The Best American Short Stories 2021: A good deal of talent but little to say

James McDonald
31 January 2022

The most recent volume of *The Best American Short Stories* series (*BASS*) presents the reader with many engaging stories and some fine writing. Also, more than previous installments of the anthology, BASS 2021 demonstrates an awareness, if not a full understanding, of a number of the crises that beset American society. The threat of fascism that Donald Trump represents, for instance, and the crushing damages of poverty. Yet, with the exception of a few gems, the book suffers socially and aesthetically from the moods and viewpoints that dominate the affluent middle class.

The twenty stories in *BASS 2021* were published in 2020, so most would have been written before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Therefore, that catastrophe, with its exacerbation of all other social crises, does not figure in the plots of the stories collected here. But the selection of the stories, by series editor Heidi Pitlor and this year's guest editor Jesmyn Ward, reflect certain grim realities of 2020 and 2021. As a result, most of the stories feature characters who are up against overwhelming, usually baffling forces that take a toll on their humanity.

Stories

Moving alphabetically by author's last name, the anthology opens inauspiciously with Gabriel Bump's "To Buffalo Eastward." The story begins intriguingly enough, describing a Great Lakes journey and, in crisp paragraphs about his parents, a past that has crumbled as far as the narrator's heels. The journey and story then become a bit of an exercise in cleverness (characters naming themselves after Sancho Panza of *Don Quixote* and Daisy Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby* and saying almost witty things),which a critic from an earlier generation would have called "precious."

"Miracle Girl," by Rita-Chang-Eppig, is set in a Chinese school and household under the domination of European missionaries. A young girl has been blessed and afflicted with stigmata, the bleeding wounds of Christ's crucifixion, resulting in her sister's jealousy of the attention she receives.

Vanessa Cuti's "Our Children" is a story of a middle-class woman who fantasizes leaving her children.

Jenzo Duque's "The Rest of Us" is a well written slice of street life in Chicago in which the narrator and his friends find temporary success making and selling crack cocaine in the 1990s. Partly written in Spanish, the story establishes a compelling narrative voice and a convincing, if predictable, story.

In "Playing Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain," Jamil Jan Kochai imagines a computer game in which his narrator is able to save his *mujahideen* father from the Soviet military. Cast in the second person, the story achieves a complexity and pathos to match any story in the anthology. The narrator's "You" is eager to play a new game that is set in 1980s Afghanistan …

> especially since you've been shooting at Afghans in your games (Call of Duty and Battlefield and Splinter Cell) for so long that you've become oddly immune to the self-loathing you felt when you were first massacring wave after wave of militant fighters who looked just like your father.

"Switzerland," by Nicole Krauss, tells a coming-of-age story, with the requisite dark edge, in an almost innocently staid prose. David Means' "Clementine, Carmelita, Dog" takes the perspective of a dachshund in telling a story of instinct and compassion that many readers will find touching. In its turn to the unhuman, though, it joins a trend of recent years (for example, in Sigrid Nunez's 2018 novel *The Friend*) that too often amounts to a disheartened escape from human vicissitudes.

In "Paradise," Yxta Maya Murray sets a Native-Mexican woman, her young child and her Trump-supporting father-in-law in front of an encroaching California forest fire, telling the story of their attempted escape. This story is not particularly well-written. For instance, as the trio finally embark, with scorching winds sweeping through the neighborhood, a moment that one might assume would call for some urgency, we are told "I tossed Jessie into the beige leather backseat…" Soon afterward, "I started the Yukon and jammed it down the driveway and almost crashed into a Camry…"

Set in Lagos, Nigeria, "Good Boy" by Eloghosa Osunde presents the reader with the idiosyncratic and elliptical first-person narrative voice of a self-described hustler. Osunde achieves a surprising degree of sympathy for this character given the sociopathic means he employs toward his wealthy end. "Good Boy" is followed by Jane Pek's charming romance, "Portrait of Two Young Ladies in White and Green Robes (Unidentified Artist, Circa Sixteenth Century)."

Tracey Rose Peyton, in "The Last Days of Rodney," imagines the last days and death of Rodney King, who died in 2012, in a story that effectively evokes melancholy and hints adroitly at tragedy.

Special mention must be made of the standout stories in the collection. Christa Romanosky's "In This Sort of World, the Asshole Wins" depicts with clear-eyed frankness and compassion the utter destruction capitalism has wrought in West Virginia, ingeniously setting a meth lab in an abandoned mine. Here the ravages of drug addiction and the brutal underworld of the drug economy are not only displayed, as they are in "The Rest of Us," their real human toll and horror are reckoned with, as they are not in Duque's story.

In part, the first-person narrator of "The Rest of Us," with his adolescent bravado, accounts for this difference, but Duque's story does not seem to provide another vantage point, a more aware or ironizing voice or

perspective from which to comprehend the social implications of its violence, save the neighborhood elders whose concern is for the narrator and his friends and remains rather distant from events. Rather, “The Rest of Us” opts for an easy nostalgia at its end. Romanosky’s story grapples more fully with the costs of poverty, and her narrator concludes on a beautiful and thought-provoking image and sentence.

“Love Letter” by George Saunders, set in the year “202_,” is a dystopia that could happen tomorrow. Written even before the events of January 6, 2021, “Love Letter” places us squarely in our predicament, with a recognition of the implications of Trump’s fascistic rhetoric that one rarely encounters in the corporate media. A grandfather writes to a beloved grandson to warn him off taking up a defense of his girlfriend, who has been detained by the authorities. (“But as your grandfather, I beg you not to underestimate the power/danger of this moment.”) The grandfather also confesses having failed history in some undefined way:

> Seen in retrospect, yes: I have regrets. There was a certain critical period. I see that now. During that period your grandmother and I were doing, every night, a jigsaw puzzle each…

In his autobiographical blurb in the back of the book, Saunders defines “that which a short story is designed to do (show the reader how hard it is to live correctly in a fallen world by putting her on the horns of a true dilemma)…” The dilemma as Saunders envisions it, however, is circumscribed by the middle-class imagination, an imagination peopled only with individuals and their subjective motivations. Trump is an individual rather than the representative of a class:

> It did not seem (and please destroy this letter after you have read it) that someone so clownish could disrupt something so noble and time-tested and seemingly strong…

And the solution to the problem of Trump is again an individual one. The grandfather writes three letters to the editor “of the local rag” (because of which a police officer warns him to “stay off the computer”) and reports that in the “critical period” he and his wife often said, “Someone should arrange a march.”

Although neither Saunders nor the grandfather reveals any deep social understanding, the writer is to be commended for identifying Trump as a fascist and depicting with clarity the way “seemingly strong” democratic institutions could fall before such a force.

“Haguillory,” by Stephanie Soileau, follows an elderly couple near the Louisiana gulf who go crabbing in the aftermath of a hurricane. Although the title character strains credulity somewhat with his final gesture, the skill with which Soileau constructs tableaux and dramatic images is reminiscent of Flannery O’Connor and manages to place “Haguillory” successfully within the tradition of the Southern Gothic.

Finally, Madhuri Vijay’s “You Are My Dear Friend” is a wonderfully tense story of an Indian au pair to British expatriates who marries and, in her loneliness, adopts an 8-year-old girl from an impoverished village. The child brings an alien world, and eventually terror, to the woman’s life, and “You Are My Dear Friend” grapples with human connections and emotions in ways that far surpass the attempt in Cuti’s “Our Children.”

The state of the art

Most of the writers in *BASS 2021* hold MFA degrees. Most of them teach and advance their careers through publication. Which is to say that to a large degree short fiction writing is a professionalized industry. This is not a particularly new state of affairs, nor is it necessarily deleterious to the art. After all, writers do enjoy freedom within their market. But it does mean that writers, like all professionals, are subject to certain pressures, certain institutional predilections and proscriptions.

The authoritative voices in anthologies are those of the editors, the gatekeepers of taste. Pitlor in her foreword to *BASS 2021* and Ward in her introduction represent those official sentiments to which today’s writing students and instructors—and editors—are encouraged to adapt themselves. As might be expected, these sentiments are refracted through the lens of the pandemic, or, more precisely, the pandemic as seen by certain social layers.

Writing in April 2021, Pitlor reveals a great deal about the gatekeeper’s class position in her comments on the pandemic as she understands it: “As the planet did battle with the enemy, we as humanity became more of a ‘we.’” She is writing of 2020, in which, according to the World Health Organization, 3 million people died of COVID-19. By April 27, 2021, again according to the WHO, global new deaths from the disease had increased for the sixth consecutive week. The fact was, for those with eyes not blurred by the corporate media, almost no battle was being waged at all. In May 2020, the corporations and the unions had forced workers back into factories, stores and warehouses where they contracted the disease in alarming numbers. Public health measures to contain the disease were being abandoned.

The “we” she writes of does strike Pitlor as a misnomer, and she corrects herself, again revealing her perspective:

> In 2020 it became even clearer how unequal this “we” always was and continued to be. A disproportionate number of people of color grew sick and died. Workers lost their jobs and got evicted at a frightening rate. Women left their jobs in droves to stay home and tend children, who were mostly forced to attend school online. The vulnerable remained who they always were and were punished, and it was infuriating.

Infuriating indeed. In this pseudo-left litany of indignation, heartfelt no doubt, Pitlor maintains the ethos of identity politics regardless of the millions of corpses, of all races and nationalities, piling up around the world. She does not consider that the effects of COVID-19 have in fact taken their toll disproportionately on the working class. Or that many workers lost their jobs due not only to the economic ravages of the pandemic on small businesses, but because corporations (buoyed by trillions in free money) took the opportunity of the crisis to “restructure” mercilessly. Nor, most importantly, does she note the millions of workers who left their jobs to avoid catching and spreading a deadly disease. And the children “forced to attend school online” were also avoiding this deadly disease. The only “vulnerable” people in Pitlor’s narrative are women and people of color, not workers of every sex and color.

Ward, a two-time National Book Award winner (*Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)), shares Pitlor’s profession, class and outlook. Her introduction to *BASS 2021* opens with an extended weather metaphor—the pandemic is a storm—appropriate to a perspective in which the only political considerations are those of identity:

> Hundreds of thousands of Americans died in the COVID pandemic, so many of them brown and black and poor. We who were left were unmoored by this storm: our world shaken, seared

> by wind and rain, tossed by grief in a sea of loss. This year set the ships of our lives adrift…

The pandemic, it seems, struck like a natural disaster, and humanity was as helpless and passive before it as if it were weather. The reality is that the novel coronavirus did arise naturally, but there the metaphor ends. The pandemic has long since primarily become, not a natural, but a political disaster. Ward acknowledges as much in a vague way:

> The institutions we believed would protect us faltered, one after another. Casual cruelty, callousness, and gross ignorance became barely remarkable.

Yet the response to this "faltering" (itself a verb that lacks intention) is disorientation and helplessness. "We" are "adrift," "upended," "capsized," "unable to chart the new world that is." It's all so confusing! And so it is for the liberal milieu of the petty bourgeoisie, those whose hopes are tied to the capitalist class that is now, quite literally, leaving them for dead.

Ward cannot leave us to drown, of course.

> That which sustained us, the rafts we depended on to keep us from sinking into the watery depths of our loss, was narrative. At the beginning of the pandemic some of us watched *Tiger King*, half horrified, half gleeful, and wholly entertained by captive cats and terrible men. We read Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* and marveled at women bent on the impossible task of escaping race and gender in America.

This is nonsense. Granted, Ward is working her way around to introducing a book of short stories, but the perfumed sigh with which she utters "narrative" is as much self-promotion as it is historical observation. Americans watched television and read books before the pandemic, and the escapism she describes—again with the exception of *identity* politics—is no valuable response to a political crisis in which, at the *Economist* 's latest report of excess deaths, between 12 and 23 million people have died.

Art has its place in all human situations, and the pandemic is no exception. Short stories, moreover, need not take the large social crises of the moment as their explicit subject matter. But the best art carries an awareness of the larger forces of its time and, in one way or another, grapples with the dilemmas those forces impose on humans and their relationships. Given the dominant culture of identity politics, though, and its obfuscation of the class struggle, an obfuscation promoted by the Democratic Party and particularly enforced on the college campuses where MFAs (usually underpaid) teach, an honest grappling with social and political dilemmas is not encouraged. This has a damaging effect on the art.

Many of the stories in *BASS 2021* feature first-person narrators who are less full and flawed characters than they are wholly sympathetic characters to be believed. In some cases, such as Murray's "Paradise" they are actually heroes to whom one is expected to ally oneself. Imagine Herman Melville, F. Scott Fitzgerald or Flannery O'Connor tied to such an aesthetic. There is a childishness to it. For such writing, "identity" and self are relatively simple matters, stable essences rather than psychologically complex and historically determined, moving composites.

Writer James Morrison (*The Lost Girl* (2007) and *Said and Done* (2009)) has commented on the current state of fiction:

> What is dispiriting to me about contemporary fiction—and culture—is certainly the model of transparency, as if art were a series of truth-claims. And then there is the resurgence of an aesthetic of identification. Modernism was already supposed to have taught us that this identification has the liability of potential narcissism with the side effect that differences get abrogated.

Self-involvement and self-centeredness, anchored by obsessions with race and gender, get to the heart of the matter. Contemporary short fiction is overwhelmingly petty and self-centered. And in times of great upheaval, such qualities can only disorient. Hence Jesmyn Ward's helpless "we" being adrift.

The best story in *BASS 2021* is Romanosky's "In This Sort of World, the Asshole Wins." Despite its demoralized title, the story faces the realities of its time, and in all of the anthology it provides the only instance of the appropriate response. Outrage.