The Best Short Stories 2024

Edited by Amor Towles

THE O. HENRY PRIZE WINNERS

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Guest Editor:
Amor Towles

Series Editor:
Jenny Minton Quigley

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—Amor Towles

Introduction

In serving as the judge of this year's O. Henry Prize, I have been reminded of the special role that surprise can play in the reading of a short story.

For a variety of reasons, surprise is less significant in our experience of the novel. Often, when we begin to read a novel, we already know something of what it contains. After all, a description of the book is typically included right there on the dust jacket. Many reviewers, in their published critiques, rely heavily on synopsis. When friends recommend a novel or mention what they're reading in their book group, they will generally give us a sketch. And many novels we are drawn to read are already part of the cultural conversation because they are revered classics or contemporary bestsellers.

For all these reasons, when we pick up a novel and turn to the first page, before we start reading the opening sentence, we often have a sense of the journey on which we are about to embark. At minimum, we probably know whether the story takes place in the past, the present, or the future. We probably know where it is set, be that Paris or New York, the South or at sea. We may have a mental picture of the central character and a general sense of the book's themes. In all likelihood, we already have identified the novel on a categorical matrix, having gleaned from various sources that it is either uplifting or tragic, comic or romantic, a page-turner or a slog. While the reality of this pre-awareness in no way undermines the pleasure or enrichment we can have from reading a novel, it does tend to diminish the overall role that surprise is going to play.

But there is a more fundamental reason that our surprise is likely to be tempered when reading a novel, and that is because the artistic intention of the novelist tends to run counter to our experience of surprise. Practically speaking, novelists understand that a book detached from time and place, unclear in its direction, and obscure in its syntax will only be tolerated by the typical reader for so many pages. Thus, it is rarely the intention of a novelist to mystify. Rather, in preparing the opening chapters of a novel, most authors—consciously or unconsciously—are trying to *orient* their readers. They are carefully describing the setting, establishing the times, and introducing the principal characters so that readers can venture forth into the narrative proper with a sense of context and confidence.

Revisit any novel you admire, and you may be surprised to discover how much information the author imparts in the first fifteen pages in order to situate you in the world of the story to come. Here, for example, are just the first three sentences of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth:*

> Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.
>
> It was a Monday in early September, and he was returning to his work from a hurried dip into the country; but what was Miss Bart doing in town at that season?

What a bounty of information we receive from this brief passage. Geographically, we are in New York City, or more specifically, Manhattan. Temporally, we can sense the era in which the story is set from the fact that it is rush hour in a train station and yet Selden refers to the woman he observes as "Miss Lily Bart," a combination of modernism and quaintness that points to the early twentieth century. Although we don't know it yet, Wharton has just introduced us to the book's two central characters and given us critical insight into their situations. Of Selden, we know that he has a job (so he is not a man of leisure), but he has just spent the weekend

"dipping into the country" (so he has the habits of the well-to-do). He appears to be single (he's traveling alone), and he is clearly attracted to the acquaintance whom he has happened upon by chance. As for Miss Bart, she is obviously unmarried and apparently of that social class that has the liberty to leave the city for the entire summer. Finally, in this brief sketch, Wharton is giving us a glimpse of two of the novel's overarching themes—the influence of class in New York society, and the life of the unmarried woman as an object of public admiration, curiosity, and opinion.

Alternatively, here are the first three sentences of Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude:*

> Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point.

Given the colonel's name and the fact that Macondo was once made up of adobe houses, we can guess from Márquez's opening sentence that we are somewhere in Latin America. In the sentence, the author also alerts us that we are about to enter a saga that will span from "that distant afternoon" when the colonel was a boy, Macondo a village, and ice a novelty; through a period when the unnamed country has modernized enough to have a standing army; to "many years later," a point at which political upheaval has led to firing squads. Tonally, Márquez introduces us to the magical realist style for which he is famous by fancifully referring to the colonel's childhood as a time when "many things lacked names." And thematically, he reveals that the book we are about to read will be a tug-of-war between the

traditional and the modern, between the individual and the state, and between memory and the historical record.

But as in most novels, Wharton and Márquez do not rely on the first three sentences to orient their reader. They spend pages establishing our sense of the landscape and times. They give detailed descriptions of architectural spaces, the appearances and personalities of key characters, the interrelationships of families, prevailing socioeconomic factors, and events from the past that have bearing on the present. And much of this is laid out before anything of significance happens.

The author's interest in orientation does not end with the first few chapters. Many of the aesthetic tools with which the novelist constructs meaning rely upon the reader's cumulative familiarity with characters, events, and images. To appreciate a story's narrative arc, the evolution of its protagonists, the layering of its interlinked events, and the resonance of its repeated motifs, readers must not only remember what they've read but be constantly updating their sense of where they are in the tale.

A final aspect of the novel that runs counter to the experience of surprise is the thematic power of inevitability. In the culminating chapters of a well-crafted novel, when the unexpected suddenly occurs, our initial surprise is usually followed quite quickly by a sense of the event's inevitability. Upon reflection, we realize that everything the author has laid out in the preceding pages—the family histories, the characters' personalities, the course of events—has led to the dénouement inescapably. This prefiguring is the very essence of Shakespearean tragedy. The murder of Desdemona by Othello, the death of Hamlet at the hand of Laertes, the misguided suicides of Romeo and Juliet—these wrenching events are unavoidable outcomes. That is what separates them from instances of deus ex machina, when a problem intrinsic to a story is resolved, unsatisfyingly, through a sudden intervention, an unlikely occurrence, or the revelation of a new piece of information.

Suffice it to say that inasmuch as surprise plays a role in the novel, it is a subservient one, diminished in its power thanks to reader pre-awareness, authorial orientation, and the dictates of narrative inevitability.

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What I have said above in regard to the novel cannot so easily be said of the short story.

First, it is quite unusual for us to begin a short story with a sense of what it is about. Whether we read the story in a periodical, an anthology, or an author's collection, we will not find a synopsis of it on the dust jacket. Most stories we encounter haven't been summarized in a review or sketched out for us by a recommending friend. Even when we consider the stories of the most revered practitioners, very few have entered the popular consciousness. And for those that have (Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"), it is generally because they were taught to us in school.

So, when we read the opening sentence of most short stories, we are delightfully in the dark. Without the pre-awareness that accompanies novels, we don't know where or when the story is taking place. We don't know what sort of person will be at its center, whether male or female, old or young, black or white, Asian or Latino. We don't know if the narrator is omniscient, an interested observer, or the principal player. We don't know if the tone is going to be cynical or wistful, compassionate or angry, unnerving or hilarious. Which is all to the better. For our discovery of each of these elements as we read the story will provide its own little jolt of surprise.

And it's sure to require some discovery on our part, because a short story writer will not orient us in the manner of a novelist. By definition, a short story must have a greater economy of expression. It can't dedicate the first fifteen pages to introductory information with which to establish familiarity and context through detailed descriptions of settings or personal histories. The whole story may well be *over* in fifteen pages!

Given a short story's brevity, its author cannot make use of many of the aesthetic tools with which the novelist generally constructs meaning. All of

those elements of craft must be either curtailed, abbreviated, or abandoned. Instead of describing a narrative arc in its entirety, the short story writer provides us with a closely observed moment. Instead of revealing the evolution of a character through time, we get a glimpse of a personality. Instead of a series of interlinked events, we are likely to witness a single encounter or occurrence. And instead of an accumulation of harmonious poetic elements, we are presented with images that are striking and haunting, but often in isolation.

Another way of putting this is that we experience surprise differently in the novel than we do in the short story because of textual dilution. As we read a narrative, we can experience the pleasure of surprise in relation to almost any element of craft: we can be surprised by a turn of events; by something a character says; by an allusion, an image, a word. But a novel is made up of a plethora of actions, hundreds of images, and tens of thousands of words. So, in the context of a novel, the power of any one of these individual surprises tends to be watered down.

In the context of a short story, however, the exact same surprise—whether it's a turn of events, an image, or a word—is sure to have more potency. It will stand out more prominently, linger in our consciousness more durably, and play a more powerful role in our formulation of thematic meaning.

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By way of example, let's consider Raymond Carver's "Cathedral." Only fifteen pages long, the story focuses on just a few hours in the lives of three people spent in two adjacent rooms. The narrator begins by telling us that his wife has invited her old boss—a recently widowed blind man whom she hasn't seen for ten years—to visit. When she brings the blind man home from the train station, they all have a few drinks, eat dinner, and then return

to the living room, where they drink some more, smoke some dope, and converse late into the night with the television on in the background.

In crafting this story, Carver makes little effort to orient us. Neither the narrator nor his wife is ever named. We never learn their ages, their appearances, or their professions. We don't learn how they met or how long they've been together. We don't know where they live, other than that it is reachable from New York City by the Hudson River line. We do learn that the narrator doesn't like his work, has no plans to quit, and smokes marijuana every night. More generally, we sense that he and his wife are part of the vast American population of hardworking men and women with jobs, rather than careers, living in modest houses with no clear ambitions for the future.

While the narrator does not physically describe himself or his wife, he describes the blind man in vivid detail. This is in part because the visitor, when he arrives, upends the narrator's expectations of how a blind man would appear. He doesn't carry a cane, for instance, or wear dark glasses. He is heavyset and balding with a full beard. He has a booming voice and chain-smokes.

Earlier, the narrator has shared with us two details about his wife's relationship with her old boss: first, that on her last day working with him, the blind man asked to touch her face, feeling her every feature with his fingers; and second, that the two of them have maintained a close friendship by sending cassette tapes back and forth on which they describe their lives. Both of these details seem to unnerve the narrator a little, and he is openly ambivalent about the blind man's visit.

But late that night, while the narrator's wife has nodded off, a documentary about cathedrals comes on the television. At the blind man's request, the narrator tries to describe a cathedral, but he can't seem to do the structure justice. So, the blind man suggests they draw one together. The narrator finds a pen and grabs a shopping bag after shaking out some old onion skins. He spreads the bag out on the coffee table. The two men sit side

by side on the carpet. Then the blind man closes his hand over the narrator's hand, and the narrator begins to draw.

In reading Carver's story, we have no pre-awareness of its contents. He provides us little in the way of orientation. There is no time for a narrative arc or character development. There is not an elaborate cumulation of images, allusions, and metaphors. There is no prefiguring of how it will all end. Instead, we are invited to witness a brief encounter in which there are a number of wonderful little surprises—a series of unanticipated elements, each standing out in sharp relief against the sparseness of the tale.

Among these I would include the very notion of a blind man coming to visit; the image of the blind man touching the narrator's wife's face on their last day of work; the fact that they have maintained a relationship all these years by cassette tape; the blind man's request that the narrator draw a cathedral with him; the narrator's use of a shopping bag as drawing paper; and his discovery of the onion skins at the bottom of the bag, a strange little detail that all of us can visualize. But most surprising is the culminating image of this unnamed narrator in his nondescript home with his nondescript job finding himself seated on the carpet with a blind man's hand closed over his own as he attempts to draw a cathedral for the first time in his life. It is an image that startled me and moved me when I first read the story forty years ago, and it has stayed with me ever since.

By definition, a surprise can't be announced, anticipated, or prefigured, which is to say, it must come out of the blue. But the power of surprise can also be diminished in its aftermath through explanation and elaboration. In other words, the most powerful surprises come without preamble or epilogue. And that is why the short story is so well suited to delivering them.

As the editor of this edition, I am envious of you for all the delightful surprises you have yet to experience in the pages ahead.

Amor Towles
New York City
October 2023

Emma Binder
Roy

In the summer between seventh and eighth grade, my dad's brother, Uncle Roy, came to watch my sister Missy and me while our parents saw our grandma Lori die. Lori lived in an aluminum shack down in Nebraska; she was our mom's mother, but our mom couldn't travel two states southward alone, couldn't be trusted to drive herself. That summer, she was trapped in her brain's dark aquarium, prone to sobbing while drying dishes or seeing something bloody on TV. Over breakfast, she once glimpsed a prop plane flicker through the window in the sky, wandered out there in bare feet to look at it, and didn't return until the next morning. She needed our dad to chaperone.

Missy and I had never met Uncle Roy, but we'd seen a single photo: in it, he stood on a dirt road outside his slouch-roofed ranch house in the Upper Peninsula, wearing denim overalls and no shoes, head globed in wiry red hair. He looked nothing like our dad. To embroider the scene, Roy held a scrawny raccoon aloft in his hands like it was Simba in *The Lion King*. He and our dad only talked once a year, on Christmas, but he was the only person they could find to watch us on short notice.

We'd also heard stories: Roy drank too much, ate skinned snakes and possums. Roy, at ten years old, tried to train-hop from Iron Mountain to the Catskills to live in a hollowed-out tree. Roy had once hosted a poker game

where a man got shot, but when the police arrived, they found no gun and a room full of men who claimed the bullet came through the window.

"If he starts drinking, call us," our dad said to me the day before Roy arrived. "If he brings anyone over, call us. He promised not to bring a gun, but if he does, what do you do?"

"Call you," I said.

On the day they left, Roy careened too fast into our neat gravel driveway in the North Woods, driving an old Ford Ranchero with blisters of rust on its matte black hood. It was mid-July. I could hear aluminum cans and loose tools sliding around his truck bed. By the time he pulled up, our mom was already in the car with her purse and suitcase, lying fully prostrate in the back seat.

Before our dad left the house, he bent to kiss my and Missy's foreheads. "If there was anything I could do, I'd do it," he said.

From our bedroom, Missy and I heard Roy and our dad exchange muffled words in the kitchen. Then the kitchen door slammed, and we heard our dad backing his car down the driveway. Missy and I crept out of our room. We found Roy drinking a carton of apple juice in the kitchen. He looked like he did in his photo but older: his coarse orange hair wild but tinseled silver, his clothes faded as if leached of their color by rain. A violet scar stretched from his temple to his chin, cleaving his face like a crack in a vase. He looked at us and grinned. A tooth was missing from either side of his mouth.

"My nieces," he said. "In living color. You two look just like your mom."

He put down the juice and started pulling drawers in the kitchen and pantry. He rummaged through the fridge and freezer, opening jars of vinegar and bacon grease to smell what was inside. Then he started on the living room, opening desk drawers, slipping spare quarters and matchbooks into his pockets. Missy and I waited in the kitchen, listening to him scrounge through all the rooms of our house, until we finally heard him make his way to our bedroom.

I marched into the hallway and found him standing in our doorway.

“That’s our room,” I said, standing before him with my arms crossed. Missy stood behind me, watching. He turned around.

“I get it,” Roy said, slowly looking from Missy to me. “She’s the princess, and you’re the tough guy.”

Missy and I both blushed with pleasure.

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That night, Roy told us he was off to find a drink, and peeled down the driveway in his Ranchero. Two hours later, he marched into the kitchen with a twelve-pack of Miller, three scratch tickets, and a rifle wedged under his armpit.

As soon as Missy saw the gun, she started to cry.

“Don’t worry,” Roy said. “I’ll show you how to hold it.”

“We need to eat dinner,” I said.

“Sure,” Roy said. “I know that.”

Roy cracked a beer and got cooking: Hamburger Helper from the pantry, fried in Crisco and Kraft steak sauce. The room bloomed with steam and the smell of fat. Missy, at eight years old, hung in the kitchen doorway, while I sat at the kitchen table, watching Roy drink two, three, four beers in the span of a half hour.

“Is it true you eat snakes?” Missy said shyly, half-hiding behind the doorway.

“I’ve been known to eat a snake or two,” he said. “But that’s not the craziest thing I’ve ate.”

He’d eaten cow tongues, he told us, shoe tongues, cattails, prison food. He’d eaten hundred-year-old pickled eggs from behind a bar shelf in Houghton. You’re lying, we said, and he shrugged, then set two bowls before us of Hamburger Helper that turned my stomach before I even tasted it. Roy himself didn’t eat it, just headed to the screened-in porch with a beer in his front overalls pocket and a pouch of tobacco. Smoke wafted through the

kitchen window and mingled with the overhead lamplight, at which point I realized that smoke was still curling from the stove. I got up to shut off the burner, and when I turned around, I found Missy dramatically scraping her meal into the garbage.

"When are Mom and Dad coming back?" she said, eyes glassed over with tears.

"Not until Lori dies," I said. I squeezed her shoulder. "Come on. It's not like Mom does much better."

Roy wobbled back inside, garbed in cigarette smoke, and handed us each a scratch ticket. He showed us how to rub off its coating with a penny. Missy gave a yelp: she'd won twenty dollars.

"Lucky girl," he said. "I'll redeem that for you." Missy handed him the ticket and he slid it into his pocket, never to be seen again.

—

That summer, I'd just become friends with two girls from school named Natalie Golding and Lauren Shipley. I already knew that our friendship wasn't going to last, but I felt lucky to have friends at all. I'd been eating lunch by myself for years. They treated me like a project they'd undertaken with burdened hearts: they somberly taught me how to braid my hair at sleepovers, told me what music to listen to, sternly chided me when I said something odd. One night they dressed me up in Natalie's clothes, since she and I were supposedly the same size: flare jeans, a tight pink shirt, and a dust-blue patent leather belt. I stood in front of them in Natalie's room while they stared, heads cocked.

"I don't know what it is," Natalie said. "It's like it doesn't fit." She circled me once.

"Can you stand up straighter?" Lauren said. I pulled my broad shoulders back.

"I guess that's better," Natalie said. "Sort of."

I was already expending huge amounts of energy to look and act more like a girl: tweezing the fledgling hairs between my eyebrows, shaving my legs and armpits, wearing my mom's drugstore lipstick at school. That year, I'd finally quit wearing the loose-fitting boy's clothes that I'd liked since I could remember. None of it felt natural, but what did? Becoming friends with Natalie and Lauren seemed like a fluke, a lucky accident that the universe would soon correct. In the meantime, I tried to learn, copying the way Natalie's sentences curled at their ends, or how Lauren, who took year-round ballet and gymnastics lessons, walked as if led by a firm kite string.

I rode my bike to Natalie's house a few days after Roy showed up. Just that afternoon, he'd taken me and Missy into the backyard, rifle in hand, and set up a line of beer cans on a stump. It was time we learned how to shoot, he told us. My dad's instructions rang in my ears—*What do you do?*—but Roy was unlike anyone I'd ever met, and something told me that if I didn't learn everything he had to teach me, I would never get another chance.

When I got to Natalie's, I told her and Lauren about Roy and the gun. The bone-splitting sound of it. The way I sent bullets into the crowns of trees, and all Roy did was whoop, like I'd done something great. I pulled the front of my shirt down and showed them where a violet-blue bruise was already growing on my collarbone from the rifle's kickback.

"That sounds dangerous," Natalie said, glancing at Lauren.

"It totally was," I said. I felt exhilarated and strange. I plopped down on the floor of Natalie's room. "What do you guys wanna do?"

"We were going to ride bikes to the ice cream shop," Natalie said. "You can come. Unless you want to shoot people with your uncle."

I rolled my eyes and stood up. "Let's go," I said.

I bounded down the stairs and pulled on my white high-tops from the Salvation Army, then walked outside with Natalie and Lauren close behind me. Natalie's mom, Mrs. Golding, was in the yard in a visor and sunglasses, hosing the hedges. "You girls ride safe," she said, waving as we biked down the drive.