It has for several years now been part of the conventional critical wisdom that the American short story is flourishing. Evidence of this abounds and abounds. Issue after issue of "quality" magazines and maverick small-press operations showcase strikingly distinctive, technically well-crafted stories. The Updikes and Cheevers and Peter Taylors — still publishing regularly, still at the top of their game — are being crowded and challenged by endless hordes of talented newcomers. It's an exciting time to be a reader.

Where do they all come from, these (really) fully-fledged, matured fiction writers? Perhaps it's the fruition (like a baby boom, seen twenty years later) of the colleges' creative writing programs: more people sensitive to the appeal of the writer's life, more people in occupations that allow some leisure time to commit to "creative" pursuits.

And yet it seems to me that the intellectual-academic emphasis so noticeable in our postwar fiction throughout the 1960s is beginning to break down a bit; that the Barthian (ruminative-analytical) and Barthelmian (inventive-eccentric) influences, though still abroad in the land, are beginning to lose their grip.

In her "Introduction" to The Best American Short Stories 1981 (of which more later), editor Hortense Calisher notes "a deeper question and dismay" evident in today's fiction, and also "fewer city-focused stories" among those she has chosen. I agree that those are the crucial trends, and I wonder if (what seems) this consensus return to the traditional "well-made story" — and its traditional subjects — may not reflect a growing grassroots concern with the directions in which things, and we, seem to be heading, a deliberate re-focusing on embattled individual characters within small recognizable contexts: a revitalized effort, kindled by our sense that our lives have become needlessly complicated, to reaquaint ourselves with our essential natures.

I'll try to demonstrate that that isn't an oversimplification by looking at some prototypical short stories of the seventies and the embryonic eighties. What I think we see in them is a
lessening commitment to ellipsis and fragmentation as expressive of contemporary experience: a general falling-away from "experiment" (though there are, and will always be, splendid exceptions — such as Barth and Barthelme themselves), and a general recourse to "old-fashioned" narrative realism.

A useful overview of the fiction of the past decade emerges from a reading of William Abrahams's *Prize Stories of the Seventies*. In introducing his twenty-three selections, Abrahams speaks of "the spirit of the age" manifest in most of them: "a tormenting awareness of alternatives, a distrust of accepted pieties" (located, he points out, in the disillusionment bred by those two moral stumbling-blocks of the period: Viet Nam and Watergate).

To be sure, there are here shard-like stories of enigmatic conflict and abrupt, sealed-off emotion (by Leonard Michaels, Raymond Carver, and Ann Beattie — perhaps the avatars of the decade's literature of alienation). Comic extravagance is brought adroitly to bear on contemporary tensions and traumas in such cleverly worked-out stories as Guy Davenport's "The Richard Nixon Freischütz Rag" and Woody Allen's "The Kugelmass Episode." Barthelme's "Subpoena," a characteristically ingenious extension *in extremis* of a perfectly believable premise, lets us see our own civilization fast becoming a regimented monstrosity in which "compliance" is the highest civic — and personal — virtue.

But these stories, provocative or amusing as they are, aren't really among the more memorable ones collected here. Most readers, I suspect, will be most viscerally affected by the "marriage" stories: Lynne Sharon Schwartz's "Rough Strife" (later incorporated into her novel of the same title), the razor-sharp account of a young marriage tested by first pregnancy, uncannily sensitive to both partners' emotional highs and lows; and Updike's "Separating" (a climactic tale in his "Maples" sequence), a very affecting portrayal of a divorcing couple breaking the news to their children: it's a stunning example of the resonance Updike can get out of the commonest domestic materials.

There's a similar emotional power in two lyrically expansive stories about fathers and sons. Harold Brodkay's "His Son, in His Arms, in Light, Aloft" beautifully conveys the *feel* of filial love and immersion in family concern. And Saul Bellow's
"A Silver Dish" turns a middleaged son's wrestling with his father's imminent death into a moving acceptance of (his father's, and his own) human frailty. It's one of the best things Bellow has ever done.

The kind of solidity and thoroughness that come through in stories like these are also present in a number of others whose surface content might have found expression instead in a more "fragmentary" kind of fiction. For example, Renata Adler's sophisticated urban mosaic "Brownstone" quite skillfully extends outward from its staccato structure, and creates a convincingly replete image of rich inner life. Joyce Carol Oates's "The Dead" effectively uses its supercharged rhetoric, rapid pace, and nervous blur of incidents to capture the self-destructive momentum of a successful woman writer coming apart under the social and personal pressures that hammer away at her. Ella Leffland infuses universality into her claustrophobic tale ("Last Courtesies") of a lonely woman's magnetic attraction to her ultimate fate, by skillfully relating this shrill individual story to "the world's madness — its rudeness, its litter, its murders."

Everywhere in this volume, we see examples of slender initiating ideas articulated into fully developed, thoroughly complex, extended stories. In "The Faithful," James Alan McPherson encapsulates the ambiguities of change in the story of a black preacher-barber whose refusal to accommodate to fashion (he "won't do Afros," and won't modernize the old forms of worship) makes him a double — and a splendidly defiant — anachronism. Bernard Malamud's "Talking Horse," poised teasingly on its own ambiguity (is the title creature a vehicle for his ventriloquist-exploiter? or a man now "imprisoned" in a horse's body?), blossoms into a fabulistic treatment of the nature of both art and freedom, with something like the power of myth. Cynthia Ozick's "Usurpation (Other People's Stories)" handles the story-within-a-story concept with ingenious forthrightness — making (herself) the writer the embattled character, confronting the intricacies of literary originality vs. indebtedness, and emerging with a heightened understanding of how stories are made. John Sayles's "I-80 Nebraska, M. 490- M. 205," a tale told by the voices of interstate truckers communicating via C.B. radios, uses the figure of a half-legendary lone-wolf driver to suggest
the kinky, kinetic appeal of "break through" and anarchy: it's a thoroughly elusive (conceivably a supernatural) story, but its expression is utterly direct and down-to-earth.

Those, then, are the constants I see beginning to emerge in our recent short fiction, and now even more dominant in American short stories of the last year or two. William Abrahams's two O. Henry Awards annuals (for 1980 and 1981), for example, seem to devote less space to the single-revealing-incident-or-perception kind of story (though there is work in this vein from such masters of it as Alice Adams and Ann Beattie, and such capable new writers as the spectacularly gifted Jayne Ann Phillips), and even to the ebullient novella-like story recently revived by the success of John Irving (Irving's "Interior Space," by the way, is a lively exception to the rule I'm trying to lay down here — as is Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl," a gnomic, enigmatic depiction of a concentration-camp death march, worked out in marvelous, unforgettable images).

Nevertheless, the emphasis throughout these two books is on patiently developed, gradually exfoliating explorations of expanding human consciousness. T. Gertler's "In Case of Survival" analyzes the mingled relief and guilt felt by a man saved, by a premonition, from boarding a plane that later crashes — and the damaging self-knowledge to which this conflict of emotions brings him. Peter Taylor's "The Old Forest" slowly, masterfully amplifies a "scandalous" episode from its Southern narrator's youth into an ironic contemplation of "our tranquil, upper-middle-class world of 1937." Jack Matthews's "The Last Abandonment" broods, in detail and at length, over a "double" crisis in the life of an elderly widower on vacation — first, the revivifying attention of a younger woman who urges him back into life; then, the gradual, painful relapse into the calm waiting for death that he'd never dreamed of evading in the first place. It's a touching story, and its power is increased by its ruminative, repetitive pacing.

It's interesting to move on to The Best American Short Stories 1980, edited by that highpowered comedian-rhetorician Stanley Elkin, and read (in Elkin's "Introduction") that he found among his year's stories an emphasis on "epiphanies," moments of discovery, in isolated experiences, that promise to cast shadows far forward, affecting the rest of their characters' lives.

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One sees immediately what he means, in such quietly resonant stories as Frederick Busch’s "Long Calls" (in which a traveling legal investigator realizes how damningly he has kept life, and feeling, "at a distance") and William H. Gass's "The Old Folks" (the story of a family reunion that grants to a nearly-prodigal son a late-in-life understanding of his parents' sacrifices and suffering). Another of Updike's "Maples" stories, "Gesturing," powerfully bespeaks the guilt and shame that accompany a marriage's ending ("We have made children. We gave each other our young bodies. We promised to grow old together"). There's a wonderful dawning comprehension of the integrity and value of the lives of a family of rustic "undesirables" ("They, are, a, family, .... They are real") in Robert Henderson's "Into the Wind" — and a moving empathy with a senile doctor's inability to understand that his wife is dying, in Richard Stern's "Dr. Cahn's Visit." In "Friends," Grace Paley elevates the social and political passions of "three opinionated left-wing ladies" into a rich double lament: respects paid, and tears shed for their dying friend, and a muted (shared) elegy for "our children murdered by cars, lost to war, to drugs, to madness." In "Hog's Heart," Gordon Weaver gives wonderful depth and texture to the emotions that hedge in (and enlighten) an ex-football player threatened with death by heart disease. The affective power of all these stories seems to derive from their intense, extended concern with the threats they discover lurking everywhere around us.

Hortense Calisher's choices for The Best American Short Stories 1981 do include a number of urban-sophisticated stories (including the obligatory Ann Beattie, Elizabeth Tallent's Beattie-like "Ice," and Elizabeth Hardwick's lovely essay-story "The Bookseller"), and several pieces of raffish invention by Walter Abish (experimentalist-in-residence at New Directions), Amelia Moseley (who nods gracefully in the general direction of Eudora Welty, with "The Mountains Where Cithaeron Is"), Robert Coover (a neat send-up of the pornography syndrome), and Max Apple (whose "Small Island Republics," about the upwardly mobile career of Inudo, "twice voted the Japanese-American teenager of the year," is another of his delightful studies of capitalism-and-acquisitiveness rampant). There are also two essentially realistic stories that I found teasingly mysterious: Joseph McElroy's portrait of a
mother and son caught up in a restaurant robbery (the curiously atonal, impersonal "The Future"); and Larry Woiwode's "Change," about an idealistic, religious family man's enlightening encounter with his troublemaking neighbors.

I was most taken with three beautifully written "conventional" stories. Andre Dubus's "The Winter Father" (in outline rather like those Updike stories I've mentioned) describes several guilt-riddled "days" that a divorced father spends with his son and daughter. The story keys on this character's self-torturing intensity, captured in evocative and moving imagery (for example: driving home alone, seeing that "the inside of his windshield was iced .... As he scraped ...., he realized the grey ice curling and falling from the glass was the frozen breath of his children"). Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh" examines in compassionate comic detail the changed life of an injured truckdriver's wife, when his enforced stay at home sends her "into the world," to discover what's out there waiting for her. It's helped along, wonderfully, by Mason's effervescent colloquial dialogue ("Is this one of those women's-lib things," Leroy asks. "Don't be funny.").

Alice Munro's disarmingly plainspoken story "Wood," doled out in simple declarative and descriptive sentences, tells of a sign painter engulfed by — indeed, almost transfigured by — his obsessive "other interest": wood-cutting. Without dramatics or undue emphasis, Munro makes the very shape of the story show us how this patient entry into a realm that is both challenge and refuge is a way of changing one's life. On another level (though, again, without ever calling attention to the complexity), "Wood" demonstrates — in a manner very like that of Sherwood Anderson's great story "Death in the Woods" — how "any set of facts gets turned into a story." It's one of the finest things I've read in several years.

The University of Illinois Short Fiction program has, since 1975, issued annually four collections by individual writers (including such fine ones as Gordon Weaver, Andrew Fetler, Barry Targan, Jean Thompson, and H.E. Francis). This year's offerings are among the best evidence in support of my contention that the well-made story is attempting a comeback. For example, Illinois is publishing a retrospective of New Yorker writer and editor Robert Henderson's work, Into the Wind (whose title story I've already discussed). Only six of the
thirteen stories gathered here appeared in the last ten years. These examinations of urban/suburban moral crises, loosely conversational and discursive, seem very much to belong to the fifties (or earlier) — and, I’m sorry to say, their cautious domestic realism is frequently dulled by impossibly stiff, stilted prose (“Ellen Gaines, her hands steady, her smile serene and fixed, cleared the dinner table, walking with the light stateliness she had early learned to walk with”).

It would be unfair as well as unfunny to say that the best thing about Abraham Rothberg’s The Four Corners of the House is its wonderful (Biblical) title — even though its eight stories are filled with strongly imagined situations all but obviated by sentimental details and an overriding tone of forced seriousness. It’s hard to know whether Rothberg’s hard-working prose is better in a modest story about a cardiac patient’s revived intimacy with his young son (“Pluto is the Furthest Planet”) or in such wide-ranging, ambitious exercises as “Polonaise” (about an American suburbanite’s encounter with Polish refugees burdened by a sense of their country’s fate) or “The Animal Trainer” (in which a Jewish college instructor must come to terms with the former Nazi soldier who becomes his student). Rothberg’s stories are often awkward, but they do have genuine strengths.

The stories in Peter Makuck’s Breaking and Entering are about equally divided between chronicles of adolescent confusion or awakening (such as “Assumption”) and slow forays into self-understanding on the part of men baffled by their unravelling marriages, or the sudden, absurd acts of violence that intrude on the shelters they’ve built up around themselves. Makuck can’t do the sex-and-drugs scene (“How It Fee-yuls,” one exploration of that territory, is really pretty awful), and doesn’t handle groups of characters very well: he’s at his best (as in the intriguing title story) when examining a single, lonely character’s consciousness.

There’s an edgy, lively feel to the stories in Ladies Who Knit for a Living by Anthony E. Stockanes (the fourth, and best, of the Illinois crop). The milieu is, once again, domestic middle-American; the subjects are aging, serious illness, and dying; the settings are often old people’s homes or hospitals — all the more surprising, then, that Stockanes’s headlong directness (Hemingway-derived, I’d say) and sharp, economical dialogue keep his stories moving along smartly. There are one
or two unremarkable portrayals of youngsters trembling on the lip of manhood, but the best of these agreeably gritty stories deal with crises — and consequences — of maturity. The title story gives a convincing impression of the rich variety of “contacts” with which, and whom, a dying man learns he must make his peace. “Mr. Eustice” tellingly re-creates the bustle and confusion, expressed in their own (overlapping) voices, of a family gripped by an absurd concatenation of illnesses and fears. And, best of them all, “Vandals” explores the emotional turmoil (and its life-altering aftermath) aroused in a man who finds his parents’ gravestones destroyed. This is a beautiful story.

The University of Iowa Short Fiction Award volume for 1981 (the eleventh in a series that has also published such writers as Cyrus Colter, H.E. Francis, and Barry Targan) is The Phototropic Woman, a collection of sixteen stories by Annabel Thomas, an Ohio writer with deep and solid roots in “the Appalachian hills.” Her typical characters are common folk, often farm people: youngsters hellbent on breaking out of the prison of hometown; reclusive, neurotic (sometimes sex-starved) lonely women. Too many of her stories are conventionally Kafkaesque picturings of madness, too often decked out in luridly “poetic” prose (“My death will come walking toward me like a black dog”).

At her best, though, Thomas is a powerfully imaginative recorder (a little like the Kentucky novelist Elizabeth Madox Roberts) of the surprising forms the life force sometimes takes. The title story, an effective fable of post-nuclear “survival,” shows how self-preservation and self-destruction are ambiguously embedded together in our natures. “Coon Hunt” is a clever story in which the title incident parallels a farm girl’s increasing vulnerability to the boy who lets her know he means to have her. In wide-ranging, Weltyan tales like “Luther,” “On Gobbler’s Knob,” and (especially) “The Wellspring,” Thomas lifts her people’s lusty confusions to a nearly mythic level. This is flawed, inconsistent, but vigorous and arresting work.

The same kind of energy distinguishes the five long stories in John William Corrington’s The Southern Reporter, a composite portrait of the contemporary South and its denizens, where Halloween vandalism erupts into mass murder (“The
Great Pumpkin"), an elderly lawyer tracking a runaway heir finds "Sodom by the sea" in southern California ("Nothing Succeeds"), and moral outrage finds its most logical, most soothing expression in vigilante violence ("The Southern Reporter"). Corrington's stories are strident, heavy-breathing black comedies, somewhat overwritten and often tasteless, powered by their unified vision of total moral collapse ("This world is a shit heap"; "This is the heart of the beast"); though his concentration on obsessive revenge is, strictly, Faulknerian, Corrington is rather like a Richard Condon who learned his trade from all the great Southern regional writers. The savage sparkle of his prose makes his stories much more than vicious melodramas.

A vigorous style is also on display in the bold tragicomic stories of Ellen Gilchrist's _In the Land of Dreamy Dreams_. These are vividly nasty portraits of adolescents pleasing themselves with monstrous lies, spoiled Southern belles who get their doting rich daddies to pay for their abortions, lamerbrained _nouveaux riches_ who can't handle the consequences of their prosperity. Gilchrist keeps an amused ironic distance from her characters: the oddly summary, noncommittal tone (she sounds, at times, like a foulmouthed Flannery O'Connor) adds real force to her aphoristic wisecracks (about the brain-damaged girl who "went through stages of biting other children at the Academy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus"; or the socialite who foresees "the entire culture of the white Christian world ... besieged by the children of the poor carrying portable radios and boxes of fried chicken").

A few of the shorter stories are really only vignettes, but even these have their moments ("Last night my mother took off her clothes in front of twenty-six invited guests in the King's Room at Antoine's"). I especially liked Gilchrist's portrayal of "the most beautiful woman in the state of Louisiana" accompanied by "a Zen Buddhist carpenter," off in a canoe to rescue her mother during a flood ("There's a Garden of Eden"), and the terrifying comedy "Rich," a sequence of catastrophic chain-reactions that might have been imagined by F. Scott Fitzgerald on a night out with Nathanael West. This is Ellen Gilchrist's first book, and she is really a writer to watch.

Tobias Wolff, whose _In the Garden of the North American Martyrs_ is the best of the individuals' books reviewed here, is a
really rather frighteningly accomplished writer. The twelve quietly realistic, beautifully detailed and subtle stories collected here are about moments of crisis in the lives of tightly coiled, introspective, self-distrusting (sometimes self-despising) people. Though he's equally good with both men and women, Wolff sometimes strikes false notes (his characterization of the victimized teacher in the title story) or waxes almost-sentimental (the golden-honeymooners in "Maiden Voyage"). Usually, however, his dramatic directness and eye for colloquial detail bring utter conviction to his stories' forceful situations: a solitary driver's new understanding, following his adventures with a woman hitchhiker, of his imprisoned life ("Passengers"); a move to the country, and a sequence of unforeseen, unmanageable dangers ("Poaching"); a minor automobile accident that triggers visions of a world everywhere unsafe, peopled by robbers and killers ("Worldly Goods"). In Wolff's finest story, "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke," he shows, through a series of brilliant understatements, how a thoughtless brief love affair powerfully alters the course of several surprisingly connected lives.

These are really disturbing stories, their power compacted in small, unobtrusive, yet strongly echoing perceptions and images. One narrator, hearing that a family friend "had lost his faith in college," conjures up a "picture of a raincoat hanging by itself outside a dining hall." A woman, driving, is so absorbed in telling a friend her troubles that she never notices that two deer are caught in her headlights; just keeps on talking. Wolff can create quietly powerful settings ("In the distance the mountains were heaped with thick coils of cloud, and closer up in the foothills the mist lay among the treetops. Water ran down the trunks of the trees and stood everywhere"), or underscore the ominousness of a conventional experience by spare, flat descriptions (for example, here is how a newly inducted soldier perceives boot camp: "They made fun of our clothes and took them away from us. They shaved our heads until little white scars showed through, then filled our arms with boots and belts and helmets and punctured them with needles").

This attentiveness to the world that surrounds and defines people's private conflict and turmoil — to not just a social context, but a universal one — is what I suppose I mean by the
amplitude and depth manifest in our recent fiction (it's what classic fiction has always attempted, and it's also what writers like Tobias Wolff are attempting). There's no better way of understanding human limitations, it seems to me, than by reasserting — and re-exploring — the inherence of the human in something larger than itself. It's very good to see such ample and persuasive evidence that the short story will continue to be one of our avenues to that understanding.

Books under Discussion


