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## Fiction: A Year in the Life of a Short Story

Short fiction is alive and well in every form—be it new, newly translated, experimental or classic.

*By Sam Sacks*

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I have never been impressed by the perennial lamentations about the death of the novel, but I admit that I have had my doubts about the short story. First there's the disappearing marketplace, as fewer paying periodicals make space for short fiction. Then there's the issue of amateurism. Since stories are the bread and butter of writers' workshops, most published collections are made up of writing originally done for the classroom. It had seemed to me that the short story, which Faulkner considered the most demanding form after poetry, was turning into the Triple-A baseball of literature, where aspirants practice their craft in front of tiny crowds until, they hope, they're called up to the big leagues of novel writing.

This is why I can say that the most exciting development in fiction in 2018—a year when a single good book was worth a hundred times its weight in rancorous political

arguments—was the unexpected banquet of top-notch story collections. These books belied my longstanding worries because they weren't dominated by promising tyros fresh out of grad school but rather by publishing veterans lured back to the story form by the grace and artistry that one can achieve in tight spaces.



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Lauren Groff's "**Florida**" (Riverhead) is a fine example of the trend. Ms. Groff made her name with the 2015 conversation- piece novel "*Fates and Furies*," yet in truth that sprawling book was messily cluttered with allusions and parroted prose styles. In contrast, "*Florida*," about family life on the fritz in the

fever swamps of the Sunshine State, crams the same intensity and restless invention into pressure-cooker stories of 20 pages.

Another exemplar of controlled chaos is Christine Schutt's "**Pure Hollywood**" (Grove), where the stories' violence is held in the tension by the poetic rigor of the language. These stunning miniatures are like bonsai trees pruned with a switchblade. Just as powerful is Catherine Lacey's "**Certain American States**" (FSG), whose careering, periodic sentences drive against the reader like meteorological events.

John Edgar Wideman's collection "**American Histories**" (Scribner) is his best work of fiction in nearly 30 years. The heartbreakingly forceful of these vignettes is less in the prose, which is elegant and restrained, than in their dispassionate consideration of the

country's racial traumas. One story imagines a debate between John Brown and Frederick Douglass; in another, set in the present, a man sits on New York's Williamsburg Bridge calmly assessing his life and the idea of ending it.

There was no shortage of page-turners, either. I loved Martin Michael Driessen's "Rivers" (*AmazonCrossing*), a triptych of waterborne stories, translated from the Dutch by Jon Reeder, that possess the swift-flowing readability of Jules Verne's yarns. Tatyana Tolstaya's "Aetherial Worlds" (*Knopf*), translated from the Russian by Anya Migdal, is a sheer raconteurial delight, filled with twinkling, lightly comic anecdotes that spin wonder from the oddities of the everyday. The most satisfying fusion of intellectual stimulation and pure storytelling is in Vandana Singh's "**Ambiguity Machines**" (*Small Beer*). These otherworldly stories imagine intergalactic space travel, breakthroughs in quantum physics and an Earth altered by global warming, but it's their soft-spoken humanism that make Ms. Singh a fitting and much-needed successor to Ursula K. Le Guin.

The possibilities of the story form were stretched and manipulated in healthy ways by the Australian iconoclast Gerald Murnane. His "**Stream System**" (*FSG*) inverts traditional narrative like a glove turned inside-out. Instead of depicting the external world, Mr. Murnane constructs a scrupulously detailed map of his mental landscape. Reading him is uncannily like viewing one man's thought process in action.

More popular was the novel-in-stories, which has emerged as the perfect form to depict the often-invisible nature of 21st-century interconnection. It was epitomized this year by Lydia Millet's "**Fight No More**" (*Norton*), a tour of the class-torn world of Los Angeles real estate, and Olga Tokarczuk's "**Flights**" (*Riverhead*), translated from

the Polish by Jennifer Croft, a witty arrangement of stories and essays united by the theme of travel.

This was also an uncommonly good year for complete or newly translated collections. Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson produced “**The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis**” (Liveright), the first comprehensive English-language edition of the stories of a 19th-century Brazilian writer who seemingly anticipated every one of the 20th-century’s avant-garde movements. “**Night Train**” (Little, Brown) reminded readers of the incendiary beauty of Thom Jones’s short fiction, which burst into view in the 1990s and, like a comet, lost none of its effulgence upon reappearance. And from **David R. Godine** came the lovely three-volume “**Collected Short Stories and Novellas**” of Andre Dubus, the clairvoyant chronicler of broken families whose work was overshadowed by Raymond Carver’s but will in all likelihood outlive it.

Two collections were good enough to take their place alongside these classics. Thomas McGuane is the lauded author of gonzo druggie novels like “Ninety-Two in the Shade,” but in one of the great recent feats of literary reinvention, he began to apply himself to the short story. “**Cloudbursts**” (Knopf) collects the fruit of this second act. The stories, centered on wayward men and women in Montana, infuse the traditional representation of the American West with a sense of longing and loneliness that feels wholly contemporary. Mr. McGuane always had the sensibilities of a poet, and in these mature stories he’s stopped straining for comic effect. They mark the pinnacle of a brilliant career.

The same is true of the late Denis Johnson’s “**The Largesse of the Sea Maiden**” (Random House). The book reprises the subjects of addiction, recovery and religious conviction that animated Johnson’s influential 1992 collection “Jesus’ Son,” but again time and experience have worked their magic on the material. These stories, especially the remarkable title piece, are longer, quieter, deeper and richer than anything Johnson had written before. They wield the power of compression unique to the

greatest short stories—like one of Johnson’s desperate souls, the reader feels squeezed “in the almighty grip of the truth.”

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