



The Best American Short Stories 2004

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Since its inception in 1915, the Best American series has become the premier annual showcase for the country's finest short fiction and nonfiction. For each volume, a series editor reads pieces from hundreds of periodicals, then selects between fifty and a hundred outstanding works. That selection is pared down to twenty or so very best pieces by a guest editor who is widely recognized as a leading writer in his or her field. This unique system has helped make the Best American series the most respected -- and most popular - - of its kind.

Lorrie Moore brings her keen eye for wit and surprise to the volume, and *The Best American Short Stories 2004* is an eclectic and enthralling gathering of well-known voices and talented up-and-comers. Here are stories that probe the biggest issues: ambition, gender, romance, war. Here are funny and touching and striking tales of a Spokane Indian, the estranged wife of an Iranian immigrant, an American tutor in Bombay. In her introduction Lorrie Moore writes, "The stories collected here impressed me with their depth of knowledge and feeling of character, setting, and situation . . . They spoke with amused intelligence, compassion, and dispassion."

The Best American Short Stories 2004 Details

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From Reader Review The Best American Short Stories 2004 for online ebook

Nana Fredua-Agyeman says

The anthology, of twenty short stories, had both interesting and less interesting stories, some of them almost novella-length.

Intransigently American, there are several of the stories whose appreciation is linked to the appreciation of the American culture and other sub-cultures. It reminded me of what Horace Engdahl, the permanent secretary of the Nobel Prize jury, said in 2008, that "The US is too isolated, too insular. They don't translate enough and don't really participate in the big dialogue of literature...That ignorance is restraining." I'm not a student of literature and so cannot say for certainty that these words are true but reading the stories, this statement crossed my mind.

Read the rest here <http://freduagyeman.blogspot.com/2012...>

Mark says

I wish I could say that Best 2004 took so long to read because I was savoring each story, but not so much. Of the twenty stories in the anthology, I would say I liked about half of them. That makes it the most disappointing of these collections that I have read (I'd read five of them before this one).

I like reading stories from newly discovered authors, but the strongest stories this year came from seasoned storywriters – Alice Munro, Annie Proulx, and John Updike. Many of the other stories were instantly forgettable. I think one of the reasons that it took so long to get through the collection was the fact that many stories didn't make me want to take the book out whenever I could squeeze some reading in. Instead, the book stayed in my briefcase and was only read while I was on the train.

Donald says

(before reading)Something I recently posted on a writing forum had been compared to an author that shows up in this collection. Naturally, I looked said author up and grabbed the first thing I could get my hands on with a sample of his writing. This should be interesting... (after reading)I'm not mentioning any names after reading this, but I don't see the comparison. After that comparison I like comparisons even less.

Regarding the collection: Eh... The title seems a bit of a misnomer. To clarify—this is a collection of short stories that seems more like a collection of character developments that all wound up being very close to stories. Not all of them, mind you, but a large percentage. Just to stay honest, there are a few good stories here.

If you're looking for a good example of character development, look no further.

Erinina Marie says

The Best American Short Stories of 2004 edited by Lorrie Moore

I'd have to say, for the best of 2004, these weren't half as interesting as they could have been. It was actually a challenge to keep reading. On the other hand, I read L Magazine's first Fiction Issue during this time and the three or four stories in there were fabulous. When a book is compiled of stories in multiple magazines over a year long period, one magazine issue shouldn't entirely trump the book, right? Sad day. I have a feeling that these were the best written short stories of 2004, but the editor should remember that interest is also a factor in the overall 'best' qualifier.

Daniel says

I enjoyed this collection moreso than the collection of essays of the same year. Some of these stories I even enjoyed quite a bit. However, even in this, none of the stories sits with me as I reflect back a month or more to when I read them. Once or twice I tried to take note of the author's name because I liked a piece, but I haven't yet found myself interested enough to seek out new works by any of these writers.

In one or two cases, I found the works to be rather pretentious -- writing more to a style for the age, rather than crafting an interesting story.

This was a good book to have on hand for the occassion when I was looking for a short work that I could read in one sitting, but not one that I will refer to time and again.

My local library will enjoy the donation.

Linda says

A couple of yawners (ex. Docent), a couple ok.

Robyn says

Stories I especially liked:

A Rich Man by Edward P. Jones

Intervention by Jill McCorkle

Runaway by Alice Munro

What You Pawn I will Redeem by Sherman Alexie

Written in Stone by Catherine Brady

Accomplice by Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum

Screenwriter by Charles D'Ambrosio

The Tutor by Nell Freudenberger

Richard Jaspers says

I read about three quarters of the stories before I left the book in the seat pocket in front of me on the Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt (Freudian slip?).

Not as good as I would have expected from editor Lorrie Moore. I didn't love as many of the stories as I do in her collections.

Jerry says

It's interesting how authors in different collections in this series, reflecting either the year or, more likely, the guest editor, reflect similar stylistic issues. In 2003 (the books are named for the year after most of the stories were written, probably to avoid confusing bookstores) authors have a fear of endings. That final step, meeting the object of their search, is too much for them. And so, just before the final period, a minor character changes their mind and the story ends hanging.

Possibly my favorite story here is John Updike's *The Walk with Elizanne*, which turns that on its head, ending with the beginning in an extraordinarily bittersweet finale.

Ben says

I typically read speculative fiction. That is, stories centered on characters in extraordinary situations, the times or the technology used to illustrate either the macroscopic view of humanity as a cynical waste or an affirming animal, or focused pieces that highlight the power of family, friendship, and the perils of temptation, set against myriad backdrops of technology and the supernatural.

Literary fiction is much the same, save that it removes the technology and supernatural, and places things in the real world, where the writer's imagination is limited by the concrete. This both gives the writer room to expand on character and limits the availability of plots. That being said, this particular collection focuses a lot on character pieces.

Nearly every story has a lot of room taken up by exposition, flashbacks that highlight character traits and motives while taking time, sweet, lengthy time, with the plot. All of the stories take the microscopic road, analyzing character against dysfunctional family, loss (both physical and emotional), loneliness, and nostalgia. It has its highlights and lowlights, but the collection as a whole, while superior in story quality (this is, after all, the BEST short fiction) fails to deliver enough story diversity, choosing to play it safe and present yarns that are, for the most part, safe choices that become repetitive in style the further one reads.

Lowlights:

"Limestone Diner"-An abundance of overwhelming, colorful, fruity, fizzy, describingful adjectives.

"Some Other, Better Otto"-Sharon and Portia are fantastic characters, the most interesting by far. And they are physically present in this bloated tale of family dysfunction for maybe a fifth of its length. Honorable mention: William

"Written in Stone"-Let's all reflect on a broken marriage for a while and have some food.

Highlights:

"Tooth and Claw"-An offbeat tale by the king of offbeat literary writers, T.C. Boyle, about a lovesick loner who wins a serval in a game of dice

"All Saint's Day"-A story about an exorcism, and the power of the human will as demonstrated by precocious children. The most surprising story in the bunch.

What You Pawn I Will Redeem-Sherman Alexie rocks.

Docent-A tour (literally) through the Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee University. The most experimental story (narratively speaking) of the bunch.

The Walk With Elizanne-John Updike's story of reflection on the innocence of youth and the realities of age will make you giddy for your memories and excited at the prospect of relationships as they evolve throughout the decades.

Ryan says

While reviewing every story in this anthology would be beyond the limits of my attention span, the 2004 edition contains my favorite story by Sherman Alexie, "I Will Redeem What You Pawn," I believe is the title.

While I've long been an admirer of Alexie's writing, I haven't ever much liked Alexie as a person; a lot of a person's attitudes about life come through in their writing, and while I appreciate Alexie's fearlessness, wry, ironic humor, and compassion for native peoples living in the modern world, his writing has always lacked that more general compassion for people, all people, as twisted and damaged as we are. This story changed my mind about that. Such genuine warmth for Seattle, all the people in Seattle, and just people in general, shone through in this story. I was living in Seattle myself when I read this story, and I also love the city, and I suddenly found myself relating to Alexie as a person as I read this story.

Ryan says

What a terrific set of stories! A few clunkers in there, of course—there always are—but the overall quality was stratospherically high. Giving a full five to this one: I've read 27 volumes of the BASS series now, and they really don't get much better than this.

My favorites, in order of preference:

- * Deborah Eisenberg - "Some Other, Better Otto"
- * Charles D'Ambrosio - "Screenwriter"
- * Paula Fox - "Grace"
- * Alice Munro - "Runaway"
- * John Updike - "The Walk with Elizanne"
- * Mary Yukari Waters - "Mirror Studies"
- * Thomas McGuane - "Gallatin Canyon"
- * Jill McCorkle - "Intervention"
- * Sherman Alexie - "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"
- * Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum - "Accomplice"

(Yes, that's literally half of the stories in the collection.) And some honorable mentions as well:

* Angela Pneuman - "All Saints Day"

* T. Coraghessan Boyle - "Tooth and Claw"

Sam says

Of course, I can't (or won't) review each story. I recommend "Accomplice" by Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum. But the collection as a whole doesn't really impress me. The stories tend towards the long side, which I disapprove of arbitrarily. I also found many of the selections to be mediocre, regardless of length. I would get recommendations rather than trudging through the whole thing yourself.

christina says

I am an enthusiast when it comes to the "Best American..." series.

The problem is at this point I am getting confused as to which I have read or not, they look so close to the same!

My request? An added little icon in the corner of each cover helping me distinguish, a fuzzy bee or a winter tree even an angry baby face, anything would help!

I have also started delving into the Essays and Travel Writing collections...

Justin Benz says

Sherman Alexie - "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" - Much of this story explores the different dimensions of the protagonist's 'homelessness', a condition which simultaneously describes an alienation he feels from his Native American heritage and his literal lack of a home or family. The story kicks off as he spots a long-lost family heirloom in a pawn-shop and is given 24 hours to pull together an impossible \$999 to purchase it. In describing his daylong 'odyssey' through the decrepit Native American community in Spokane, WA (and his own decrepitude), Alexie does a great job of interweaving his mythological premise with a stark, bittersweet realism, resulting in a very well-hewn story.

T.C. Boyle - "Tooth and Claw" - Delivered with an almost disarming level of clarity, Boyle delivers an urban romance story that somehow succeeds in pivoting itself on one of the most bizarre plot elements I have ever seen in a short story (which I will not spoil here). In the hands of a lesser writer, the thing I'm describing would have probably come off as being hamfistedly weird-for-the-sake-of-weird, but Boyle's descriptive prowess and believable characters combine to not only prevent that pratfall, but to treat readers with a refreshing and unique spin on some well-worn human themes.

Catherine Brady - "Written in Stone" - Now, stories like this one are precisely the reason I have faith in anthologies like this. If not for this enterprise, I would have certainly missed out on finding out about this excellent writer. The story itself is a fairly straightforward tale of one marriage's slow collapse, cross-hatched with a subtle narrative about the modern world's shifty balance between public and private existences. The writing in this story certainly includes its fair share of floating metaphors, but never bludgeons the reader over the head with them. I also thoroughly enjoyed the author's conscious goal of ambiguity, which I didn't realize right away. In my stubborn drive for meaning, I ended up frustratedly reading the story twice before checking the authors' notes section in the back and learning that the story was purposely open-ended. After

slapping myself in the forehead a few times, I realized that the narrator's ambiguity is probably representative of a more salient realism than any clearer alternative. Putting this story aside, I was also thoroughly impressed by the author's writing prowess and will definitely make sure to look deeper into her body of work.

Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum - "Accomplice" - This story really did not work for me in any way, which is a shame because the author writes very well and has a gift for clever metaphors. However, in a way, I think the cleverness might be part of why the story gained no traction. Very much like volume editor Lorrie Moore, Bynum seems a little too comfortable in some insular 'liberal arts creative-writing class' universe that has little to do with the real world. The result of this is that nothing of the autobiographical-sounding Ms. Hempel, her father, her students, or her students' parents comes out sounding believable. The back-to-school-night scene was especially hamfisted and I couldn't buy into the idea of a bunch of 7th graders becoming avid readers overnight. Where the story does better is in its descriptions of the main character's own back story and the relationship she had with her unusual (yet still somewhat idealized) father. Reading this through, all I took from this story was an idea that the writer could probably stand to leave the shelter of her own life because, as such, there's just not enough dirt under those fingernails yet.
