

Arenas, Reinaldo - *The Doorman*

So different from what we're taught about writing English. So little dialogue at times. Vast quantities of text in which he "tells" a story . . . but it works for him. Most of the time. His satire is good.

Arenas, Reinaldo - *Singing From the Well*

Bank, Melissa - *The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing*

Not a novel, really, but all the chapters, like stories, connect in the end. Title story is probably the best, but I liked them all, particularly "The Worst Thing a Suburban Girl Could Imagine."

Banks, Russell - *Searching For Survivors*

Very distinctive stories, particularly the title story. Great variety, yet the stories are joined together by theme in a way that is organic and not forced.

Baxter, Charles - *Through the Safety Net*

Great but often quiet stories. The last one is narrated by a man in a park who is watching everyone there. He says, "There is no story here," but that's the story: the bucolic but eventful afternoon in the park.

Beattie, Ann - *Distortions: Stories*

Another great collection. I liked the ones in the second half better than those in the first. Especially fine are "Wolf Dream" and "Wanda's." Very 1970s yet timeless and literary in quality.

Begala, Paul - *It's Still the Economy, Stupid*

His tone is too partisan, too strident, almost adolescent. BUT . . . his facts are interesting and right on the mark. Too bad his tone almost ruins the book's credibility. Another book, like Ivins's *Shrub*, that won't be read by the people who need to.

Best American Short Stories 2002 (Sue Miller, guest editor)

Burroughs, Augusten - *Running With Scissors*

Memoir. Someone born in the late sixties writing fairly average prose. Only a sort of train-wreck curiosity makes one keep reading. Enjoyed it, but reader feels a distance. Little feeling or affect revealed on part of the author. Jokes about all the horrible things that happened to him, and one must probably do this to survive. But . . . I feel cheated at the end—and after staying up till 3:00 to finish it. [I couldn't

sleep anyway.]

Capote - *In Cold Blood*

My second reading although my first time was in 1968 when my college choir was touring in western Kansas—virtually miles from where the Clutters were murdered in their home. Of course, as with any reading this far removed from the first, I had eyes for different things this time. I had also read the Gerald Clarke biography in 1988, so I knew how attached Capote had become to Perry Smith, the one responsible for most of the murders. Some of the most vivid scenes, aside from events of the murder themselves, occur in the Finney County jail. In the four-story building in which Perry is held adjacent to the caretaker in a cage usually called the “women’s cell.” How appropriate. Perry feeds a pet squirrel he coaxes into the cell through the window. He doesn’t harm or kill the squirrel but murdered four people (two, by his account). Could only someone this feral in nature coax a squirrel inside a jail window to eat a few crumbs each day? Not as enthralled with this reading as I was in 1968. Not sure non-fiction novels ever caught on. Difficult to tell what is actual and what is surmised on the part of Mr. Capote—almost negating the validation of either genre.

Casey, Nell - *Unholy Ghost: Writers on Depression*

Mostly they write about their own depression. Quite good. Rang some familiar bells. However, I don’t seem to have the same creative result that most of these writers have with their multiple publications, prestigious grants. Perhaps my depression isn’t deep or severe enough. [Ah, bitter bitter tears. Perhaps I’m just not as talented.]

Cather, Willa - *The Professor’s House*

Dull but curious book. Strange structure.

Clinton, Hillary - *Living History*

Thoroughly enjoyed. Literate. Honest. Accurate. Kinder (to her enemies) than she might have been. Very informative and corroborates all we believed was happening as it was happening: Kenneth Starr is an asshole who overstepped his boundaries, as was the Newt. How the Clintons weathered this eight-year period I do not know. I do believe she will be a presidential candidate in 2008 (if not drafted in 2004), and she will win. That’s why she’s so frightening to the Republicans. She’s too good with the people, too real, more real than Republicans can ever be because all that Republicans want to do is perpetuate a patrician way of life that has so little relationship to Democracy, and she flies in the face of all that.

Cohen, Elizabeth - *The House on Beartown Road*

Memoir by a woman whose parent has Alzheimer’s. Much more mystical than the other two memoirs I’ve read. Husband leaves her. Her baby is one year

old / Cohen is 40 / her father is 80; she's definitely in "sandwich" situation. Heart-breaking but never sentimental. All three books cover the disease differently. But all three point out that AD is a coast-to-coast train wreck about to happen. 4.4 million more will be diagnosed with it. Yet . . . researchers feel they are very close to a cure.

Conroy, Frank - *Body and Soul*

Truly literary novel. Strong prose. Strong sense of purpose. Researched the heck out of music and history. Felt at times a distance from the characters. Emotion is something male writers seem to *display*. Women seem to *portray* or show emotion so that a reader *feels* it. Still, I enjoyed the book as a good read, particularly the musical references. He even has an opinion on *Some Like It Hot*.

Cooney, Eleanor - *Death in Slow Motion*

Good. So different from Sue Miller's book which is controlled emotionally. Cooney lets forth yet also is controlled, so you feel for her but also for her mother. My God, what a nightmare for people with little or no money. But I'll bet even RR is difficult for Nancy—with all their money—still very hard!

Cunningham, Michael - *A Home at the End of the World*

First novel. Excellent. Can see where *The Hours* is coming from. He uses the phrase "the hours" in a prescient manner. Can see he is already thinking of Woolf and his next book. A much better "version" of the Stephen McCauley book (*Object of My Affection*), if that's fair to say. Two gay guys + one straight woman (although sexuality of Bobby is nebulous). A much richer story than gay guy & straight woman who is pregnant by an absent straight man (*Object*). *End of the World* explores what it is like to be a family of misfits. Rotating narration in which chapters are from the POV of three main characters, as in *Catch-22*, *Little Altars Everywhere* (Mary Karr). MC is a mighty force.

Cunningham, Michael - *Flesh and Blood*

Probably liked *The Hours* and *Home at the End of the World* better. There is an "Hours" link all three books share, as if subconsciously Cunningham is working toward *The Hours*. Repeats a variation of the cake-making motif in this one. One character asks mother if she threw out the first two cakes before producing the "perfect" third one. Mrs. Brown in *The Hours* did just that—threw out the first cake before getting the second one right.

Erdrich, Louise - *Master Butchers Singing Club, The*

Quite good. Quite well written. Kept me involved. Clever ending.

Erdrich, Louise - *Love Medicine*

This is a “novel,” but it is not linear. Nice change. Like a number of other native American or Hispanic novels: *Ceremony* (Leslie Marmon Silko) and *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (Tomas Rivera) . . . a washing back and forth through time—as if there really is no difference between past, present, or future. Each “chapter” seems self-contained, episodic, and it is, but each one also fits with the rest, ringing bells in your head about episodes told earlier. Not sure I could write this way, but I admire it. So natural, the way one’s mind works.

Franken, Al - *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*

A more satisfying book I have not read in a long time. Confirms what all liberals and most people with brains knew already. Bush et. al. are all lying—and not about having sex with an intern—but crucial issues that will determine whether we have a planet in 100 or 50 years from now. Very funny book, too, but maddening. I could go on and on with kudos, but I must stop so I can send the following e-mail to my friends: “You must drop what you’re doing and read Al Franken’s *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them!* You will laugh (at how he uncovers the liars in the act of lying). You will cry (at how he uncovers the liars in the act of lying). [I did send something like this to my friends when I was not near as angry. Did any of you ever read his book? PB, I don’t believe you’ve ever returned my copy.]

Franzen, Jonathan - *Strong Motion*

Liked most of this book. Renee is shot $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through. After that Franzen seems to hurry everything (or is it a long denouement?), easily explaining everything. Ah, well, I still love his writing. Quite good.

Heller, Joseph - *Catch-22*

Glad I finally read this one. Quite well worth the time. The satire is apt for anyone who works for an institution of any kind. War scenes are real, not maudlin.

“There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one’s own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn’t have to; but if he didn’t want to he was sane and had to. Yossariah was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle” (46).

“Rome was destroyed, Greece was destroyed, Persia was destroyed, Spain was destroyed. All great countries are destroyed. Why not yours? How much longer do you really think your own country will last? Forever? Keep in mind that the earth itself is destined to be destroyed by the sun in 25 million years or so” (238).

“Always remember,’ his mother had reminded him frequently, ‘that you are a

Nately. You are not a Vanderbilt, whose fortune was made by a vulgar tugboat captain, or a Rockefeller, whose wealth was amassed through unscrupulous speculations in crude petroleum; or a Reynolds or a Duke; whose income was derived from the sale to the unsuspecting public of products containing cancer-causing resins and tars; and you are certainly not an Astor, whose family, I believe, still lets rooms. You are a Nately, and the Natelys have never done anything for their money" (243).

Hensley, Patricia - *Hummingbird House*

A literary novel I read about in *AWP Writer's Chronicle*. Quite fine, although I didn't catch on or catch up until halfway through the book. A female nurse from Indiana works in Guatemala. Dangerous work in the 1980s. She's disillusioned. Falls in love with a priest whom she is planning to marry until he is shot by guerillas late in the novel. Is a book literary in nature if you make up your own rules about characterization (too many to follow or care about), structure, language, style?

Ivins, Molly and Lou Dubose - *Bushwhacked*

Of all the Bush exposés, the most articulate in which anger is under control, the facts are just the facts, ma'am. Ivins uncovers even more than I thought possible. Chapter 15, "The Empire Strikes Back" is probably the most revealing in terms of Bush's foreign policy (Kill them before they kill you, says this Christian man).

Lahiri, Jhumpa - *Interpreter of Maladies*

I read the title story in 1999 *Best American Short Stories*. I called it the "perfect" story at the time. Perfectly realized. I read it again—annotated it. Such a subtle chronicle of the distance between a husband & wife—a distance created by one generation being raised outside India. Moral distances. "Interpreter" has such a broad and yet narrow usage here. Central character is an interpreter who helps a doctor interpret his patients' "maladies." But another character wants him to psychoanalyze her (the interpreter) as to why she is so "bad." He loses all interest in her after the question comes up. The rest of the stories are quite strong. So subtle.

McCourt, Frank - *Angela's Ashes*

Lovely book. Can see what all the fuss is about. Childhood recreated in all its misery and innocence, yet through the eye of a knowing adult. Makes judgments (on Catholics, the Irish) without being hateful. Lyric quality to his prose, laced with the voices of his childhood, the lovely Irish tongue and legend.

McMurtry, Larry, editor - *Still Wild: Short Fiction of the American West 1950 to the Present*

Excellent collection. He has a great eye and ear for the short story. See Table of Contents for annotations. I believe "Brokeback Mountain" by Annie Proulx is in this collection. [But I can't prove it BECAUSE SOMEONE HAS FAILED TO

RETURN MY COPY. YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE.] Also stories by Mark Jude Poirier, Louise Erdrich, and Rick Bass, favorite writers of mine.

Mailer, Norman - *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*

Okay. Great “thoughts” in places. Not so good in others. The chapter on film is not enjoyable.

Some nuggets:

“Consciously or unconsciously, writers must fashion a new peace with the past every day they attempt to write. They must rise above despising themselves” (71).

“Plot comes last. I want a conception of my characters that’s deep enough so they will get me to the places where I as the author have to live by my wits. That means my characters must keep developing. So long as they stay alive, the plot will take care of itself” (90).

“You really don’t want to get into a theme where you take no real chances, especially if it is a long book. How to dignify the time it uses up?” (127).

An ongoing bad mood (not clinical depression) can be helpful. Don’t want to be in love with a story or character. Want to be detached (141).

WRITING STORIES = ORDER

Mason, Bobbie Ann - *Love Life*

Stories. Most of them quite good. In “Marita” she alternates between first and third person quite successfully. Not sure of her purpose, though.

Maupin, Armistead - *The Night Listener*

Fine, as always, for what it is: a good read. He could be a more literary writer, but he seems to take the easy way out. Yet, it is moving story with no manipulations or machinations.

Miller, Sue - *The Good Mother*

Fine novel. The narrator works in a lab caring for rats. She describes leaving the building as if she, too, is a rat caught in a maze—over which she has no control. In some ways the book seems commercial: appeals to women though men, too, would enjoy it if they gave it a chance. The novel is “instructive,” cautionary. Prose is fluid, more than adequate. Today’s Edith Wharton, perhaps?

Miller, Sue - *Inventing the Abbotts And Other Stories*

Miller is so adept at writing the so-called domestic story. But she fully realizes each

character without favoring or slanting anything toward a particular given. Her words in the last sentences are so all encompassing, almost like poem's lines. Really character driven, making each story "unpredictable."

Miller, Sue - *The Story of My Father*

Memoir of Miller's father's bout with Alzheimer's Disease. Very touching. Informs my situation with Dad in many ways. I don't believe he has AD, but I sense he is losing his mind.

Miller, Sue - *The World Below*

Excellent. I love her writing. She stays out of her own way so that she can tell the story, yet she is so eloquent. Great prose style. Wonderful metaphor that controls the novel. There exists so much "life" below our everyday lives—things we don't "see."

The town hidden under the reservoir (except for a brief glimpse at various times) = the lives that people keep hidden in their journals, letters, and in their hearts.

The only aspect I couldn't "buy," was this: How did the narrator know so much about her grandmother when her grandmother's diary was not fluent but quite perfunctory in most places? An authorial device, I suspect, a suspension of disbelief required on my part . . . I suppose.

Moore, Michael - *Stupid White Men*

For an "uneducated" man, Moore makes great use of facts gleaned from a variety of sources to state his case quite eloquently and logically: that Bush (and Clinton) are greedy, stupid white men, who continue the long tradition of chauvinistic imperialistic white men who would rule the world and line their pockets with gold at the same time. If every working man or woman were as enraged by this book as I am, they could rule this country. If the fifty percent who don't vote would vote for the same person, they could rule this country. We need congress people who rent instead of buying property in D.C. Congress people who cut their salaries rather than voting themselves an automatic increase without permission from their constituents. Gah, it makes me furious, the greed of these people.

Nichols, John - *The Sterile Cuckoo*

One case in which the film is mostly likely better than the book [and that's not saying much]. The bar has been raised over the last 35-50 years. I don't think a comparable novel could be published today. Narrative pace is too slow and plodding, the subject matter too trifling.

Proulx, Annie - *That Old Ace in the Hole*

Entertaining. I see why J would like it, so much history being spouted . . . by mere

characters. Who knew that people in the panhandle of Texas knew that much about their own history!

Not a literary book like her stories. Just a good read for the most part. Prose seems a bit phony, based on only a cursory knowledge of the area, particularly in the dialogue (they don't sound like the West Texans I know).

Robson, Claire - *Love in Good Time*

I met Claire in Key West at a workshop with Edmund White. Then I heard her read from the book in Northampton MA at the Broadside Book Store—a wonderful bit of serendipity to wind up at the same spot at the same time. A most moving memoir. Claire tells of her coming out, but more important, she does it amid the conflict of her hectic family life in England. Beautifully realized “character,” if you can say that about person in her own memoir (you can). I've never truly laughed and cried simultaneously before as I did over the scene in which her family motors to her father's funeral, seventeen miles of joke-telling and smoking and crying. “They were impressed by the depth of our sorrow” (215). So witty, so multi-layered. Not just about being a lesbian. Much broader and more literary than that. No wonder Michigan State Press picked it up.

Styron, William - *Set This House on Fire*

Perhaps not the *tour de force* that *Sophie's Choice* is, but then he's twenty plus years younger here. Still . . . quite magnificent in its own right. Structure is complex in reality, simple in perception. The mind follows him along every crack and crevice of the mountain the character is climbing and then descending. I want to write like this. Opinionated, moral characters. Not Sunday School moral, but humanistic moral—people who instinctively know right from wrong though they don't always practice doing what is right. Who does, always, I mean?

Thomas, Helen - *Thanks for the Memories, Mr. President*

Light reading but insightful in regard to the last six presidents.

Truong, Monique - *The Book of Salt*

Fabulous novel. Stylish prose is impeccable. Clever idea: Vietnamese/French chef (who is gay) works for Stein and Toklas in Paris. More about the cook than the celebs.

Welty, Eudora - *One Writer's Beginnings*

More memoir than writing book, but the book is a jewel, evoking in the reader memories of his own life by Welty's recalling strong vivid memories of her own.

White, Edmund - *Marcel Proust*

A lightweight (as is each book in the series) literary biography, but I enjoyed the thumbnail sketch of Proust's life, especially as it relates to *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Zoetrope: All Story

Some great short stories. Some of the best I've read in a long time: "Baker's Wife" by Sara Powers, "The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing," and "The Leopard Gary" by Melissa Bank. "Her New Life," by Emily Perkins, is perfect!