

# The Best Short Stories

2022

*Edited by*

Valeria

Luiselli

THE O. HENRY PRIZE WINNERS

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nation’s most prestigious  
awards for short fiction.”  
—*The Atlantic Monthly*

# The Best Short Stories 2022

The O. Henry Prize Winners

Guest Editor:  
Valeria Luiselli

Series Editor:  
Jenny Minton Quigley



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*To my niece María—my ferocious reading companion in these  
past pandemic years*

*—Valeria Luiselli*

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## *Foreword*

Terms of eligibility can be as revealing through those they exclude as through those they welcome. The first O. Henry Prize collection, published in 1919, ruled out all non-American writers. Yet in that very first edition, series editor Blanche Colton Williams called attention to several accomplished stories that she regretted were ineligible for consideration. Jacke Wilson, host of the *History of Literature* podcast, recently unearthed Williams's introduction to that 1919 O. Henry collection and found in it this admission: "According to the terms which omit foreign authors from possible participation in the prize, the work of Achmed Abdullah, Britten Austin, Elinor Mordaunt and others was in effect non-existent for the Committee." Williams goes on to describe at length the three missing stories by these authors, highlighting their unfortunate absence from the book and from the prize.

Over the next decades at least one expansion was made to the eligibility rules for the O. Henry Prize. It is not clear exactly when this happened, but in 1955 a student in Florida mentioned in her master's thesis on the O. Henry series that "foreign-born authors were eligible if they became U.S. citizens." In the 1990s the prize was further opened to Canadian writers. We can guess that the motivation for that may have been to allow consideration of stories by the widely acclaimed Canadian short story writer (and future Nobel laureate) Alice Munro. A further expansion came in 2003 under the ninth series editor, Laura Furman. The *Publishers Weekly* review of the 2003 edition noted, "A new, wider-ranging selection process (allowing the consideration of all English-language writers appearing in North American publications regardless of citizenship) makes



this one of the strongest O. Henry collections in recent years, with stories by, among others, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.”

Nineteen years later, the guest editor for the 2022 volume, Valeria Luiselli, has selected a brand-new story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, along with ten remarkable stories in translation. This means that fully half of the winning stories this year are artistic collaborations with talented translators who enable readers of English to enjoy fiction originally crafted in Bengali, Greek, Hebrew, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, and Spanish. The subjects of this year’s twenty winning stories are predictably varied, but many touch on the pandemic, love, and loss, though there is also humor, and their appeal is universally human.

A century ago, the writer O. Henry popularized stories about the downtrodden and humble during a time when fictional protagonists belonged mostly to high society. In 1906, he titled his second collection *The Four Million* in response to an op-ed written by Ward McAllister in *The New York Times* claiming that New York City had only four hundred people worth getting to know. O. Henry believed that the stories of all four million people then residing in New York City were worthwhile, and *The Four Million* includes his best-known story, “The Gift of the Magi,” about poor newlyweds in the city who sacrifice their favorite belongings for love. Ward McAllister has recently resurfaced in a new television series, *The Gilded Age*. In the show created by Julian Fellowes and set in New York during the 1880s, McAllister—played by Nathan Lane—is the gatekeeper for the socialite Mrs. Astor, who famously could fit four hundred people in her ballroom. When O. Henry arrived in New York in 1902, bars more than ballrooms were his scene. As he labored under the conviction that elite writing need not be elitist, it seems apt and exciting that *The Best Short Stories 2022: The O. Henry Prize Winners* celebrates ordinary people, though now on a more global scale. One can imagine O. Henry would be pleased by the continual expansion of his namesake prize and that Blanche Colton Williams would see the series she helped launch—the oldest literary prize for short fiction in America—as moving in the right direction.

Readers of English have relied on translated stories at least since the Bible, and yet translations have long taken a backseat in our culture. If

stories give us a window through which to momentarily enter the soul of another person, then translated stories magically transcend the limits of the language that has shaped our consciousness. What I learned from Valeria Luiselli this year is nothing short of how to read in a new way. I learned to dissolve my previous conception of “successful” (perhaps tidy) literary translation and open the borders of my thinking to the living, dynamic melding of languages undertaken by the translators here in a way that opens one’s capacity to engage with literature and language generally. For every story is a work of translation, if only from thought to page and then into the reader’s particular consciousness.

I am grateful that Valeria has led the O. Henry Prize toward the removal of geographical requirements for eligibility and congratulate the thirty O. Henry Prize–winning artists of 2022, both writers and translators. Valeria, I hope readers everywhere are inspired by your brilliant vision.

—Jenny Minton Quigley

## *Introduction*

A little over a century ago, in 1919, the first O. Henry series editor, Blanche Colton Williams, explained in an introduction much like this one that the committee of the newly created O. Henry Prize had agreed upon these two seemingly simple rules: “the story must be the work of an American author, and must first appear in 1919 in an American publication.” One hundred years later—one hundred and two, to be precise—during what seemed like an eternal second wave of the COVID pandemic, I was asked to guest-edit the following year’s iteration of the O. Henry Prizes. One fundamental thing had changed about the prize over the years: the clause “American author” had been replaced by simply “author,” and just last year the prize became open to work in translation. That alone was reason enough for me to accept.

What had seemed like a simple rule, “American author/American publication,” had, over the years, accumulated a number of absurd consequences, such as the automatic exclusion of foreign-born authors who had been living, sometimes entire lifetimes, in the United States, or, simply, the exclusion of authors who were published and read widely in the United States and therefore formed part of the literary culture—except that they didn’t have a U.S. birth certificate. This exclusion of course persists, even today, in several national prizes.

The idea of a “national literature” as a monolithic, pure, uncontaminated collection of work by people who hold the same passport is ludicrous. Imposing upon literature rules written in some government office, in a nation’s obscure and labyrinthine immigration system, is not only absurd but simply contrary to the very nature of literature. And part of

that nature is to travel—across borders, despite borders. We write and read not in order to engage with an idea of nationhood but to engage with the human soul and human stories more generally. But somehow we continue to nod to the arbitrary consensus of “national literature,” just as we forget that “American” means “from the continent named America” and not just from one country within the continent. (Perhaps, in the not-too-distant future, the *Best American* series will seize the opportunity their name contains and include work by authors from the entire American continent.) In any case, that the O. Henry decided to do away with its national clause is, I hope, part of a wider trend in understanding literature and the literary ecology as a complex, beautifully messy thing and not one that fits neatly in the pages of a passport. A movement in this direction is surely overdue and particularly needed after these past years of xenophobia, hate, and an asphyxiating nationalist discourse that certainly did not make America anything but more isolated and lonely.

I spent the second half of the year 2021 reading a selection of eighty stories, published in a wide array of journals. Of the eighty stories I was sent, twenty were translated from other languages. The ratio was not ideal, but it was not bad, considering that still today, only approximately 3 percent of the books published in the United States are in translation. (I imagine that in literary magazines, unless they are specifically devoted to seeking out translated work, the number is even lower.) Editors acquire far less material in foreign languages, either because most are still monolingual and cannot base their decisions on directly reading originals, or because they believe that the niche for work in translation is smaller and less profitable, or because there are a number of unconscious biases at play—or a combination of all of the above. Of the twenty stories in foreign languages, ten made it to this anthology—a number I could be proud of, if only I had deliberately intervened in their favor, championing translation. When I realized I had chosen so many stories in translation, I asked myself seriously, cautiously—why? Was I biased somehow, or did they have qualities that set them aside? And here, dear reader, you will simply have to trust me. I was no less scrupulous while reading the translations, no less meticulous while pondering whether each should receive an O. Henry

Prize. But as it happened, I didn't have to intervene in their favor. With some exceptions, their overall literary quality was simply excellent.

What was it, specifically, in those ten stories that seemed so deeply appealing? Surely, whatever quality it was—if it indeed was one single thing—it was also present in the rest of the stories I'd chosen. The twenty stories included in this volume are of course widely varied and have distinct qualities of their own. Some of them have a wild and contagious sense of humor; others capture the desolation and difficult loneliness of these past couple of years; others—more timeless—reach into the depths of the absurd to show us how fragile our conventions around reality and normality actually are. However, all these stories do, in fact, share one common quality.

Marcel Proust once wrote that “beautiful books are always written in a sort of foreign language.” Indeed, all the stories present in this volume belong to that family of literary works that read as if they are written in some kind of foreign language. In other words, they straddle the familiar and the unfamiliar—a rare quality that only good literature possesses. The world each of these stories contains immediately opens up to us, as if we already know or remember it. But at the same time, these stories present us with the unknowable, the unpredictable, and the strange.

The word “strange,” which English shares with Romance languages —“*extraña*,” “*étrange*,” “*estranha*,” “*strano*,” “*straniu*”—comes from the Latin “*extraneus*,” meaning “foreign, external, alien, unusual.” And also, “curious, queer, and surprising.” And that is precisely what good stories feel like: within the setting of complete familiarity, the flowering of the *extraneus*. Too many stories published today follow the most predictable paths possible. Dialogues, sensibilities, plots, and characters often feel no different from those in any of the myriad streamable series, all like each other, all packed neatly and ready for immediate consumption. Under banners such as “relatability,” a significant part of the literary field has given in to streamlined, marketable prose. The dictum “write about what you know” has become the epitaph under which the “foreign, unusual, curious, queer, and surprising” is prematurely entombed.

If the currents of our present culture are driving fiction to its most predictable, most conventional paths, what are the undercurrents that can

alter that path? The German writer Rudolf Pannwitz, known mostly via Walter Benjamin's essay on translation "The Translator's Task," criticized translators who "germanize Indic Greek English instead of indicizing, graecizing, anglicizing German." In other words, he thought of translation as a means to foreignize the language into which something was being translated, rather than a task that domesticized a foreign language, making it more palatable and digestible. His criticism continues: "They are far more awed by their own linguistic habits than by the spirit of the foreign work...the fundamental error of the translator is that he holds fast to the state in which his own language happens to be rather than allowing it to be put powerfully in movement by the foreign language...he must broaden and deepen his own language through the foreign one." Pannwitz is referring to translators when he writes this, but he may as well be referring to writers more generally, and even to readers. This idea of translation as a kind of fertile contamination, as a way of putting a language back in movement by allowing the currents of different languages, foreign to one another, to mix and blend is, deeper down, a theory of writing and reading. And it is, moreover, an approach to literature that motivates and animates this year's awards and anthology.

Perhaps no other genre encapsulates the general sensibility of a society in a particular moment in time as much as the short story. The short story is like a slice of the immediate present. Novels, because they are usually long-term commitments, may encapsulate the ethos of an era; the short story, the temperature of a moment. And this moment, as these twenty stories will hopefully show, is a moment in which we are beginning to open the doors and windows of this old locked-down house, letting new light and air come in to stir us powerfully into movement.

—Valeria Luiselli

Alejandro Zambra

Translated from the Spanish by Megan McDowell

## *Screen Time*

**M**ANY TIMES OVER HIS TWO YEARS of life, the boy has heard laughter or cries coming from his parents' bedroom. It's hard to know how he would react if he ever found out what his parents really do while he's asleep: watch TV.

He's never watched TV or anyone watching TV, so his parents' television is vaguely mysterious to him: its screen is a sort of mirror, but the image it reflects is opaque, insufficient, and you can't draw on it in the steam, though sometimes a layer of dust allows for similar games.

Still, the boy wouldn't be surprised to learn that this screen reproduces images in movement. He is occasionally allowed to see other people on screens, most often people in his second country. Because the boy has two countries: his mother's, which is his main country, and his father's, which is his secondary country. His father doesn't live there, but his father's parents do, and they're the people the boy sees most often on-screen.

He has also seen his grandparents in person, because the boy has traveled twice to his second country. He doesn't remember the first trip, but by the second he could walk and talk himself blue in the face, and those weeks were unforgettable, though the most memorable event happened on the flight there, when a screen that seemed every bit as useless as his parents' TV lit up, and suddenly there was a friendly red monster who referred to himself in the third person. The monster and the

boy were immediate friends, perhaps because back then the boy also talked about himself in the third person.

—

The meeting was fortuitous, really, because the boy's parents didn't plan to watch TV during the trip. The flight began with a couple of naps, and then his parents opened the little suitcase that held seven books and five zoomorphic puppets, and a long time was spent on the reading and immediate rereading of those books, punctuated by insolent comments from the puppets, who also gave their opinions on the shapes of the clouds and the quality of the snacks. Everything was going swimmingly until the boy asked for a toy that had chosen to travel—his parents explained—in the hold of the plane, and then he remembered several others that—who knows why—had decided to stay in his main country. Then, for the first time in six hours, the boy burst into tears that lasted a full minute, which isn't a long time, but, to a man in the seat behind them, seemed very long indeed.

“Make that kid shut up!” bellowed the man.

The boy's mother turned around and looked at him with serene contempt, and, after a well-executed pause, she lowered her gaze to stare fixedly between his legs and said, without the slightest trace of aggression:

“Must be really tiny.”

The man apparently had no defense against such an accusation and didn't reply. The boy—who had stopped crying by then—moved to his mother's arms, and then it was the father's turn. He also knelt in his seat to stare at the man; he didn't insult him, but merely asked his name.

“Enrique Elizalde,” said the man, with the little dignity he had left.

“Thanks.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I have my reasons.”

“Who are you?”

“I don't want to tell you, but you'll find out. Soon you'll know full well who I am.”

The father glared several more seconds at the now-remorseful or desperate Enrique Elizalde, and he would have kept it up except that a bout



of turbulence forced him to refasten his seat belt.

“This jerk thinks I’m really powerful,” he murmured then, in English, which was the language the parents used instinctively now to insult other people.

“We should at least name a character after him,” said the mother.

“Good idea! I’ll name all the bad guys in my books Enrique Elizalde.”

“Me too! I guess we’ll have to start writing books with bad guys,” she said.

And that was when they turned on the screen in front of them and tuned in to the show of the happy, hairy red monster. The show lasted twenty minutes, and when the screen went dark, the boy protested, but his parents explained that the monster’s presence wasn’t repeatable, he wasn’t like books, which could be read over and over.

During the three weeks they were in his secondary country, the boy asked about the monster daily, and his parents explained that he only lived on airplanes. The re-encounter finally came on the flight home, and it lasted another scant twenty minutes. Two months later, since the boy still spoke of the monster with a certain melancholy, they bought him a stuffed replica, which in his eyes was the original itself. Since then the two have been inseparable: in fact, right now, the boy has just fallen asleep hugging the red plush toy, while his parents have retired to the bedroom, and surely they will soon turn on the TV. There’s a chance, if things go as they usually do, that this story will end with the two of them watching TV.

—

The boy’s father grew up with the TV always on, and at his son’s age he was possibly unaware that the television could even be turned off. His mother, on the other hand, had been kept away from TV for an astonishing ten years. Her mother’s official version was that the TV signal didn’t reach as far as their house on the outskirts of the city, so that the TV seemed to the girl a completely useless object. One day she invited a classmate over to play, and without asking anyone, the friend simply plugged in the TV and turned it on. There was no disillusionment or crisis: the girl thought the TV signal had only just reached the city’s periphery. She ran to relay the good news to her mother, who, though she was an atheist, fell to her

knees, raised her arms to the sky, and shouted histrionically, persuasively, “It’s a MIRACLE!”

In spite of these very different backgrounds, the couple is in complete agreement that it’s best to put off their son’s exposure to screens as long as possible. They’re not fanatics, in any case, they’re not against TV by any means. When they first met, they often employed the hackneyed strategy of meeting up to watch movies as a pretext for sex. Later, in the period that could be considered the boy’s prehistory, they succumbed to the spell of many excellent series. And they never watched as much TV as during the months leading up to the birth of their son, whose intrauterine life was set not to Mozart symphonies or lullabies but rather to the theme songs of series about bloody power struggles in an unspecified ancient time of zombies and dragons, or in the spacious government house of the self-designated “leader of the free world.”

When the boy was born, the couple’s TV experience changed radically. At the end of the day their physical and mental exhaustion allowed only thirty or forty minutes of waning concentration, so that almost without realizing it they lowered their standards and became habitual viewers of mediocre series. They still wanted to immerse themselves in unfathomable realms and live vicariously through challenging and complex experiences that forced them to seriously rethink their place in the world, but that’s what the books they read during the day were for; at night they wanted easy laughter, funny dialogue, and scripts that granted the sad satisfaction of understanding without the slightest effort.

—

Someday, maybe in one or two years, they plan to spend Saturday or Sunday afternoons watching movies with the boy, and they even keep a list of the ones they want to watch as a family. But for now, the TV is relegated to that final hour of the day when the boy is asleep and the mother and father return, momentarily, to being simply she and he—she, in bed looking at her phone, and he, lying face up on the floor as if resting after a round of sit-ups. Suddenly he gets up and lies on the bed, too, and his hand reaches for the remote but changes course, picks up the nail

clippers instead, and he starts to cut his fingernails. She looks at him and thinks that lately, he is always clipping his nails.

“We’re going to be shut in for months. He’s going to get bored,” she says.

“They’ll let people walk their dogs, but not their kids,” he says bitterly.

“I’m sure he doesn’t like this. Maybe he doesn’t show it, but he must be having a horrible time. How much do you think he understands?”

“About as much as we do.”

“And what do we understand?” she asks, in the tone of a student reviewing a lesson before a test. It’s almost as if she has asked, “What is photosynthesis?”

“That we can’t go out because there’s a shitty virus. That’s all.”

“That what used to be allowed is now forbidden. And what used to be forbidden still is.”

“He misses the park, the bookstore, museums. Same as we do.”

“The zoo,” she says. “He doesn’t talk about it, but he complains more, gets mad more often. Not much, but more.”

“But he doesn’t miss preschool, not at all,” he says.

“I hope it’s just two or three months. What if it’s more? A whole year?”

“I don’t think so,” he says. He’d like to sound more convinced.

“What if this is our world from now on? What if after this virus there’s another and another?” She asks the question but it could just as well be him, with the same words and the same anxious intonation.

During the day they take turns: one of them watches their son while the other works. They are behind on everything, and although everyone is behind on everything, they feel sure that they’re a little more behind than everyone else. They should argue, compete over which of them has the more urgent and better-paid job, but instead they both offer to watch the boy full-time, because that half day with him is an interval of true happiness, genuine laughter, purifying evasion—they would rather spend the whole day playing ball in the hallway or drawing unintentionally monstrous creatures on the small square of wall where drawing is allowed or strumming guitar while the boy turns the pegs until it’s out of tune or reading stories that they now find perfect, much better than the books they themselves write, or try to. Even if they only had one of those children’s

stories, they would rather read it nonstop all day than sit in front of their computers, the awful news radio on in the background, to send reply e-mails full of apologies for their lateness and stare at the stupid map of real-time contagion and death—he looks, especially, at his son’s secondary country, which of course is still his primary one, and he thinks of his parents and imagines that in the hours or days since he last talked to them they’ve gotten sick and he’ll never see them again, and then he calls them and those calls leave him shattered, but he doesn’t say anything, at least not to her, because she has spent weeks now in a slow and imperfect anxiety that makes her think she should learn to embroider, or at least stop reading the beautiful and hopeless novels she reads, and she also thinks that she should have become something other than a writer; they agree on that, they’ve talked about it many times, because so often—every time they try to write—they’ve felt the inescapable futility of each and every word.

“Let’s let him watch movies,” she says. “Why not? Only on Sundays.”

“At least then we’d know if it’s Monday or Thursday or Sunday,” he says.

“What’s today?”

“I think it’s Tuesday.”

“Let’s decide tomorrow,” she says.

He finishes cutting his nails and looks at his hands with uncertain satisfaction, or maybe as if he has just finished cutting someone else’s nails, or as if he were looking at the nails of a person who just cut their own nails and is asking him, for some reason (maybe because he’s become an expert), for his opinion or approval.

“They’re growing faster,” he says.

“Didn’t you just cut them last night?”

“Exactly, they’re growing faster.” He says this very seriously. “Every night it seems like they’ve grown out during the day. Abnormally fast.”

“I think it’s good for nails to grow fast. Supposedly they grow faster at the beach,” she says, sounding as if she’s trying to remember something, maybe the feeling of waking up on the beach with the sun in her face.

“I think mine are a record.”