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Short Stories

ANDREW KAHN, *The Short Story: A Very Short Introduction*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
£8.99/$12.99 paperback.

Rishona Zimring

Short stories are like memories, glimpses of people that we have perhaps loved and lost. Yet these shards of reminiscence can have enduring effects on the recollector. Short stories, too, create an illusion in which each glimpse bears the treasured trace of a whole world. The modern short story—and it is the *modern* short story to which Andrew Kahn's study treats us—has profound, if fragmentary, powers, much like the ubiquity of photos that are an amazing and sublime archive of modernity. Memories, photos, short stories: brief, transitory, replete with meaning. Overall, these elements are rather melancholy things. Whereas such glimpses bring us into awareness of ephemerality and mortality, we begin a novel, epic, or serial in happy anticipation that the end is nowhere in sight—neither of the fiction, nor of life. One of the pleasures of *Ulysses*, of course, is its seductive capacity to slow down time, stretching a day into something like forever. Contrastingly, one of the pleasures of *Dubliners* is that it offers us fleeting moments of the same city, captured nearly randomly, and arguably leaves us with a greater sense of melancholic loss despite or in addition to its prevailing sense of humor. Just as we are getting started, it all ends, all too soon.

The Short Story: A Very Short Introduction issues myriad invitations to reflect on the power of short stories as distinctly modern forms of expression. As Kahn affirms, "there are states of being and mind, such as rapture, loneliness, and grief, where the short story, like the poem, is proportionally suited to emotional intensity" (xxv). The short story's capacity to express and create emotional intensity sets it apart, in Kahn's scheme, from both the novel and the joke. However, like jokes, short stories are "particularly good for uncomfortable or edgy subjects" (xxv). Both jokes and short stories pack punches, making their audiences squirm. Kahn does not touch on stand-up comedy (only jokes), but many of his observations could link stand-up to modern short fiction.[1] Like stand-up comics, the "I-narrators" of short stories "tend to be larger-than-life personalities who revel in performative display," as Kahn observes in his chapter titled "Openings." Further, like stand-up, short stories relish "people and events in unsettled states—characters in motion, on thresholds, evading routine, or finding that it evades them" (26). Kahn's book begins with Alice Munro's piquant remark, upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, that she "would really hope this would make people see the short story as an important art, not just something you played around with until you got a novel" (xix). While the comparison to the novel makes sense, so too does the comparison to the joke, which bears significant fruit throughout this contribution to the "Very Short Introduction" series. If stand-up is arguably one of the great twentieth-century performance art forms, so too is the short story, a kindred spirit in unsettling audiences into recognitions and epiphanies.

Kahn incorporates a dazzling array of angles to illuminate the short story. As one might expect from a scholar of Russian literature, which is Kahn's professional position at Oxford, there is a chapter on Chekhov, which emphasizes sharp—ironical and satirical—humor. Do short stories,

[1] John Limon, *Stand Up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America* (Duke University Press, 2000).

like stand-up, make audiences uncomfortable? Indeed, they do. Kahn states the following about situational irony, which is critical to the Chekhovian story: "social embarrassment, character, delusion, and illusion can all present impediments to communication," and characters "make the necessary business of living, loving, and dying about which talk can be refused, evaded, and sublimated into some other thing" (97-8). Is there a better description of the way that one discomfort is turned into another in the current era of rampant discomfort? Or, for that matter, in Joyce's era (see "Clay")? In this facet as well as many others, Kahn's book exceeds its usefulness as a handbook to the short story. The short story offers guidance on a range of situations that we encounter and presents the amelioration of life through its flourishing touches and codes of poetic justice. The short story is particularly good at the "ironic twist" (81), often delaying this revelation until the very end, where the "sting-in-the-tail can take the form of a punchline, come-uppance, or tragedy" (82). When you begin a Dickens novel, you sense that a character deserves and will eventually suffer a come-uppance, most often accompanied by a banquet of ironic twists. You will also patiently wait over thirty-thousand words to get there. In a Lydia Davis story, you might wait only twenty words (xxiv). Not only does Kahn hold up the short story for comparison with the poem, the novel, and the joke, but he also puts the short story on maps of genre. For example, he notes how short stories with shocking turns "share with pulp fiction a zeal for entertainment and catharsis" (67). With encyclopedic literary knowledge, and a kaleidoscopic refraction of the short story through various prisms, Kahn excels in establishing the short story as a delightful and wise modern art form.

The Short Story: A Very Short Introduction is organized primarily along formalist lines. Six of its eight chapters focus on individual features of literary form. He focuses on openings in Chapter 2, voices in Chapter 3, place in Chapter 4, plot in Chapter 5, ironies and reversal in Chapter 6, and endings in Chapter 8. The remaining two chapters, which respectively discuss the rise of the short story and Chekhov's heirs, are more historical. The first places the modern short story in the context of British and American print culture in the nineteenth century, and its legacies; the second explores the "enormous" (94) influence of Chekhov from the 1920s onward. The structure facilitates a comprehensive understanding of individual stories, groups of stories, and the historical backgrounds that engender and encourage the flourishing of the short story, especially in the twentieth century. To achieve its formalist goals, Kahn's book occasionally draws on Russian formalism. For instance, Kahn elucidates how postmodern fiction (and metafiction) executes the play between *fabula* (events as they happened) and *siuzhet* (events as ordered in narration) (75). Kahn surveys metafictional play and plots in twentieth-century literature, with an impressively broad range of reference: Julio Cortázar, Guillermo Cabrera, OULIPO, Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Donald Barthelme, and Donald Antrim (74). While this list is exclusively male—excepting some of the unnamed individual members of OULIPO—Kahn's compass includes many women writers. His method involves both a broad sweep across continents and traditions as well as close readings of individual works. To explicate postmodern metafiction, he selects examples from Margaret Atwood's short story cycle *Happy Endings*, Lydia Davis's *Ten Stories About Flaubert*, and Patricia Highsmith's *Little Tales of Misogyny* (76-9). These women represent just a few of the many authors that Kahn cites. He provides insightful readings of many short fiction texts and an enticing array of works to read, if you have not done so already.

A formalist appreciation and understanding of the short story's unique powers inform Kahn's approach in his historical chapters as well. Periodical culture represents both context and creation. Nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines, and the explosive growth in reading that they engendered, expanded the market for storytelling (2). Stories entertained, addictively so. Khan points out that "lurid stories stylized as Gothic tales" fed the appetite for entertainment (3); stories were shaped by the expectation of "cheap thrills" (5). A backlash against such thrills spawned an

antithetical kind of story devoted to "slice-of-life realism" and the realization of short fiction's "artistic potential" (9, 10). To contextualize the artistic potential of short fiction, Kahn rightly extols the dominance of the *New Yorker* magazine in the Anglo-American sphere: "there is no richer archive of story writing and its indelible contribution to Anglo-American writing, synonymous with a certain type of short story canon—urbane, ironical, and reserved" (14). Published in the *New Yorker* in 2000, Lydia Davis's deadpan "Thyroid Diary" provides an outstanding example of this sensibility.[2] To Kahn's list of the urbane, ironical, and reserved, one might also add the category of the cringeworthy. This category is recognizable to anyone swept up in the viral 2017 *New Yorker* story, Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person."[3]

Kahn treats a wide range of authors and their works with sympathy and insight. There are brilliant close readings to be found here. Of "Eveline," for example, in a tour-de-force pairs Joyce with Richard Yates, whose *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* does for New York what *Dubliners* does for Dublin. There are brief introductions to authors less familiar to most Anglo-American readers, including Varlaam Shalamov. His stories of Soviet labor camps are influenced by Chekhov, Maupassant, and Proust. Kahn compares his *Kolyma Tales* to John Updike's *Maple Stories* and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (xxvi).

If Kahn's book does not include some short stories (E.M. Forster's, for example, or Carmen Maria Machado's) who could fault it, given the wealth of material presented so elegantly and the formidable obligation to be brief? Kahn has achieved a great deal in creating a precise formalist approach and lucid argument for the significance of the short story. One would like to know what Kahn thinks about Boccaccio or about how the novel won the competition for attention in the eighteenth century. However, a very short introduction is just that. Kahn resists a temptation that I cannot, and that is to end with this: brevity is the soul of wit.

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[2] Lydia Davis, "Thyroid Diary" (*New Yorker* September 17, 2000), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2000/09/25/thyroid-diary

[3] Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person," *New Yorker* (December 4, 2017), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person