

Alexie, Sherman - *The Toughest Indian in the World: Stories*

Very strong collection. Fred Leebron said he writes about that which pisses him off. So, too, Mr. Alexie. His last story, "One Good Man," made me both laugh (when narrator challenges pompous white professor at WSU) and cry (caring for dying father near end of story). Stories are set up in a fine kind of rhythm, and Alexie emphasizes several themes throughout: hate but tolerance of the white man, anti-alcohol (breaking stereotype of drunken Indian), pansexuality (crosses many borders here).

Bernays, Amy and Pamela Painter - *What If?*

Another great creative writing text. Practical yet creative in approach. The "what if" list actually helped me to "unstick" and finish "Dedication."

[Since then, I've also used a number of these exercises to revise, and a number of them to polish a ms. For example, highlighting that which represent the five senses using five different colors. It graphically represents how much or how little your writing is concrete, appealing at least some of the time to the five ways we interpret the world. Used it with regard to my entire novel. Helped me to revise some rather poverty-stricken areas of the book.]

Best American Short Stories 1999 (Amy Tan, Ed.)

Editorial choices are so based on the editor's personality, tastes. Liked most all of these. One story is perfect in its realization: Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies." The most incomprehensible story was Steve Yarborough's "The Rest of Her Life." Read it twice and need to read it again, I guess.

Best American Short Stories 2000 (E.L. Doctorow, Ed.)

Every story is a 9 or a 10. It's like being faced with a large box of Godiva chocolates and being forced to pick your favorite(s). All stories should move (go somewhere) like these. Prose that moves (the reader) like these.

Best American Short Stories 2001 (Barbara Kingsolver, Ed.)

Again the editor really affects the choice of stories. Didn't like as many of these as I did in 2000. [Marked Contents for good stories, i.e. ones I liked]

Best American Short Stories of the 20th Century (John Updike, Ed.)

1923 Jean Toomer - "Blood Burning Moon"

1929 Grace Stone Coates - "Wild Plums" (Set in Kansas, captures my grandmother's era, the same language, its idioms.)

1955 John Cheever - "The Country Husband" (Excellent portrayal of suburban life.)

1960 Lawrence Sanders - "The Ledge" (Harrowing tale of man and boys who go out hunting and don't return.)

1987 Tim O'Brien - "The Things They Carried" (Worthy of the hoopla. So very well crafted, perfect. The objects soldiers carry, some quite weighty, in Vietnam become metaphor for all their emotional baggage, which may actually be heavier.)

1994 Alice Elliott Dark - "In the Gloaming" (Very subtle story about mother coming to terms with her son dying of AIDS.)

Burroway, Janet - *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*

Confirmed many of my best instincts. Hopefully, she helped extinguish some of my worst practices. Need to 1) Work from the subconscious 2) Revise differently than I have been. [A text that I return to often.]

Capote, Truman - *Other Voices, Other Rooms*

Finally located a copy in Santa Fe. Good for a 23 year-old. Seems sloppy, maybe derivative, compared to today's standards. Yet he is bold for his time period.

Dark, Alice Elliott - *In the Gloaming*

A great collection. Liked the way she used one place—Wynnemore—as the setting for all her stories. Yet the connection was subtle.

Duberman, Martin - *Stonewall*

Prose isn't great, but the background he gives of the six or seven people involved in the historical incident that kicked off Gay Liberation is quite interesting. Reenactment of the actual riots is adequate but disappointing.

Fitzgerald, Sally, ed. - *Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*

A great composition book, telling *how* she writes. Quite opinionated about everything. [Yet, like Jane Smiley in her book, she has the right to be opinionated because she has been so successful. What could she possibly do wrong?]

Ford, Richard - *Rock Springs*

Great stories, especially "Optimists." Taught me a great deal about retrospective POV, the tone of objectivity required, that and no sentimentality. Narrator tells the plot in the first paragraph and proceeds to reveal how it all unfolds. THIS IS

HOW I WANT TO WRITE: LIKE RICHARD FORD, LIKE TOBIAS WOLFF!

Franzen, Jonathan - *The Corrections*

Interesting book. Liked parts of it, many parts, in fact. Others seemed to “telly” or “talky,” too much of filling the blanks [usually called elaboration], probably editorial in nature. But a great novel for Boomers to read. We are there.

Ghiselin, Brewster - *The Creative Process*

Marked a number of passages, particularly as people speak of writing from the subconscious. Henry Miller quite helpful in this respect.

Houston, Pam - *Cowboys Are My Weakness: Stories*

Great connection between stories, almost too much so. Same female, same male, variation on a theme. But . . . each one masterfully written . . . and always tied to the land, the West, to be exact.

[Years later I realize that a variation on a theme is perhaps Houston’s way of representing a certain promiscuity (oh, how I prefer to think of it as a lust for life), the cyclical kind of life (lives) the character is living. And this book sold over 250,000 copies at one point, so it must have struck a nerve.]

Houston, Pam - *Waltzing the Cat*

“The Best Girlfriend You Never Had” is a story Pam read from the night I heard her read at TTU in Lubbock. It also appeared in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (ed. by John Updike), no small feat considering that hers is for 1999.

“Cataract” balances an internal conflict with continuous movement in the plot. But again, many stories seem to be about a single woman on the horn(s) of dilemma(s): whether to sleep with that cowboy, hard-hat, all-around masculine-but-sensitive guy. And yet each story goes beyond just that to something deeper—something I must still discover. And yet I know, don’t I? Pam’s struggle, as always, is with the land, the physical, the concrete, and yet more, much more I hope to discover as I read and re-read her stories.

[I first met Pam Houston when she gave a reading at Texas Tech University. I bought her first two books (signed!), and I told myself that if I ever got the chance to study with her, I would. And so followed three workshops with her, two in Taos and one in Mallorca. I was drawn to her exploitation of autobiographical material, how she was able to take personal stuff and transform it into something quite literary and jewel-like. From Pam I’ve learned a great deal including how to observe the world around me, and I owe her much.]

Neihart, Ben - *Burning Girl*

Interesting “thriller” or “mystery,” but more well written than most books in either genre. Ending is almost tedious.

Poirier, Mark Jude - *Naked Pueblo*

Liked the two previously unpublished stories the best: “Ska Boy, 1986” and “Let Them Love.” They possess a certain freedom the others don’t have (if that is the right word, freedom).

[MJP, my teacher this summer in Iowa—a class that boosted my moral quite a bit.]

Saunders, George - *Pastoralia*

Appreciated but didn’t particularly warm to this work except, perhaps, for the last two stories. Writes with a great emotional distance I find disconcerting. [Sorry, L & J. I admire the fact that you get him and I don’t. You’ll have to share.]

Sedaris, David - *Holiday on Ice*

Talks about the holidays with the kind of candor we’d all like to—and sees things that most of us don’t. The hypocrisy, etc.

Sedaris, David - *Me Talk Pretty One Day*

Absolutely wickedly funny. His wit is so subtle as to jump on your back when you’re not expecting it and ride you around the room.

Writers on Writing: Collected Essays from the New York Times

[See Table of Contents for notes.] A great set of essays.