



The Best American Short Stories 2006

Ann Patchett (Editor), Katrina Kenison (Series Editor)

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“While a single short story may have a difficult time raising enough noise on its own to be heard over the din of civilization, short stories in bulk can have the effect of swarming bees, blocking out sound and sun and becoming the only thing you can think about,” writes Ann Patchett in her introduction to The Best American Short Stories 2006.

This vibrant, varied sampler of the American literary scene revels in life’s little absurdities, captures timely personal and cultural challenges, and ultimately shares subtle insight and compassion. In “The View from Castle Rock,” the short story master Alice Munro imagines a fictional account of her Scottish ancestors’ emigration to Canada in 1818. Nathan Englander’s cast of young characters in “How We Avenged the Blums” confronts a bully dubbed “The Anti-Semite” to both comic and tragic ends. In “Refresh, Refresh,” Benjamin Percy gives a forceful, heart-wrenching look at a young man’s choices when his father -- along with most of the men in his small town -- is deployed to Iraq. Yiyun Li’s “After a Life” reveals secrets, hidden shame, and cultural change in modern China. And in “Tatooizm,” Kevin Moffett weaves a story full of humor and humanity about a young couple’s relationship that has run its course.

Ann Patchett “brought unprecedeted enthusiasm and judiciousness [to The Best American Short Stories 2006],” writes Katrina Kenison in her foreword, “and she is, surely, every story writer’s ideal reader, eager to love, slow to fault, exquisitely attentive to the text and all that lies beneath it.”

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From Reader Review The Best American Short Stories 2006 for online ebook

Ryan says

Kenison's last batch as series editor. Neither a peak nor a trough for the series -- i.e., it was a pretty good edition to go out on. Plenty of good stuff to be found, as usual, with a few standouts and only one total dud. My favorites of the bunch, in rough order of preference:

- * Ann Beattie with Harry Mathews - "Mr. Nobody at All"
- * Benjamin Percy - "Refresh, Refresh"
- * Nathan Englander - "How We Avenged the Blums"
- * Thomas McGuane - "Cowboy"
- * Donna Tartt - "The Ambush"
- * David Bezmozgis - "A New Gravestone for an Old Grave"

And some honorable mentions:

- * Tobias Wolff - "Awaiting Orders"
- * Mary Gaitskill - "Tonight I'm Yours"

Georganne says

I love short stories and these volumes, published yearly, are always some of the best.

Dan says

As I've said before, it's difficult to review collections like this, because I read them over such a long stretch of time, a story here and a story there. What I remember about this one is that there seemed to be a lot of "short story-y" stories, particularly in the first half -- a lot of the summer that changed our lives or the childhood friend with the severe medical condition or troubled home life. The story selection seemed too safe.

When I picked up the book for the last time and decided to knock off the rest of the stories in one go, I hit a stretch of very good stories that seemed poised to redeem the book and bring it up to the high standards of the Best American series. Thomas McGuane's "Cowboy," in particular, is memorable -- a Cormac McCarthy-esque summation of a ranch hand's life (albeit without brutal murders or crushing bleakness). Stories like Jack Living's "The Dog," Yiyun Li's "After a Life," Aleksandar Hemon's "The Conductor," Nathan Englander's "How We Avenged the Blums," and David Bezmozgis' "A New Gravestone for an Old Grave" take what could be standard short story fare and craft quite memorable, worthwhile stories. The collection seemed to have righted itself, cruising towards a 4-star rating.

Then came Ann Beattie's "Mr. Nobody at All." This story, the final entry in the collection, clocks in at just under 50 pages, when it consists of little more than a gag that shouldn't take more than 15 pages. In the author's own words: "I've burned out on memorial services in which you sit immobilized while people, in the guise of talking about the dearly departed, talk about themselves, so I thought it would be funny to do a

send-up of memorial services." Well, yes, it could be funny. But the problem is that, in this case, it isn't that funny. The story consists strictly of speeches given at a memorial service, but none of them are really that funny or entertaining. And when taken in the aggregate, they don't really tell a larger story; you don't get much of a picture of the deceased's life (which is, I guess, kind of the point), nor do you really understand much about how all these people are connected to each other. And it just goes on and on and on. By the fourth or fifth speech, you get the joke. By the eighth or tenth, you realize that there is no larger story being told beyond the original joke. By the twentieth or thirtieth, you realize that there is nothing new or better coming down the pike, and you start to wish that it was your memorial service.

To sum up: This collection starts out slowly and blandly, delivers a number of solid stories in the second half, and then grinds to a soul-bleaching halt as you slog through the last story.

Beth Hartnett says

I set out to read a short story collection at the suggestion of Anne Patchett who absolutely RAVED about the genre. While there were some interesting stories and I am glad that I tried it, I once again confirmed that I would rather read a novel or memoir or anything that lets me get into the story and characters more than a short story. I am not ruling out future short story forays, but will be choosing elsewhere in general!

Grace says

My favorites:

The Alice Munro story: A gorgeous portrait of a family of Scottish immigrants, full of great characters.

Katherine Bell's "The Casual Carpool:" Concerns a group of people who don't know each other but who are all riding in one car in order to take advantage of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge's carpool lane. I couldn't help but love this as a Bay Area native (the carpool lane has always been a big deal on the bridge). It's also a great set-up for a short story.

The Donna Tartt story- this collection had a lot of stories focused on the "effects of war in the family," I guess because we were in the middle of the Iraq War in 2006. This was my favorite. Haunting and thought-provoking.

The Yiyun Li story- I love everything that Li writes, but this was really great. It's well-observed, gripping, and disturbing. Li at her best.

The other stories weren't super memorable, but the collection was worth it for those four.

Stephanie says

My favorite story was shockingly not from an old favorite author in this mixed-bag collection--I was pleased to discover Katherine Bell's "The Casual Car Pool."

Kristy says

I love reading short stories. You can pick it up and put it down and not forget what you've read previously. Maybe it's because I finished a short story collection not long ago that was amazing and fresh in my mind. None of these stories really stood out to me.

Cdubbub says

A book of short stories, selected by my favourite author? YES PLEASE! There were so many good stories in this collection, particularly "Today I'm Yours", "The Dog" & "The Casual Car Pool". There were quite a few where my attention wasn't kept, but not enough to make it an unpleasant reading experience. And most importantly it confirmed one thing: no matter how many stories of hers I read, I just don't get Alice Munro.

Sheri Joseph says

I love Ann Patchett's writing, but she's no editor. I've read every book in this Best American series since 1996, and this is the worst so far. Choosing from among 100 or so stories, Patchett couldn't help but include a few strong ones, and she has (stand-outs for me include Patrick Ryan, Aleksander Hemon, Katherine Bell). But most are only okay or just blah, especially compared to a few I'd read that made the "Top 100" list, and she chooses far too many stories that are essentially the same (kids playing war games at home while soldier fathers are away at war; marriage troubles in Beijing) and then puts them right next to each other.

I teach these books in writing workshops, where it can be valuable for students to read a poor collection and find the weaknesses of "successful" writing. They understand that they *can* do better than this, and anger at bad (false, pretentious, insincere) writing is a fine motivator. If you're looking to read some good stories, though, skip this one.

Billie Pritchett says

This was an enjoyable collection of short stories. Here are some of the memorable short stories. Benjamin Percy's "Refresh, Refresh" is about a small town whose best job opportunity for the men is joining the army and about the young men who try to cope with the absence of their fathers. Maxine Swann's "Secret" is a story about sexually coming of age in high school. Patrick Ryan's "So Much for Artemis" involves a father whose recent actions aren't quite comprehensible to his son (but which are comprehensible to the reader). Kevin Moffett's "Tattooizm" is about a young woman and her boyfriend, the latter an aspiring tattoo artist. Other enjoyable stories I remember, but I'm too lazy to recall are "Cowboy" and "Today, I'm Yours." Some of the other stories were enjoyable and instructive, but not as much as these were. I would dissuade folk from reading the final story in this collection, because I couldn't find much to merit the inclusion of the story: it's called "Mr. Nobody at All," and, aside from the various perspectives people have on the man's life, he is not a person you would want to spend too much of your time with nor are many of the people who are close to him and who recount their experiences with him.

Emily says

Ann Pachett's introduction was stellar and gave me encouragement to take risks in my writing of short stories. She says "Because they (short stories) are smaller, the writer is simply more willing to learn from her mistakes and throw the bad ones and the only pretty good ones away. Knowing that something can be thrown away encourages more risk taking, which in turn usually leads to better writing. ... it takes a real nobility to dump the bad novel. The novel represents so much time that the writer often struggles valiantly to publish it even when it would be in everyone's best interest to chalk it up to education and walk away. I know a lot of people who published the first novel they ever wrote. I can think of no one who published his first short story." I most enjoyed or learned from "Refresh, Refresh" by Benjamin Percy, "The View from Castle Rock" by Alice Munro, "A new Gravestone for an Old Grave" by David Bezmozgis, and "The Casual Car Pool" by Katherine Bell. An excellent collection.

Ariel says

Noteworthy/memorable:

Tattooism rings true. What do people want from relationships, and how do they reconcile that with what they get? When is it over and how do you know? It also reminded me of people in the moments before having to make a tough decision. Like when we're faced with the fact that we can't continue our unsustainable consumer lifestyle any more. We're so satisfied and happy with ourselves right now, we can barely imagine giving up our way of life, even for something we know will be better in the long run. Is it better to willfully quit something than let it fall apart?

How We Avenged the Blums is a story of anti-semitic oppression and how to respond to it. I like that it uses a children's perspective to take a fresh look at the meaning of revenge.

Mr. Nobody at All is a unique story told from a unique perspective. Despite being unorthodox it still manages to have drama, conflict, and resolution. Definitely a memorable look at what other people think about you - what is public - and what is private.

Honorable mentions:

Cowboy, Today I'm Yours, Grandmother's Nose, The Casual Car Pool

Take-home message:

Most of the stories were similar to each other, describing childhood or the Iraq War, and I didn't connect with most of them. There are a few memorable ones but in general, not one of my favorites in the BASS series.

Nicola says

Appreciated the contemporary feel of this collection, with many stories directly referencing the war in Iraq. Though it is kind of sad to think that the world hasn't changed all that much after two years. As with all collections, this one was a bit uneven, though, overall, worthwhile. Unfortunately, I struggled with both the first and the last story-so, in retrospect, wish I had just eaten the meat of the sandwich and not the bread. Standout stories: Robert Coover's 'Grandmother's Nose,' Kevin Moffett's 'Tattooizm,' Jack Livings 'The Dog,' and, of course, Benjamin Percy's 'Refresh, Refresh.'

A note on amazing short stories in general: It's really quite incredible how much they earn in such a short space. I love when the twist (the kink in a character's situation) feels both shocking and obvious at the same time. Like this blind spot that is suddenly revealed. Or like my friend the other day with a kink in her neck, who kept having to turn to see things: that moment her body is building up towards, when her neck suddenly, easily twists and she'll finally be able to see that weird-man-in-the-clown-suit who has been following her, probably, since she was a little kid, but no one really knows.

Amy says

Most stories were good, although I did not like the last story and could not finish it.

Craig says

Short stories are starting to grow on me. The more I read them, the more I understand them. Their focus is on the moment and how it feels.

With that in mind my favorite of this collection was Yiyun Li's "After a Life," about a family who has spent a lifetime taking care of a child with special needs and the guilt they feel for imagining what life will be like "later."

I also enjoyed Edith Pearlman's "Self-Reliance." I came across three odd sentences while reading it and discovered at the end that they were clues to what would happen. In my past experiences with short stories, those clues would have been lost on me.

My other favorite was Thomas McGuane's "Cowboy." Although I struggled with the opening paragraph, confused by what was happening, I quickly enjoyed the voice and the growing relationship with the main characters.

Runners up go to Nathan Englander's "How We Avenged the Blums," David Bezmozgis' "A New Gravestone for an Old Grave," and Jack Livings' "The Dog." All three created a tension in their stories and brought me into worlds I wasn't familiar with.

Rounding out my favorites were Katherine Bell's "The Casual Carpool," Aleksandar Hemon's "The Conductor," and Alice Munro's "The View from Castle Rock." All three had characters that I enjoyed.

As for the other eleven stories, they provided brief moments of enjoyment for me, either based on nostalgia or an intellectual idea but didn't hit me deep enough to put them at the top of my list.

Overall, I'd recommend these short stories to anyone who isn't familiar with the genre but is curious to try something new.
