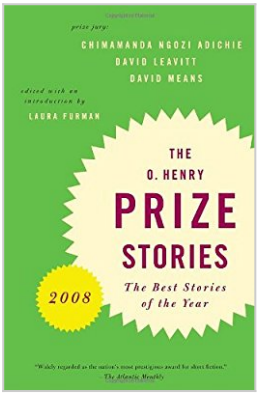

O. Henry Prize Stories 2008 (Pen / O. Henry Prize Stories)

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An annual collection of the twenty best contemporary short stories selected by series editor Laura Furman from hundreds of literary magazines, *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2008* is studded with extraordinary settings and characters: a teenager in survivalist Alaska, the seed keeper of a doomed Chinese village, a young woman trying to save her life in a Ukrainian internet café. Also included are the winning writers' comments on what inspired them, a short essay from each of the three eminent jurors, and an extensive resource list of literary magazines.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Widely regarded as the nation's most prestigious awards for short fiction.”
—*The Atlantic Monthly*

About the Author
Laura Furman's work has appeared in *The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, Ploughshares, The Yale Review,* and other magazines. She is the founding editor of the highly regarded *American Short Fiction* (three time finalist for the American Magazine Award). A professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, she teaches in the graduate James A. Michener Center for writers. She lives in Austin.

Introduction

The O. Henry Prize Stories 2008 includes acknowledged masters, such as William H. Gass, Alice Munro, and William Trevor, along with talented beginners, such as Shannon Cain, Brittani Sonnenberg, Tony Tulathimutte, and Alexi Zentner. Though the twenty authors differ in age, nationality, gender, and style, it is a happy accident that their work consistently demonstrates the liveliness of the short story form.

Another happy accident-the invention of academic graduate programs in creative writing-contributes to the number of stories being written by young people. The benefit is accidental because the proliferation of short stories in writing workshops might be attributed to the practical demands of the average sixteen-week semester; the student can work on several drafts of a story in the course of a term with an intensity not possible for drafts of novels or even novellas. (There are exceptions to this, no doubt.)

The existence of graduate programs in creative writing is now an ordinary fact of literary life, though as recently as the 1940s it wasn't. The phenomenon often puzzles those who are neither teachers nor students, for what can be taught in any writing program? Talent can't be, nor can taste. Intelligence is there or not. Awareness of what is honest and what is false can be encouraged but must be innate also. Students can be educated as readers, as can anybody, and they can be introduced to the work of wonderful writers and be helped to understand what makes the work so good; educating readers is one of the higher callings of writing classes, if not the highest.

The most valuable contributions to a writer's education aren't insightful pronouncements or didactic urgings of method or subject matter from the teacher, or even the indispensable-the detailed consideration of the student's own efforts. The best learning, like the best writing, comes from instinct, never from logic. The most valuable and lasting gift is the unspoken example of the teacher's own integrity, devotion to literature, and passion for the work of writing. In the presence of the right teacher, the student is momentarily part of literature too.

A first reading of William Gass's “A Little History of Modern Music” is delightful for the situational humor of the classroom in which the teacher is free to say what he pleases and the students are under constraint. Subsequent readings show that there is more to the professor than a cranky fellow at the end of the term and perhaps his rope. The professor's history of modern music is also a guide to the role of the audience in the development of art. He teaches that new art creates its own new audience. “Home” to Mr. Gass's professor is

the old music. A willingness to hear new music signals the courage to have new experiences and to leave home. “A Little History of Modern Music” is a portrait of the dissemination of knowledge, the encouragement of instinct, and the excitement of the intellectual adventure of connection and articulation.

Another teacher-student relationship, this one burdened by the giving and taking of grades and sex, is the spark for Sheila Kohler's “The Transitional Object,” an age-old story of manipulation. Claire, a foreign student in Paris, learns what it is not to belong. The lessons she learns from her professor bring into question her own morality and acquaint her all too well with the power to be gained from being unscrupulous. As you read Kohler's story, consider, if you will, who is the transitional object, where Claire has been, and where she is going.

In Edward P. Jones's carefully calibrated story of social snobbery, “Bad Neighbors,” the reader can decide just who the bad neighbors are. Are they the respectable and reprehensible residents of the 1400 block of Eighth Street NW, or the Bennington family, whose furniture is half broken and whose children can't quite be numbered by the street's established families? Jones's story delineates, as does Edith Wharton's work, the ways in which society's measurings fail the individual. Sharon Palmer, the Benningtons' beautiful across-the-street neighbor, almost crosses social barriers, for she and Neil Bennington share a love of literature. Sharon borrows from Neil a book of stories by the Irish writer Mary Lavin. In her preface to her *Selected Stories*, Lavin asked, “To whom does a story belong; to the writer or to the reader for whom it was written? To whom does the echo belong; to the horn or to the valley?” After reading Jones's story, we can ask: to whom does “Bad Neighbors” belong, the reader or Sharon? The story has undertones of *Romeo and Juliet* ; we might also ask if that tragedy belongs to the audience or to the characters.

Ha Jin's “A Composer and His Parakeets” gives us a glimpse of the creation of a work of art and also of love. Bori, a parakeet, has been left in the care of the composer Fanlin. Slowly but surely, the bird wins Fanlin's attention and then his heart. The puzzle of Ha Jin's story is gradually revealed, and in the end concerns a fundamental question about how love-and art-comes into being. At the story's beginning, Fanlin believes that art cannot happen by accident, only by intention. As happens often in short stories, a conviction deeply held at first is turned on its head by the end.

Michel Faber's “Bye-bye Natalia” is another musical story, or rather the story of a difficult life held together by music. The overt problem facing Natalia is almost comical, whether or not she'll be able to persuade her tone-deaf cowboy to make her into a mail-order bride. Soon we realize how crucially Natalia needs rescuing, not only from poverty in a disintegrating society but from disease and petty criminality. Michel Faber has written a truly global story, including global culture, plague, and misunderstanding. “Bye-bye Natalia” reminds us that Babel was a global city. Nobly, Natalia remains faithful to Inward Path, a dark-metal band whose day has passed. Her final, plot-pivoting decision might seem whimsical, but it is an act of courage. Michel Faber's story is true not only in its tone but in its knowledge of what the human spirit will sacrifice in order to survive intact.

How children survive, how anyone survives the difficulties life dishes out, is the secret subject of Mary Gaitskill's unflinching story “The Little Boy.” The failed mother at the plot's center ruminates on her many omissions in raising her own children and on the adult problems they blame on her. When she sees a child in need, it's her instinct to do the right thing, but can that alter her painful, unchangeable past or the child's present? The ending of Gaitskill's skillfully told story is almost a comfort.

Another child is at the center of “Taiping” by Brittani Sonnenberg. The fierce declaration at the beginning that his English father's blood in his veins “feels like insects crawling” puts the reader inside the narrator, and it isn't a comfortable place to be. He's divided against himself, contemptuous of other people, and in love

with a street boy who hates him. Watching Taiping from a distance, the narrator stands as alone as he always will be, alienated even from his own blood. In her comment on her story, Sonnenberg asserts that grief is universal. Her story shows that love is too, however coercive and unwanted it might be.

In David Malouf 's “Every Move You Make,” Jo, a Hungarian immigrant to Australia, wishes for a love so deep that its loss would send her howling in the street. Her lover Mitch Maze's houses are as attractive and spontaneous-seeming as he is “remote, untouchable, self-enclosed.” His mystery makes his attractions complete for Jo; romantic love is always about the unknown. “Every Move You Make” is an engrossing, lovely story with a steel underpinning; at its end Jo understands what howling for love really means.

Friendship as a variety of love is played out in Rose Tremain's “A Game of Cards,” about the lifelong relationship between two Swiss men, Gustav, a hotel keeper, and Anton, a pianist. Through an English visitor to his hotel, Gustav learns the game of gin rummy, a simple game demanding little, requiring little skill, and supplying little excitement. Gustav tells us that gin rummy is “a game that, if you are both equally good and bad at it, strengthens a friendship.” Leaving Switzerland, or making any significant changes, even for the good, threatens Gustav. The idea of stasis as security, friendship as imprisonment, haunts the story as Gustav's phobias and needs come to dominate his life and his friend's.

In Lore Segal's “Other People's Deaths,” a circle of friends and colleagues seeks an etiquette for death, trying to formulate appropriate emotions and reactions while feeling contempt for the dead man and a perverse subgenre of Schadenfreude. Their fear of being contaminated by proximity to death causes them to shun the widow; surely their reaction will be recognizable to readers. The plurality of points of view in the story gives the reader access to the private thoughts and quibbles of all the characters. Perhaps the best joke in Segal's sharp, funny story is that the widow's unbearable but straightforward grief is a relief to the reader.

In “Folie à Deux” by William Trevor, the chance meeting of two men, friends when they were children and then at school, disrupts the carefully constructed subsistence of one and the smug equilibrium of the other. William Trevor's stories combine clarity and mystery. Those who love this great writer's work will recognize the subtle, pervasive anxiety that accompanies any contact between his characters. In the case of “Folie à Deux,” the shadow of a shameful act committed long ago is the deciding factor in their moral lives, with profound consequences for one and, unfortunately, none for the other. Though Trevor doesn't judge his characters, his stories often turn on the characters' new vision of themselves in the harsh light of the story. They see themselves, judge themselves, and have to live with that.

An attempt at friendship between two middle-aged men drives Roger McDonald's “The Bullock Run.” At the core of the story is a luscious piece of land, put together by Alan Corker's father for grazing young bulls. For Corker, the bullock run represents security and luxury in an oftenharsh profession. The moment when Corker shows the bullock run to the artist and would-be rancher Ted Merrington, it's like one dog exposing his throat to another, an act of submission and an offer of friendship. The two are a fair match for rivalry, for the game of contesting who's the better man, but they're a poor match for friendship. McDonald's powerful story shows a man accepting his age, his place, and the measure of his possibilities.

By a lake with glacial water, a small hand-built cabin serves as a summer home for Oskar, Margret, and their small son, Jonas. In his story “On the Lake,” Olaf Olafsson introduces into their peaceful existence a neartragedy on the water and the subsequent wave of feeling that threatens devastation. The story is quiet, tense, and written with the deliberation of a mosaic maker; each sound in the silence that Olafsson creates has meaning.

Alexi Zentner's absorbing story “Touch,” set in Canadian logging country, allows us into the life of another

family living by the water, in this case a river that floats felled trees to market. There's a straight line in “Touch” from the father's mangled hand to the narrator's fate. Zentner writes movingly about the way his loggers and their families are uplifted, defined, and imprisoned by the place in which they live.

The form of “Scenes from the Life of the Only Girl in Water Shield, Alaska” by Tony Tulathimutte brings the story together for the reader. The story is broken into scenes, each titled, introducing us to Shelley, the only girl in Water Shield, Alaska, and her father, who's raised her very much alone. Shelley's world is circumscribed not only by place but by education and her father's single-minded devotion to survival at a basic level. In the course of the story, Shelley awakens to the limits of her surroundings and her father. The story has resonance and its own quiet madness, echoing the barks of the possibly rabid dog at its metaphorical core.

The power of parenthood to define and confine is the subject of Yiyun Li's “Prison.” The profound, perverse, and all too understandable idea of Li's bereft couple is to replace their dead daughter with another child. The mother is too old to bear a child, so they decide to hire another woman to carry the child for them. The grieving parents seem rational, even scientific, but their coolness and practicality belies the madness of trying to compensate for an irreplaceable loss. Li's narration does everything to demonstrate subtly their avoidance of grief. Interesting issues are raised about nature versus nurture and seeing what money can buy, but the emotional center of the story is the imprisonment of the grieving mother by her love for her dead daughter, and the fatal quality of any mother's love for her child.

Shannon Cain's “The Necessity of Certain Behaviors” begins with the words “To escape,” and for much of the story it seems that Lisa, an American tourist gone astray, has escaped from her city and country, from her friends and family, her job, her sexual identity, and her past. In the little society Cain creates for Lisa's idyll, men and women are equal, and homosexuality and heterosexuality are equally valid expressions of desire and love. From that premise, the story gives the reader a sojourn in a very different society and, along the way, examines Lisa's capacity for change. What she leaves behind of her past and what she will take into her future turn out to be as unpredictable as the new world she's discovered.

The relationship between the individual and society has always been an intrinsic subject of fiction, affording tension to be resolved and impossible dilemmas to solve. Alice Munro's “What Do You Want to Know For?” Anthony Doerr's “Village 113,” and Steven Millhauser's “A Change in Fashion” all deal with that relationship.

In “A Change in Fashion” it isn't tension between characters driving the story, for there aren't any conventional characters here. Rather, the shifting of fashion from revelation to concealment (and inevitably back again) and the reactions to such changes by both the wearers and creators of fashion afford the story its action and movement. The fashion designer Hyperion is the closest thing the story has to an individual character, and the mystery of his true identity is never solved. The emotion and movement is controlled by Millhauser's tour-de-force sentences and his dry humor.

“*The river bottled, the nation fed*.” In “Village 113” by Anthony Doerr, the clash between the individual and society couldn't be more evident. Based on the creation of the Three Gorges Dam by the flooding of hundreds of villages, the displacement of 1.3 million people, the destruction of an ecosystem, and the loss of the archaeological past, Doerr's story focuses on the gradual emptying of one village and the reluctance of the village's seed keeper to abandon the life she cherishes. The contrast of her son's empty, bureaucratic city life with life in her doomed village, haunted as it is by layers of history, spiritual belief, and interaction with nature and community, is stunning. The seed keeper's sensible choice at the end is understandable. Sureness in a time of profound change is even enviable.

Alice Munro's earliest stories were about women who were caught by society, often represented by a man and a marriage, and who longed for another life and for self-knowledge. Her women recalled their childhoods or early womanhoods and came to an understanding of why they did certain things and chose not to do others. Gradually, Munro's stories have become less about a yearning for change and the unattainable than about how the past lives within the present, at least for those for whom the past is meaningful. The past is no longer only the personal one of the individual; now community life as it was lived and an examination of what that life has left behind are to be puzzled over by the living.

In “What Do You Want to Know For?” there are two kinds of excavation, one into a mysterious tomb discovered by chance during a country drive, and the other of the narrator's body as her breast cancer is discovered and diagnosed. Munro pulls the disparate threads through her story as her narrator explores the uses of knowledge and the usefulness of curiosity. The story's title questions not only why she would want to learn about a mostly forgotten piece of local history, but why she would want to know when exactly death is coming for her-and why she should fight it.

The image of the legendary lamp buried in the tomb echoes the familiar passage from Psalm 119, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” For Munro's readers, the word is literature, helping the reader to figure out what the path might be and what it's been for others.

—Laura Furman
Austin, Texas

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