking down under the pressure of too much information. Yes, he was guilty of literary excess, but the excess wasn't really superfluous; it was precisely the point. I felt a little stupid for missing that.

So what does all this have to do with the *Best American Short Stories* of 2012? Less than I expected, actually. I've read a lot of short fiction over the past several months, and one thing I've learned is that the debate that seemed so important to me fifteen or twenty years ago—minimalism vs. maximalism, populism vs. elitism, realism vs. experimentalism, Carver vs. Wallace, however you want to frame it—just isn't that big an issue anymore. As crucial as they are in my own personal narrative, neither Raymond Carver nor David Foster Wallace seemed to cast much of a shadow on this year's pool of stories. You might sense a vague

kinship with Wallace in George Saunders's poignant and very funny "Tenth of December," or catch the homage to Carver in Nathan Englander's provocative "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," but that's about it. This makes sense, I guess: time passes, the culture moves on, tastes evolve. Carver and Wallace are gone, both way before their time, and death has made them seem even more distinctive somehow, more stubbornly themselves, one-of-a-kind and irreplaceable, rather than leaders of rival schools of fiction.

If there's a single writer who looms over this year's collection—over the art of the short story as it's practiced in North America right now—it would have to be Alice Munro. Munro is an acknowledged master, of course—her reputation has been growing steadily for decades—but she still hasn't gotten enough credit for the way she's expanded our sense of what stories can do, and how they might be written. "Axis," the story included here, feels both typical of her work and quietly remarkable—typical in its choice of subject matter (rural Canadian girls hoping to escape their drab small-town lives), and remarkable for its combination of amplitude and compression, its ability to encompass multiple decades and points-of-view in a handful of tightly focused scenes. Edith Pearlman's creepy and powerful "Honeydew," has a similar complexity—it's composed of three intricately braided perspectives—as does Saunders's "Tenth of December," the two-sided chronicle of a chance encounter between a lonely boy and a sick man, both of whose inner lives are fully accessible to the reader.

When I was in graduate school—not that long ago, I swear—it was considered highly unorthodox for a story to be written like this. Out of curiosity, I looked back at the *Best American Short Stories* of 1986, edited by none other than Raymond Carver—it’s an amazing collection, a snapshot of an unusually rich moment in American fiction, with stellar contributions by Richard Ford, Amy Hempel, and Mona Simpson, among others—and confirmed my suspicion: there’s not a single story in the anthology that switches point-of-view. It just wasn’t done, at least not in the literary mainstream: back then, you had your main character, and you had your central event or situation, and that was that. The fact that it’s no longer considered risky, or even especially noteworthy, to tell a story from multiple perspectives—or to range freely across the expanse of a character’s life, as Julie Otsuka does in her haunting “Diem Perdidi”—owes a lot to Munro’s formal daring, her insistence on smuggling the full range of novelistic techniques into the writing of her short fiction, and the influence she’s had on her contemporaries.

But maybe that’s just inside baseball, gossip for the MFA crowd. Form and technique matter, of course, but we read fiction to satisfy a more basic need—to imagine our way into other lives, to explore characters and situations that tell us something new about the world, and maybe about ourselves, or to remind us of something important that we may have forgotten. If that’s what you’re looking for, I humbly suggest that you’ve opened the right book.

As always, this year's stories come from prestigious publications (*The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*) as well as obscure ones (at least to me) like *Fifth Wednesday Journal* and *New Ohio Review*; oddly enough, two come from a single issue of a magazine called *Hobart*. You'll find work from some of our finest writers—Mary Gaitskill, Kate Walbert, Stephen Millhauser, and Jennifer Haigh, among others—and discover new voices like Taiye Selasi, Taylor Antrim, Adam Wilson, and Mike Meginnis. You'll encounter bizarre scenarios—please check out “Beautiful Monsters,” by Eric Puchner, and “Volcano” by Lawrence Osborne—as well as a variety of intriguing, sometimes challenging characters: the homeless drunk trying to be a good dad in Jess Walter's “Anything Helps”; a black woman who teaches structural engineering at an obscure technical college in Roxane Gay's “North Country”; a young boy jealous of his dying brother in Sharon Solwitz's “Alive”; a lesbian single mom who works at Home Depot in Carol Anshaw's “The Last Speaker of the Language”; and a sewage inspector who wanders into dangerous moral territory in Angela Pneman's “Occupational Hazard.” Some of these stories are funny and some are heartbreaking—my own personal favorites somehow manage to be both at once—while others are angry or disturbing. There are a couple of sexy ones, too, though fewer than I might have expected. But all of them took me somewhere I didn't expect to go, and jolted me into that state of heightened alertness and emotional receptivity that's one of the great rewards of reading good fiction.

Inevitably, I had to leave out some stories I really enjoyed and admired, and I'm sorry about that. There were just so many good ones to choose from, so many different ways to envision the final list. There will undoubtedly be critics who disagree with my selections, skeptics who think I was the wrong person for the job, or believe that they could have chosen more wisely. To them I say, with all due respect: I'm sure your pizza would be pretty tasty, and possibly even delicious, but mine is clearly the best.

It says so right on the box.

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