

# Who Reads Short Shorts?

Full libraries in one little package



Once upon a time, I took a break for Thanksgiving and cleaned up my messy room. Turned out I had more than 300 books lying around, needing homes. And because I lived in the home of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and frequented Prairie Lights Books, many of those books were short story collections.

Recently, I performed some pre-Thanksgiving cleaning and started to pile books left, right and center for re-sorting into appropriate bookshelves. More plays, more literary nonfiction, more young adult books ... but not too many short story collections.

And that's a shame, even though I already have hundreds of short stories on my shelves. For one thing, it's an axiom among publishers that people don't buy short stories, and I like to counter that with my spending money. For another, short stories offer a wide range of experience in compact form.

The best short story I've ever read, by Lorrie Moore, comes from her 1998 *The Birds of America*. I reread "People Like That Are the Only People Here" so often some sentences are practically engraved on my brain: "Baby and Chemo, she thinks: they should never even appear in the same sentence together, let alone the same life," for example, or "Overheard, or recorded, all marital conversations must sound as if someone must be joking, though usually no one is."

Moore's mordant humor and her mocking self-awareness, which leave room for tender and surprising flashes, charm tears and smiles out of me every time. Do yourself a favor and order *Birds* from, say, Books Without Borders. Or, for more reading pleas-

ure (including Alice Munro's depiction of the price of longing, "The Children Stay," and a barely known gem called "Brokeback Mountain" by Annie Proulx), find "People Like That," the first-place winner, in 1998's *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*.

Prize anthologies — my usual suspects include *Best American Short Stories* and the O. Henry Awards — provide dangerously seductive reading. "Oh, I can just read one story while I'm cooking dinner," I might think, or perhaps, "I'll check and see which story took second place in 2003 while I pack for the trip to the Midwest." Yeah, good plan! Not.

But neither is opening books by a single author. I remember being charmed by Isaac Asimov's terrible short story puns when I was 12 or so. Now I'm more likely to return to Junot Diaz's intense and vulnerable debut collection, *Drown*, or Ethan Canin's rich and complex *The Palace Thief*. If I want tough Scots immigrants and their emotionally stunted offspring, I'll pick up one of Alice Munro's collections; to balance Scots with Irish, I'll read Andrea Barrett's 1996 National Book Award-winning *Ship Fever*. And if I want a new book about our state, I'll pick up my copy of Eugene-born Benjamin Percy's *Refresh, Refresh*.

*Refresh, Refresh* is clearly a young writer's collection; some stories could have been revised after aging. Yet Percy (whose first collection, *The Language of Elk*, was published in 2006) captures sides of the Pacific Northwest that most people don't know — the brutal depression of rural poverty, the dangers of the mysterious forest and the people who grow up within its powerful grip, the allure of guns and fighting and fury in a landscape that demands, and defeats, big gestures. Our current wars with their hot charge of death and despair blow through Tumalo's lava-based country in the prize-winning title story, and David Brin's *The Postman* shadows every step of the apocalyptic "Meltdown." Bittersweet revenge works, for a while, for the working class guys in "The Killing" and "Somebody Is Going to Have to Pay for All This." Wisely, Percy saves the strong "When the Bear Came" for last, a hardscrabble reward for a book about the hardscrabble lives of people who aren't merely vacationing in the demanding terrain of Central Oregon.

"There is no frigate like a book / to take us lands away," wrote Emily Dickinson. In Percy's case, there is no dirt bike like this collection to take us into the depths of the high plateau. **ew**

**BOOK NOTES:** **Kenny Moore** signs *Bowerman and the Men of Oregon*, 7 pm 11/28, Barnes & Noble. **Deborah Madison** discusses *Vegetarian Suppers from Deborah Madison's Kitchen*, 7:30 pm 11/28, Powell's on Burnside, Portland. **Ehud Havazelet** and **Dorianne Laux** read, 8 pm 11/29, Knight Library, UO. **Shannon Wheeler** discusses the latest Too Much Coffee Man collection, *Screw Heaven, When I Die I'm Going to Mars*, 7:30 pm 11/29, Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland. Contributors to *It's So You* read, 7:30 pm, 12/4, Powell's on Burnside, Portland.

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