

The Best American Short Stories 2023: A step backward

James McDonald
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The Best American Short Stories 2023 (Mariner Books) features 20 stories published between January 2022 and January 2023. The stories in this offering of the annual anthology were selected by guest editor Min Jin Lee from a group of stories originally chosen by series editor Heidi Pitlor.

The last two years of the *BASS* anthology had seen a heightened awareness of the objective social and political realities that make up the context in which most American stories are set. There were stories that dealt directly with the COVID-19 pandemic, stories that depicted wildfires and contemplated the crisis of climate change, even stories that took a working class perspective and actually made themes of the conditions of work, and the lack of it, in contemporary America. It was a promising trend.

This year's installment of the series, in this regard, is a step backward. Before looking at what this book represents historically, however, it is appropriate to consider some of the individual stories that are worth a reader's time.

Perhaps half the pieces in *BASS 2023* are coming-of-age stories, that lyrical standby now usually written in a gritty but still rhapsodic voice. The best of these in this book are Taryn Bowe's affecting "Camp Emeline," Benjamin Ehrlich's "The Master Mourner" and Ling Ma's Russian doll narrative "Peking Duck."

Among the stories in other genres, the most intriguing are Tom Bissell's "His Finest Moment," about a well-known author who decides to tell his teenage daughter about his having committed a sexual assault years before, which he knows is about to be exposed by a ravenous media; Maya Binyam's almost dreamlike "Do You Belong to Anybody," which contemplates matters of history, revolution and suffering; Joanna Pearson's beautifully written "Grand Mal," and Kosiso

Ugwueze's grimly comic "Supernova," a story about a suicidal Kenyan girl taken hostage by bandits.

A handful of stories attend to overtly political matters. "The Mine," by Nathan Harris, tells of a local mine superintendent who must retrieve a body from deep in the pit before a visit by foreign corporate executives. "The Mine," a bit overwhelmed by its own conceits, however, is not a fully satisfying story. Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi's "It Is What It Is" tells the story of two young émigrés from Iran in a time of explosive turmoil, one of whom adopts a cat that was the only survivor from a plane that has been shot down over Tehran. Finally, Sana Krasikov's "The Muddle" presents a pair of separated Ukrainian friends, one in Toronto and one in a dacha outside Kyiv, in the first year after the Russian invasion. The two characters, elderly women who grew up together in the Soviet Union and who see the invasion from opposing points of view, allow Krasikov to treat the narratives of both sides skeptically, as propaganda, without seeming to want to come down anywhere definite.

Other stories are worth mentioning as well, such as Manuel Muñoz's "Compromisos," Jared Jackson's "Bebo" and Lauren Groff's "Annunciation."

While there are a number of fine pieces in the collection, a Rip Van Winkle who had been asleep for 20 or 30 years would have virtually no idea from reading *BASS 2023* that the America in the title is careening toward World War III, led by a government that is allowing a pandemic to ravage its population and that has already sacrificed over a million to the disease rather than slow the accumulation of unprecedented profits. Rip would find no indication that the country and its democratic institutions are crumbling under the weight of economic inequality, that the Republican Party is now openly fascist in all but name, or that the

Democratic Party has become the leading defender of genocide and ethnic cleansing, as part of the US ruling elite's drive to world war.

Contemporary fiction need not engage any of these matters as major setting or plot points, but fiction writers should by and large demonstrate a thematic awareness of the world beyond the feelings and personal relationships of their characters. Remove the cell phones and most of the stories in *BASS 2023* could have been written in the 1990s.

The good news is that this selection of stories is hardly representative of what is being written today. After all, they are only 20 stories. But beyond that, this year's anthology, more than in years past, is drawn almost entirely from the most prestigious magazines and literary journals. Of the 20 stories in *BASS 2023*, 15 are taken from just six publications. There are four pieces from the *New Yorker* alone. One could argue that these magazines publish the very best that is available in American short fiction. That elitist argument is hard to maintain, however, when one realizes that thousands upon thousands of short stories are submitted for publication in a year. And in the back of *BASS 2023*, Pitlor lists well over 200 journals that publish short stories.

Lee and Pitlor share responsibility, of course, for the selection of stories in the book, with Pitlor shortlisting 120 stories from which Lee chose the final 20. Pitlor, who has been editing the series for years, is a known quantity, an editor with a good ear for sentences but whose social outlook ventures no further than upper middle class preoccupations such as identity politics.

Pitlor's foreword to the volume says all the reader needs to know about the complacency of *BASS 2023*. Take these sentences, for instance:

After all, we are living in a disconnected time. Heap a waning pandemic that had us all working and attending school at home on a population increasingly isolated by technology, on top of a burgeoning political movement that worships individualism and capitalism and treats social justice and acceptance of diversity as affectations donned by nerds and schoolmarms, and you get a society that is far more fractious than collaborative.

Where does one begin? We weren't "all" working at home during the first year of the "waning" pandemic (1,500 people were dying every week in the US at the end of last year). Millions were working "in-person" at cash registers and on assembly lines, in hospital units and classrooms and the like, and many were contracting COVID as a result. Over a million have died. And the "burgeoning political movement" Pitlor describes, presumably the far right, as though it were a lack of manners, is authoritarian and fascistic. Strike waves and mass popular opposition to war vanish here. The crisis of the moment is that the *BASS* editor feels "disconnected." In this orientation to the self, its impressions and feelings, Pitlor speaks for an affluent segment of the population and many in academia and the publishing business.

Lee is the author of the novels *Free Food for Millionaires* (2007) and *Pachinko* (2017), a finalist for the National Book Award. In her introduction to the anthology, she cites the website *Poets and Writers* as reporting that 773 magazines publish fiction (this would be internationally) and rightly argues that almost all literary journals operate on a shoestring budget. She has no critique, however, of the society that produces this circumstance, nor does she suggest any remedy. Nor does it occur to her that writers and small press publishers are not the only ones facing economic disaster. As one of the titles in the anthology has it, "It is what it is."

Lee goes on to express "a teensy bit of contempt" for people who do not read fiction or poetry. They are not of her "tribe." Again, there is no historical or social contextualization, no consideration, for example, of the state of education at the moment, let alone why it is in such a state. Only smug self-satisfaction.

In all, *BASS 2023* is a selection of mostly very well-crafted stories, but as a bellwether of the state of fiction—and society—today, it comes up far short. It represents its time primarily as a reflection of a certain obliviousness, and no doubt an element of denial that will not be able to maintain itself much longer.



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