



# Typical: Stories

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Collection of short stories, published in 1991, by the acclaimed author of *Edisto* and *A Woman Named Drown*.

## Typical: Stories Details

Date : Published December 1st 1992 by Henry Holt & Company (first published 1991)

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Author : Padgett Powell

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# From Reader Review Typical: Stories for online ebook

## Thing Two says

Michiko Kakutani said "This new collection of short stories sends off fireworks of language, language that runs, jumps, and sometimes performs acrobatics in the air." It's the first time I've noticed a Kakutani review on the back of a book. Powell's writing reminds me of Faulkner's in that some of the stories are fascinating, and some go right over my head. My favorite story is one called "General Rancidity". Powell writes an entire story using various meanings of the word ran and words that start with r,a,n. I tried to copy this style yesterday; not sure if I was as effective, but it was a fun exercise. Powell is head of the MFA program at Florida. Go Gators.

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## Michael Seidel says

Some stinkers but some that seemed fueled by rocket fuel. The last two stories, Mr. & Mrs. Elliot and Cleveland, and The Winnowing of Mrs. Schuping are raw treasures of the English language. Slog through the rest of the book if only to reach those.

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## Fred says

Once again, I've broken my No Short Story Policy, but in my defense, IT'S PADGETT POWELL. I'll easily admit that while I am what Stephen King refers to as a "Constant Reader", I am far from qualified as "well read". But I do recognize quality writing and original thought when I see on the page. And Powell is certainly an original thinker. The man clearly has fun with language. He's not afraid to roll it around on the carpet a while to see what it picks up.

" General Rancidity ran the obstacle course and the whorehouse. He ran away from nothing. He ran to weight on furlough. He ran headlong into marriage. He ran aground once is a ten-foot dinghy in a foot of water, disposing himself toward a career in the infantry"

how about his one.....

"I am a student of low-affect living edged with sefl-deprecating irony.

I am a character of lower-affect living a bit on edge with Mr. Irony, a self-deprecating therapist.

A therapist of self-deprecation, teaching the presumptuous among us to edge ourselves with irony until we can be said to be low-affect burghers of the modern world, appropriate denizens of the modern world, Mr. Irony sits on the edge of the sofa smoking with his leg crossed over his knee after the fasion of a lady corossing her leg over her knee, not after the fashion of a man corssing his, etc, a manly configuration suggesting, from above at least, more the figure 4 than Mr. Irony's position does"

Some of these stories are only a few pages, some are much longer. All are fun. Yes, I did use the word 'fun'. This from a guy who loathes manufactured enthusiasm in all its forms, so you can safely put faith in the honesty of that statement.

As is true of all Powell's works that I've read, I'm inspired to either learn to write now or give up the notion in favor of something more pedestrian. Perhaps ermine farming. Give these stories a read. They work quite well as stand-alones or as consecutive scenes.

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### **Bob says**

The 64-year-old Powell has lived and taught in Florida most of his life and is considered an inheritor of the literary tradition of the American South. These short stories (many of which appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Grand Street*, *Harper's* and so on) are set everywhere from North Carolina to Texas to the surrealist nonplace of Donald Barthelme, from whom an epigraph sets the tone.

The least interesting stories (to me) are little more than word games (e.g. a three pager where every sentence contains an idiomatic variant of "to run" - "run up a tab", "run up a flagpole", "run to fat" etc). Others are psychological portraits of rural characters, their vernacular impressively rendered and generally catching them at some crisis point in their lives.

The approach of sketching a particular psychological trait is perhaps a bit heavy-handed in the sequence titled "Dr. Ordinary," "Mr. Nefarious" and "Mr. Desultory" (kind of like Roger Hargreaves for grown-ups) but they are clever and vary in style despite the names. My favorite, for the record, was "Mr. Irony."

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### **Ben Brackett says**

I wanted to enjoy this, but kept getting about halfway through each story and skipping to the next hoping that one would finally come together in a way that I didn't hate reading.

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### **Richard says**

Powell fits nicely into the fraternity of Donald Barthelme and George Saunders, in that reading a short story by any one of this lot makes you have to redefine what exactly makes for a short story in the first place. With Powell, a story can become an exploration of a word like irony, winnowing or desultory, or an absurdist train of logic that erupts from an accidental beheading or free world tour tickets sitting between the pages of a magazine. Absolutely primo stories here are the title piece, "Wait," and "The Winnowing of Mrs. Schuping." And the ear, the ear! Powell can make sentences throb with spirit.

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### **David says**

In every cheesy horror or sci-fi movie involving aliens or demons or pod people, there's the almost-obligatory scene where the hero(ine), having successfully slain the last(?) of the evil critters, falls into the arms of his or her sidekick/romantic interest/significant other, only to come to the sickening realization that the person they are embracing has been taken over by the forces of darkness. The music crescendos in ominous cacophony; the camera zooms in as the horrifying realization dawns across the protagonist's face ....

As I read this collection of stories, the third book by Padgett Powell, I experienced that exact same sinking

feeling. Here's an author whose first novel, "Edisto", was one of the most enchanting books I had read in 1984, the year it was published. So when I came across this collection in the second-hand book store, buying it seemed like a no-brainer. Caveat lector! As it says in those indigestible mutual fund prospectuses that clog my mailbox daily, "past success is no guarantee of future performance".

In this case, the warning signals were loud and clear. Had I just taken the time to do a little skimming in the store, I would have surely seen the warning signs. "Stories" with titles like "Mr. Irony Renounces Irony", "Dr. Ordinary", "General Rancidity", "Mr. Nefarious", "Miss Resignation". These sound like homework assignments from a graduate writing workshop in hell, and that's pretty much the way they read as well. Mr. Powell apparently thinks this kind of thing may be passed off as writing:

"Dr. Ordinary found solace in nothing. He found his shoes untied during surgery. He found his mother once, when she was in her sixties, naked in the bathtub calling for a fresh martini. He found bluebirds too far south. He found pies too sweet to eat. He found God with no difficulty, but locating his belief another matter. "

And so on, for a total of three wretched pages, and sixty repetitions of the phrase "He found..". If this kind of thing strikes you as insufferable, you are unlikely to find "General Rancidity", which is just more of the same with the verb 'run' instead of the verb 'find', any better.

It gets worse. Four of the 'stories' are named for states: Kansas, Texas, South Carolina and Florida. Here is the first 30% or so of 'Texas':

"I fell off the lightning rod. I entered the sweepstakes. I lost control. I became beautiful. I charmed a queen. I defied gravity. I moved mountains. I bowled. I wept, mourned, moped, and sped about town in a convertible, progressively irascing the gendarme until I was charged with exhibitionist speed."

My feelings about this toxic insult to the intelligence may be summed up as follows:

Dr. Giltinan found this book to be worthless dreck.

Or, if you prefer:

I wanted to vomit.

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## Sasha says

the first section dragged a bunch after the title story which is also the first story, and the second section although fantastic left me wondering if maybe powell was just about being a much more southern barthelme, but then ladies and gentlemen, we hit the third section. good lord does my heart beat faster and harder and with more grace that i thought it could just by thinking about the end of this book.

it comes off at times as someone who obviously learned a lot from barthelme. there are moments where you worry it will take only the tools and tricks and none of the emotional heft at the core of don b's work.

but it's good. it is. it is really really good. our fears and doubts are simply fears and doubts, and what is a world without fears and doubts?

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## **Mike says**

My first by Powell, I was really impressed. Initially I was turned off by some of his pretentious phrasing, but as I read more of the stories, I was able to understand it better.

Didn't care for all of his stories (Mr. Irony, South Carolina) but he definitely has more hits than misses. The Modern Italian is one of the best short stories I've ever read, and I would buy the book in a heartbeat just to read that story again.

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## **Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says**

This collection of short stories made me realize that I already know all stories and the fact that there are a lot of them written and still being written is because stories now all differ only by the way they are being presented, like there are a lot of ways rice can be cooked, rice with garlic, rice with fish, fried, boiled, paella, noodled, etc. The carrier piece here, Typical, is what assaults your brain when you start reading and it is nothing but the same stuff Kafka would have written, I mean idea-wise, though much more modern and much more difficult. It is like rice mixed with pebbles, if ever there is such a dish somewhere in China, so it is difficult to swallow and digest although the story is as old as the hills. What I mean is, why have rice with pebbles when rice can be pure or mixed with other edible stuff and can be enjoyed without difficulty?

This is therefore different, but not much. Forgettable, and quite certainly.

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## **Robert says**

To be honest I'm not really fond of short stories due to the fact that the consistency varies. I hate reading one fantastic story, wading through a lot of weak ones and then encountering another great story. I was sort of hoping that the collections featured in this list would buck that trend.

Powell is a chronicler of rednecks, no gooders, losers and eccentric characters and furthermore the majority of these stories take place in the south and he captures the accents and mentality (during my sojourns in Canada, I did meet a lot of southerners from all backgrounds). In fact there are a lot of linguistic pyrotechnics here.

However when it comes to short stories I prefer more well-rounded plot based ones. Powell likes to create an atmosphere with his writings and in the case of middle series of pieces in the book this works fine but sometimes it doesn't work out too well. In most cases I didn't really enjoy reading them.

There is, however one gold nugget and that's the title story. The rambling of a redneck. It is brilliant in every way. Other than that if you come from the Guy du Maupassant and Roald Dahl school of writing, do approach with caution.

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## **Lulu says**

Powell has a really compelling voice. One of the blurbs on the cover of this book has a line about the poetry of his colloquialism, or something to that effect. It's a good way to understand Powell's project here. He moves through a variety of different dialects and what ties this collection together is the way it neither embraces nor distances itself from the stories' subjects.

Not every character here is sympathetic. Some, quite the contrary. But there's a beautiful attitude towards morality and the way it straddles the ideal/real world divide.

Powell is also an excellent humorist for anyone that loves the tongue-in-cheek stuff, especially if it's accompanied by wide eyes as well.

The "Mr. Irony" series or "Wayne's Fate" were my favorites here, but it seems that every story (except maybe "The Modern Italian," which seems to think it's much less racist than it is) has something to recommend it.

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## **Deanne says**

Quick read from the 1001 list, made up of short stories some very good, some bizarre and some I didn't really like though these were few.

Got this as an inter-library loan, was told it came from Greenwich, but didn't realise it was from the states.

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## **Steve says**

An interesting, experimental, but ultimately directionless collection of short stories by the author of "Edisto." Most of the stories are set in the contemporary south, but rather than being character studies or perceptions of events, they are experiments in various prose techniques and devices, often involving no more than plays on words, as in "General Rancidity" or "Dr. Ordinary." Some of the stories, such as "Mr. Ordinary," are fun in their language but ultimately ineffective as stories. Among the best in the collection are "The Modern Italian," "Miss Resignation," and the final two stories, "Mr. & Mrs. Elliot and Cleveland" and "The Winnowing of Mrs. Schuping." Not nearly as engaging as "Edisto," but uniquely quirky in its best stories.

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## **Tony says**

Willie Stargell, prodigious hitter of home runs and occasional philosopher, once considered that every baseball game begins with the home plate umpire reaching an arm over the shoulder of a squatting catcher, pointing toward the pitcher, and ordering, in a melodic voice, "PLAAAAAAAY BALL!" "He doesn't say, 'Work Ball'," Stargell smiled.

Reading Padgett Powell, I am reminded that there is *wordplay*, but no *wordwork*.

Twenty-three short stories, some long and some very short, just two or three pages. Some bizarre, but not

bizarro. Some tending to magic realism.\* But all make the reader pause from time to time at the fun of putting words together, even if sometimes they originate in the darkest corners of the mind. These guys:

Try this, from 'Mr. Nefarious':

*Mr. Nefarious smiled, and only when smiling was he able to do anything else. When smiling he could also do nothing, but when not smiling he could do nothing but not smile.*

Or how about one sentence, this from 'Wait':

*Spavined, clavicular, and cow-hocked, with an air not of malice but simply of a leaden determination that seemed to come up from the hard, baking ground itself on which it stood, chained, confined, gravitate to the orbit of earth depressed, moonlike, and polished by its five-foot circular diurnal traveling, looking forward with a low-lidded not scowl or glare but just look, the eyes half-lidded and half-rolled, suggesting not insolence or calculation or even sentience but a kind of pride--rear-axled and log-chained for a lifetime to a hot powdery hole in which it is its fate to consider its chances of fighting, the rare times not chained, for its very life--a profound self-esteem that says simply, I am here, you see that I am here, what need to look you in the eye: the bulldog bit the corncob truncate.*

'Mr. Irony' is a Tim Burton-like character in his eponymous story, but then he renounces irony in the very next story, aptly (not ironically) named 'Mr. Irony Renounces Irony'. Having given up Irony, Mr. Irony goes to the unemployment office. He's denied benefits because he had had no employer, had not been laid off or fired. *What was more ironic than getting paid for not working only if you could prove someone had deemed you unsuitable for working?*

Powell, when not being ironical, can also serve up truisms.

From 'Proposition':

*You can't ramble around the woods in your truck going to fish camp without drinking.*

And from 'Texas':

*If a boy is afraid of the dark and wets the bed, try hard, very hard, not to comment in any language. He will grow to put you softly in your grave.*

In one of the weirder stories, 'The Modern Italian', which I recommend you read *last*, Mario Moscalini, a cab-driver, picks up a very fat Frenchman:

*Mario had no idea how to contend with a large Frenchman who did not care if you insulted Jerry Lewis. The idea even frightened him a little. One might as well be dealing with a Moroccan, or worse. A Frenchman unprepared to defend Jerry Lewis might do anything at all, because he would be a man who was empty inside, perhaps not even a man in the normal sense but a kind of alien--an anti-homme, as he thought the French might put it.*

I could go on and on.\*\* But I will end with my favorite story: 'Labove and Son'. Labove, see, was a teacher somewhere else, where he inappropriately 'touched' the Varnier girl. For all of five seconds. She was



thirteen. He fled to El Campo, Texas, married and had 'son'. When son was in high school, he learns about what his father did, reading about it in a book of all things. He sorta asks his Dad about it in the context of telling his Dad he wants to change his name to Bob Love II. The dad, Labove, likes to sit on a flat chair, tilted back, with the front two legs exactly two inches off the floor.\*\*\* He let the chair settle down to all fours, then tilted back again, *a rare full three inches off the ground*. And when he finally speaks, in one of those defining father-son moments, he says this: *What she was like, I need Italian to tell you. Change your name.*

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\*By the way, has anyone else considered that *magic realism* is an oxymoron. Dr. Phil, I think, has just published his fourth DIET book. Setting aside the fact that you should be able to say everything about dieting in your first volume, why -WHY, WHY, WHY- I ask are these books not in the Magic Realism section of the library?

\*\*You mean you haven't?

\*\*\*Try it. Highly recommended.

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