

The Best American Short Stories 2022

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The Best American Short Stories 2022 (Mariner 2022), selected and edited by fiction writer Andrew Sean Greer (*The Confessions of Max Tivoli*, 2003), presents as strong a selection of writing as the series has featured in a number of years.

In large part, of course, the quality of an issue of *BASS* depends on the tastes and views of the editor, who selects the 20 stories from the recommendations of hundreds of American and Canadian literary journals and magazines. With a couple of exceptions, in this reviewer's opinion, Greer has chosen stories that in their form, language and examination of thematic ideas are highly accomplished, even if the collection as a whole bumps its head against certain objective limits. Just a few of these stories are mentioned below.

Notable stories

"The Wind," by Lauren Groff, manages something rarely seen in literary fiction—thrilling suspense. A woman beaten nearly to death by her sheriff's deputy husband attempts an escape with her three children. Told by the woman's granddaughter many years after the fact, "The Wind" inhabits a working class world of bad jobs and nearly heartless managers where police cover for and abet each other's crimes. It is straightforward realist fiction, and executed flawlessly.

"Detective Dog," by Gish Jen, is a more complex story of a Chinese family from Hong Kong newly emigrated to New York during the time of the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests. The story takes up the question of protecting oneself and one's family through quietism and emigration versus participation in political struggle. Though the story does not delve into the complexities of the Hong Kong protests, which were ultimately corralled behind various pro-capitalist parties and organizations, characterization and the depiction of submerged family tensions are noteworthy accomplishments in "Detective Dog."

"Post," by Alice McDermott, is the first story in the *BASS* series to focus on the COVID pandemic. A young couple in New York, now friends, nurse each other through COVID to emerge on the other side altered in an ambiguously altered world. Although it is not clear whether the title and the

ending mean to suggest that the pandemic is over or simply that the two protagonists have recovered, the story's depiction of the grueling illness and its consideration of love and compassion under extremity make "Post" worth reading.

"The Meeting," by Alix Ohlin, is one of four or five stories in the last two *BASS* installments to feature wildfires. In "The Meeting," a "brand developer" for a failed digital media company that has been bought out accompanies her boss on a pilgrimage to the purchasing company's campus in drought-stricken northern California, a sprawling complex whose open spaces are covered in lush green grass. She learns that the "diversified" company is essentially an incoherent amalgam of enterprises such that even its CEO is perplexed as to its "story." Ohlin's story is a successful send-up of capitalism's destructiveness, cruelty and irrationality.

"The Ghost Birds," by Karen Russell, is a speculative story of a dystopian future in which the planet's air has become unbreathable without special suits, and all bird species have become extinct due to climate change and wild fires. A scattered group of people claim to have seen "ghost birds" haunting the barren present, and one such person takes his daughter out on a dangerous quest for a sighting. The story's dalliance with magical realism is ultimately a portrait of delusion in grief, and "Ghost Birds" confronts reality with clear-eyed courage.

"Mr. Ashok's Monument," by Sanjena Sathian, is the best story in the book. Beautifully written in an austere yet humorous voice, Sathian's story follows the fate of Mr. Ashok Jagtap, English-language tour guide to the E— caves in India. Mr. Ashok, and the narrator, work for the Department of Symbolic Meaning in the Ministry of Culture, National Identity, and Historical Interpretation. The story is a complex meditation on history, memorialization and chauvinism (the GLORIOUS HISTORY is strictly Hindu, Islam representing "the wrong history"). "Mr. Ashok's Monument" is a direct satire of Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but its themes are globally applicable in a time of proliferating ultra-right governments and of postmodern/postcolonial identity politics and its promotion of historical falsification and "speaking one's own truth."

The state of the art

While the stories in *BASS 2022* clearly stood out to Greer, it is also safe to say that his final selections are representative of the sort of thing being done by American short story writers generally. Greer, we are told on the back of the book, lives in San Francisco and Milan, and he has taught at Stanford and at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. He comes from the same general milieu as many of the writers in the collection (at least 11 of the 20 authors hold a master's degree in fine arts [MFA] and teach writing in colleges or universities). His tastes, therefore, are likely to align more or less with those of the majority of American MFAs and writing instructors.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a writer being an academic. Nevertheless, academia, and especially the humanities, particularly in our historical moment, carry with them certain ideological baggage. The stories in *BASS* tend to speak to the ideas and attitudes one will find in the various MFA programs and, consequently, in most of the hundreds of small literary reviews that publish short stories.

American short stories, and novels, despite displaying a rich diversity of settings, voices and subject matter, share a relatively narrow palette of thematic ideas and political dispositions. In recent years, this palette has been dominated by identity politics—the obsession with the self and with race and gender as defining categories—that saturates college campuses, the Democratic Party and official American liberal culture generally.

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Despite the pressures and inducements to take part enthusiastically in race and gender politics, many writers have honestly registered the pressing crises of recent years—COVID, climate change, wealth inequality, the threat of fascism—and as these crises intensify this is happening more and more. *BASS 2022* is evidence of this healthy trend.

A number of the stories in this anthology foreground matters of climate change, poverty, the pandemic, police brutality, nationalism and government suppression of democratic rights. In none of these stories, however (with the exceptions of Alix Ohlin's "The Meeting," Sanjena Sathian's "Mr. Ashok's Monument" and, to an extent, Hector Tobar's "The Sins of Others"), is the crisis in question examined critically, let alone with an eye toward probing it to its bottom.

It is telling, for instance, that in her foreword to *BASS 2022*, series editor Heidi Pitlor should mouth the standard Democratic/*New York Times*/MSNBC view of the issues of the moment:

As we lurch our way through and hopefully out of a pandemic that is more persistent than any of us would

like; as we witness an autocracy attempt to violently overtake a democracy in Ukraine and the threat of another world war; as the news of climate change alarms almost daily, the power of good art, of excellent fiction to reorient the reader toward what truly matters never fails to inspire me. . . . Reading these stories, I was reminded of the value of societal cohesion and kindness. We must take better care of each other.

Where does one begin? In all these insipid formulations, Americans are isolated individuals who watch television and feel things. COVID-19 is to be countered with hope; Ukraine is a democracy and, presumably, the US and NATO are compassionate saviors, and the answer to social and political questions generally is individual kindness. Such sentiments, freed as they are from actual historical awareness and political principle, are not likely to prove helpful in identifying "good art" or "excellent fiction," i.e., work that is genuinely urgent, compelling, truthful.

A short story portraying the US as a defender of democracy in Ukraine, for instance, would fundamentally (and fatally) misrepresent reality and, however attractive its prose or moving its plot, would qualify more as propaganda than as important and lasting art.

None of which is meant to suggest that the authors featured in *BASS 2022* are writing in bad faith. Most are confronting the crises and contradictions of our time, on the level of the individual human life, to the best of their ability, working on the basis, however, of a very limited understanding of the critical social questions of the day. As these crises and contradictions continue to intensify, still more writers will train their gaze outward, and to still better artistic effect.



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