

Further signs of life: The Best American Short Stories 2019

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Great challenges continue to confront the arts and artists. With corporate media's near stranglehold on popular culture and academia's similar domination of literary life, pursuing a career as an artist or writer in today's climate encourages far too many to toil in the prescribed mine of identity politics or in an innocuous (or worse) vein of self-absorption. Such conditions do not encourage either the stark diagnoses of life and reality or the bold innovation that characterize important work. But there is hope, even as the objective conditions themselves dramatically alter.

The Best American Short Stories 2019 (Mariner 2019) presents a collection of fiction that proves good work is being written, and published, alongside the chaff. Not every piece in the anthology escapes the deformities of our moment, but editor Anthony Doerr and series editor Heidi Pitlor have assembled in these twenty stories a book well worth reading and with more than one piece that contributes admirably to contemporary American literature.

Some of the best stories in the anthology deal with adolescence. "Hellion," by Julia Elliott, is a tour de force of colloquial narration in a memorable and contemporary coming-of-age story. With the character Butter ("You do it again and I'll sick the Swamp Ape on you. I'll get Miss Ruby to put a hex on your entrails."), Elliott makes a self-conscious and worthy addition to the Southern Gothic tradition, a "hellion" on a dirt bike who already sees the freedom of her youth being lined up for destruction by an education system and economy that have little room or patience for her.

Another fine piece on innocence and experience comes from nature writer, environmental activist and novelist Wendell Berry, whose "The Great Interruption," a brief installment in his Port William

saga, showcases Berry's strength as a chronicler of place as well as his compelling affinity for memories borne and lost by communities and their landscapes "in a country dismemoried and without landmarks."

Whereas Elliott's and Berry's stories are poignant, they are nonetheless leavened with an attention to the particular joys of youth. The remaining stories of adolescence in the anthology present various dystopian visions of life for contemporary youth. The finest of these is "The Era," by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah. The "post-Turn" era Adjei-Brenyah presents, in a science fiction story both comical and chilling, offers the what-if of a society where offspring are genetically "opti-selected," emotion is banished and those children with any trace of compassion or imagination become hapless "shoelookers." This may sound like generic fare, but Adjei-Brenyah's extraordinary ear for language and acute perception of the sources of alienation make of "The Era" a powerful and heartbreaking indictment of what we do to children in our era.

Equally grim but not at all humorous is Ella Martinsen Gorham's "Protozoa," a story more interesting and valuable for its window upon than for its interpretation of the symbiotic relationship between today's adolescents and social media. And Jenny Alandy Trahan's "They Told Us Not to Say This" promises more in its first pages than it delivers, as a complex social issue—in which a group of Filipino-American girls find inspiration in their school's gritty, white basketball star—ultimately callouses over with a self-adoring, shopworn ending celebrating identity.

Perhaps the best composed story in the anthology is Maria Reves's "Letter of Apology." Serious, hilarious, adroit at every turn, the story anatomizes the effects of Soviet Stalinist totalitarianism, from the absurd to the

horrific, in a scant fourteen pages. Borrowing an idea from Milan Kundera’s novel *The Joke*, Reves presents a wily poet, Konstantin Ilyich, who after a reading tells an impermissible joke (“a wrongful evaluation”) and lands in lukewarm water with the authorities, who put the story’s feckless narrator on the case. Soon the agent finds he must contend with a woman who may or may not be the poet’s wife. It is in these two characters, the narrator and the woman, that the story achieves its brilliance, and their final scene together is worthy of Franz Kafka and John Cleese.

A National Book Award winner, Sigrid Nunez, and a finalist, Jamel Brinkley, are represented in the anthology. Nunez’s “The Plan” is an entertaining thriller with a twist. The plan is the carefully plotted murder of Harley by her husband, a man who has lived an emotionally stunted life enlivened primarily by homicidal fantasies. The husband thinks of his would-be victims, mostly women who have annoyed him in some way, as “candidates.” Raskolnikov lurks in the shadows of this story as we inhabit the man’s obsessive thoughts, but whereas Dostoevsky’s portrait is of a feverishly afflicted everyman, Nunez presents us with the tawdry mind of a murderous personality. As for the social or psychological elements that might provide insight into just what impels the man’s sinister turn of mind, Nunez is silent. The cumulative effect of these aspects of the man’s character is to render him, at best, implausible. The story is saved from irrelevance by the twist, but not from the strong whiff of misanthropy that tends to mar Nunez’s work.

Brinkley’s “No More Than a Bubble,” a late-adolescence story about college students at a party, is lyrical but slight, tedious in the number of pages we spend listening to the self-pleased ramblings of the half-drunk twenty-year-olds. The story draws its only thematic weight from a faux orgy and a near-homoerotic encounter. In a manner that seems drawn directly from critic Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*, women in the story figure simultaneously as sources of mystery, taskmasters and “snacks,” while true love—that worthy of a poignant ending to a short story—is that which, for dramatic purposes in Brinkley, still dare not speak its name.

Accomplished and interesting stories abound in *BASS 2019*, including “Pity and Shame” by the late Ursula K. LeGuin, “Seeing Ershadi” by Nicole Krauss, “Bronze”

by Jeffrey Eugenides, “Audition” by Said Sayrafiezadeh, “Wrong Object” by Mona Simpson, and others.

What one does not find, except obliquely in Elliott’s “Hellion” and Adjei-Brenyah’s “The Era,” is any attempt to grasp and grapple with the defining problems of our time, the failure of capitalism, the vast social inequality, the threat of war and the drive toward authoritarian rule. No doubt such stories are out there, among the thousands of stories published by the scores of small and still smaller journals. However, it takes publications like this anthology, which have ready access to those journals and which do the leg work of sifting through those stories, to bring contemporary short fiction to a broader readership.

Again, Doerr and Pitlor have done an admirable job in selecting the stories in *BASS 2019*, but we should keep in mind the pressures the market system brings to bear on such anthologies and on the themes, voices and characters that the majority of writers ultimately chooses to explore and journals choose to publish. This anthology will have done its job, then, if it inspires readers to undertake their own search of contemporary short fiction, looking for the important art that is out there—or perhaps creating such work. To paraphrase Shakespeare, the best is not so long as we can say, “This is the best.”



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