

“Best” short stories of 2003 could do better

By Sandy English
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The Best American Short Stories 2003, edited by Walter Mosley, New York: Houghton Mifflin

The Best American Short Stories is an annual anthology of material published in Canadian and American magazines during a given year. The prestigious collection has been issued since 1915. A series editor, in this case Katrina Kenison, selects between 50 and 100 stories from hundreds of magazines, including such showcases of short fiction as the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, but mostly from periodicals with small circulations.

Then a prominent writer selects 20 stories from this pool for the anthology. The editor for 2003 is Walter Mosley, the author of, among other works, the popular Easy Rawlins mystery novels set in African-American working-class areas of Los Angeles in the middle of the last century. Mosley has examined love and ambition within the social contexts of the 1940s to the 1960s among all sorts of people in Los Angeles. These novels are honest and vivid works of art.

It is disappointing, then, that in his introduction to this collection, “Americans Dreaming”, Mosley (who recently called himself a “political writer”) avoids mentioning any of the social or literary problems in the last few decades of American life.

On the contrary, the sensibility of our age doesn’t concern him. “The writers in this collection,” he says, “have told stories that suggest much larger ideas. I found myself presented with the challenge of simple human love contrasted against structures as large as religion and death.”

Mosley seems to be saying that large ideas are those with eternal themes. Of course every writer wants to create something enduring. But few writers today grasp that the lasting work emerges in part from penetrating and making sense, deep sense, of the immediate and particular. Nothing becomes dated more quickly than the abstractly and palely “universal”.

The quest after a universal human nature (a rather average, mediocre “human nature”, one might add)—fairly widespread today among writers and other artists—takes as its basic assumption that human beings have felt and done the same things over the ages. Basic human traits stand outside of historical development and in this way are “universal”.

Mosley implies that the job of the short story is to capture what is of lasting concern to Mankind with a capital M. For example, some of the stories here concern exile and loss. What makes them successful, however, is that they are not “merely tales of personal loss. Mothers have left us long before the mountains were shifted by southward moving flocks.”

This is essentially a dogmatic approach to life. It looks for (or imposes) universal “structures” such as love, death, religion, etc., in new people and places. It balks at approaching fresh emotions or ideas as they arise from new human relations. This view of what fiction can do was first overcome in the 18th century English novel. It is fair to call Mosley’s ideas retrograde.

What does life mean today, at the turn of the 21st century, as opposed to the 1980s? When we read about the 1980s, what ideas, actions, feelings might be present that are distinctive to the time?

An editor (a “political writer”?) concerned with the overall state of art

and society might have concerned himself with what was specific and new in the stories of 2002-03. Are they more or less conscious of what has been happening in the recent history of everyday life? Do they divulge something novel or fresh? How well do they assimilate what they discover?

A more sensitive editor might look for stories that give readers a flavor of the times—that treat a period of a few months or years as a unique moment in the struggle to exist, to show what people are up against.

The US has been shaken by extraordinary developments—wide-ranging and painful economic changes; a sex scandal and an impeachment, the hijacking of an election, the launching of an illegal, “preemptive” war. A creative artist might not be in a position to assess these events in objective, scientific terms. His or her job perhaps lies elsewhere. But ordinary Americans have been moved in a variety of ways by these developments, sometimes in ways of which they were hardly aware. The absence of almost any reverberation of these and other deep concerns of the population in a collection of stories from 2003 is itself a cultural problem.

We are not quite sure what was written, if anything, that Mosley missed in his effort to find supposedly “eternal” themes, but the stories do not tell us much about the world we live in.

Much of the work in the collection seems snared in a quasi-mystical outlook: authors and their characters faithfully accept strange coincidences and improbable and inexplicable situations. In several stories unknown and invisible forces are directing how we live and die. The outlook expressed seems to be that some powerful awareness is active in making relationships in the worlds of imagination and reality. This is pretty flaccid and unsatisfying in 2003.

For example, in Dan Chaon’s “The Bees”, clairvoyant dreams presage a family’s gruesome end. In Edwidge Danticat’s “Night Talkers”, a Haitian immigrant in America has discovered the murderer of his parents, a Duvalier stooge. He returns to his grandmother’s village in Haiti, but the author directs his investigation into the dreams that he and his grandmother share. Even here, in the fruitful world of dreams, nothing much happens. The story hobbles through the feelings and thoughts that the recent history of the country must give to Haitians, and we sense a missed opportunity.

The most evocative and aesthetically adventuresome story in this category is Louise Erdrich’s “Shamengwa”. A man’s violin is stolen. The owner, Shamengwa, is an older, respected musician who lives on an Ojibwa reservation. Several narrators, including the tribal judge and Shamengwa himself, tell the story, which becomes a tale of the violin. A dream had led him to it in his youth. An old letter is found that links the violin to the thief, to ancestors gone for a century. The violin is magical. In the end Shamengwa’s daughter says, “We know nothing.”

Mysterious coincidences, magically endowed music, reflect ancient views of reality. Seniority, though, does not make them intellectually legitimate today or even interesting. The narrative structure of “Shamengwa” is masterly, but the backward philosophical view mars the story. It would be better for authors to make the attempt to know something, even if they fail.

Mosley has selected a number of other stories that deal with the near future. This is all to the good. Science fiction has been one of the few areas of writing in which social criticism has been possible since the end of the Second World War. Any number of dystopian short-stories and novels have examined the “larger ideas” of oppression and revolt. They have often been pessimistic, but at least they stretched the imagination into the area of social life in an intelligent way.

But the stories here seem quite tame, in keeping with a fairly recent decline in the treatment of credible social issues in science fiction. In Nicole Krauss’s “Future Emergencies”, a young woman and her professor boyfriend live in a future world afflicted by panicky government alerts. People have to get their gas masks. No one seems to know why. Fine so far. But there is a tepid atmosphere to the whole thing, not just mystery everywhere, but acquiescence. Otherwise, two people continue with a rather conventional student-teacher relationship: Again, a missed opportunity.

Ryan Harty’s “Why the Sky Turns Red When the Sun Goes Down” speaks of a family tragedy with a robot-child. It is not clear why it was either necessary or compelling to make a child mechanical.

In terms of the present, Mosley has not found much either. A lot has happened in the world over the last two decades. The 1980s and the 1990s, years of a great rollback in social conditions in the United States, roughed up many people. The overall trend has been more tension and anger, more difficulty for the thinking, feeling human creature in America.

What do the writers here say about this?

In “Mines” by Sharon Straight, a prison guard and her charges cope with a bleak world. Much of the detail in the story feels authentic, but it does not go beyond the violence and awfulness of prison life.

A Philippine maid in LA has a generally hard time in Mona Simpson’s “Coins”. Simpson’s story is little more than a smart workshop-piece, somewhat condescending.

ZZ Packer’s “Every Tongue Shall Confess” is about a woman with a beautiful voice involved in her church. The nuttiness of life is self-consciously played up in the story, but it only makes the characters seem silly. It reads like a parody of James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.

This group of stories smacks of pity for the poor; any implicit desire to change the state of affairs is muted. They miss the mark.

Rand Richards Cooper “Johnny Hamburger” published in *Esquire* exemplifies this sort of story. It takes place in 1988, during a heat wave and details a young man’s problems with his two jobs, his family and his girlfriend.

The author intimates that ordinary life is all about working hard, drinking, goofing up with one’s girlfriend, in other words, a more-or-less shoddy existence. Johnny drives a “piece of shit Escort” a can of beer is “snuggled down in his crotch where a cop can’t see,” and later, “He smokes too much. He drinks too much. His apartment reeks—spilled bong water ...” These observations are both banal and exaggerated at the same time.

It is true that the issues in Johnny’s life are genuine concerns of millions: “What strikes Johnny, what he feels without putting words to the idea, is the sameness of it all—the same work, same heat, same jokes, same idiot songs on the radio day after day ...”

Something original should happen, something a little more poignant. The more stupid elements of American life are simply held up as interesting and significant in themselves. They are hardly examined, and anything like passionate empathy from writer to character cannot be found.

Among this work, it seems almost like an accident that some of the stories were genuinely affecting.

“Baby Wilson” by E. L. Doctorow was first published in the *New*

Yorker and is included in Doctorow’s new collection *Sweet Land Stories*. Doctorow on many occasions has put forward a truthful and compassionate view of life.

This story concerns a baby-snatching and the subsequent flight from the law. The narrator, Lester, wants no part of it, but feels impelled to help for good or poor reasons, and drives around the western United States as a fugitive. There is relief in the end. The motivation for the baby-snatching seems silly, like the one in the film *Raising Arizona*, but this story presents some important images.

Michiko Kakutani writing in the *New York Times* complains that Doctorow’s pieces in *Sweet Land Stories* are missing “an indelible sense of time and place” and fail to “disclose a larger social landscape”. These have been, as she recognizes, some of the strengths of his writing, and perhaps, as Kakutani contends, this recent work might lack something compared to his other fiction.

Yet in *Best American Short Stories 2003*, “Baby Wilson” stands in glaring contrast to most of the other stories: we are in America at the turn of the twenty-first century. On the lam, Lester lives by gambling and stealing credit. A Nevada town is “a railroad yard, a string of car dealerships”. The story has a real feeling for the emptiness and loneliness of much of American life today. The characters lack consciousness of their own lives, of the larger situation.

Another satisfactory piece is Dorothy Allison’s “Compassion”, originally published in *Tin House*. It lives up to the boldness of its title. The story focuses on three sisters’ deathwatch for their mother.

The story treats emotional survival during the tension before death in a socially full and truthful manner. Hospitals “don’t care who we are.” Medical insurance doesn’t cover all the bills. Life is tense in its typically American way: all three sisters work, have moved, have moved home again.

In flashbacks the narrator tells about the family’s slow desperation to escape, and an inability to do so. Escape from what? Allison never says; not knowing the answer is one of the central problems of American life. A moving line: “We thought ourselves free, finally away and gone, but none of it had turned out the way we thought it would.” How many people feel this way?

The narrator examines the lives of each of the sisters, one who breeds Rottweilers, who may or may not kick her boyfriend out someday; another who listens to music she disliked when it was new, who has taken vodka and pills twice. Allison examines the abusive but sober stepfather, Jack. A couple of the sisters love him. The mother dreams that the narrator-sister wants to kill her husband, and the narrator does wish she might.

The narrator takes her mother out shopping in what becomes a subtle scene of dissent when mother and daughter encounter two born-again Christian women at a sale bin in a department store. The discomfort of the fundamentalist women as they encounter a stranger, their fear before the energy of the dying woman, as she tells them that “God is your daughter holding your hands when you can’t stand the smell of your own body. God is your husband not yelling, your insurance check coming when they said it would.” False piety is demolished.

Allison creates a certain atmosphere of frustration in everyday life. This is characteristic of life in much of the world today. There is bitterness and stress, unresolved anger.

How can this woman’s life come to a quiet and respectful conclusion? When the end comes, we want to read through it quickly. Jack’s voice cracks, and there is incredible pity.

“Compassion” is a potent piece of art. It makes use of the demands of its genre, the short story, by finding a particular expression at the end for the sentiment and theme of the entire piece. The last word of the story is “free”, and this sums up, by an opposite, the constricted and oppressed life that this family has lived.

The stories by Allison and Doctorow show that it is possible for fiction to capture the timbre of an era. It is no insignificant thing to see into day-to-day reality and harder still to grasp the general trend of things. The two are in fact related: when larger ideas emerge, it is because they are in tune with a real history and real life.

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