



The Best American Short Stories 2011

Geraldine Brooks (Editor), Heidi Pitlor (Series Editor), Caitlin Horrocks (Contributor), Bret Anthony Johnston (Contributor), Claire Keegan (Contributor), Sam Lipsyte (Contributor), Rebecca Makkai (Contributor), Elizabeth McCracken (Contributor), more... Steven Millhauser (Contributor), Ricardo Nuila (Contributor), Joyce Carol Oates (Contributor), Richard Powers (Contributor), Jess Row (Contributor), George Saunders (Contributor), Mark Slouka (Contributor), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Introduction), Megan Mayhew Bergman (Contributor), Tom Bissell (Contributor), Jennifer Egan (Contributor), Nathan Englander (Contributor), Allegra Goodman (Contributor), Ehud Havazelet (Contributor) ...less

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The Best American Short Stories 2011 includes

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Megan Mayhew Bergman, Jennifer Egan,
Nathan Englander, Allegra Goodman,
Ehud Havazelet, Rebecca Makkai, Steven Millhauser,
George Saunders, Mark Slouka, and others

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From Reader Review The Best American Short Stories 2011 for online ebook

Rachel says

Apropos to very little, I liked guest editor Geraldine Brooks's anecdotes about being a journalist where you learn quickly that the grit of a story is out in the world and not in flowery, distracting word choices. That being said, most of my favorites in this collection were about culture clashes/brushes with tragedy and didn't adhere to style over substance.

They are:

"Ceiling" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Granata.) The nouveau rich go shoulder to shoulder with the slums in Lagos, Nigeria.

"A Bridge Under Water" by Tom Bissell (Agni.) I profess some personal connection to this story about a hastily married, strained couple touring Catholic and Jewish Rome.

"La Vita Nuova" by Allegra Goodman (The New Yorker.) A woman becomes an unconventional nanny and rekindles her artistic talent after her fiance leaves her.

"Soldier of Fortune" by Bret Anthony Johnston (Glimmer Train.) A man looks back to 1986 when, as a teenager, he cared for his crush's dog after a family tragedy.

"Property" by Elizabeth McCracken (Granata.) A recently widowed archivist moves temporarily into a house where he changes things up because he doesn't understand their meaning.

"To the Measures Fall" by Richard Powers (The New Yorker.) An overview of a literature major-turned-lawyer's life and how she perceives the changing media of five decades.

"The Call of Blood" by Jess Row (Harvard Review.) A mixed race nurse gets involved with a divorcee from a mixed faith marriage while taking care of her Alzheimer's mother.

Two stories I struggled with were "Free Fruit for Young Widows" by Nathan Englander and "The Dungeon Master" by Sam Lipsyte. The former dealt with the murky ethics of a man murdering likely enemies in cold blood after barely surviving the Holocaust, but I felt it was a copout to tell the story from an un-involved person's perspective, as if his sympathy was unquestionable absolution. The latter quite quickly equated violence and mental illness with tabletop roleplaying games, and although I don't doubt these characters could exist in real life, the negative stereotype is quite wearying.

Ben Loory says

Favorites:

Bret Anthony Johnston - "Soldier of Fortune"

Steven Millhauser - "Phantoms"

Richard Powers - "To the Measures Fall"

George Saunders - "Escape from Spiderhead"

The Bret Anthony Johnston especially was a real eye-opener.

Chris Gager says

Have rescued a few of these over the past few years. From the local transfer station I assume. Seven of the twenty stories first appeared in the New Yorker so I may have already read some of these.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - "Ceiling" - Nigerian middle class blues. Not bad, not great.

Megan Mayhew Bergman - "Housewifely Arts" - Lonely, clueless, rootless, drifting single mom blues. Not terribly original - Alice Munro lite.

Tom Bissell - "A Bridge Under Water" - Got-married-to-an-asshole-because-I-got-pregnant blues. Game's over before the Roman honeymoon ends. This one has bite.

Jennifer Egan - "Out of Body" - Troubled might-be-gay-but-definitely-an-arsehole young guy in Manhattan blues. Very well written but otherwise not so compelling for me. This actually reminded me of "City of Bones" - weird!

Nathan Englander - "Free Fruit for Young Widows" - Definitely read this before in the New Yorker. The best one so far. No navel-gazing ...

Allegra Goodman - "La Vita Nuova" - More NYC (actually Boston, but the protagonist is from NYC) breakup blues. Does TNYer select these stories specifically to appeal to its younger readers or to attract more? It gets a bit old. The writing's always good but the subject matter is repetitive.

Rhud Havazelet - "Gurov in Manhattan" (Where else?) - This one's about the middle-age blues. The style is recognizably Russian-Jewish-Nabokovian ironic melancholy. Again - very well written. "Gurov" refers to a Chekhov tale.

Caitlin Horrocks - "The Sleep" - A fantasy (not sci-fi) and not much to my liking, though pretty effective in making its point. Rural, upper Midwestern and depressed/depressing, small-American-town-in-decline blues. Reminded me of the Karen Russell story (The Bog Girl) in the recent New Yorker, an indulgent, non-sci fi fantasy whose point is much more obscure and therefore even more off-putting.

Bret Anthony Johnston - "Soldier of Fortune" - fictional(?) South Texas-based memoir. Dickey male 1980's adolescence blues. "Glomming" (as an adjective????). "Lamp" as a verb - as in "to light up/illuminate"???? The writing is often overly clever and awkward-sounding as if the author were trying too hard, but the content is at least somewhat compelling. The whole memoir genre is NOT my favorite thing anyway. How does the rememberer remember verbatim conversations from 20 years before? Oh yeah, now I remember I had something to say about the "twist" near the end. How could it be that if this twist were true that the narrator had not heard any rumors about it??? NOT believable!

Claire Keegan - "Foster" - The title means foster child. Another from The New Yorker that I remember reading. Young girl in a crappy home blues. Unwittingly finds a nicer place, has to go home again and finds

that she's not happy about it. Some of that familiar William Trevor territory I'd say. The Irish English "style" is recognizable. The story is sort of an old fable. The crappy parents are fecund while the deprived, lonely, but loving parents are childless by nasty circumstance.

Sam Lypsyte - "The Dungeon Master" - Another New Yorker story that rings a vague memory bell. This one's back in middle-America-young-lad-growing-up blues territory but pretty funny and sort of serious at the same time. ANOTHER drowned child - two straight stories! Another ill-use of the term/phrase "beg the question." Apparently I'm one of the few people in the known world who knows the actual meaning of that phrase. Anyway, this one reminded me of John Green - flashy/breezy, knowing, smart, and compassionate. Borrows from "The Hobbit" - of course.

Rebecca Makkai - "Peter Torelli, Falling Apart" ... gay-actor-old-friend-loses-his-mojo-and-disappears blues. A Sad tale about ... witnessing the falling apart of a dear friend. What can one do?

Elizabeth McCracken - "Property" ... dead-wife-blues combines with filthy-house-rental-blues with a nice twist(and more personal-loss-blues) near the end. Life is sad ... indeed.

Steven Millhauser - "Phantoms" - This one's a bit different ... existential apparition blues? As with all the others it's well written but with a "meaning" that is a bit mysterious to me.

Ricardo Nuila - "Dog Bites" - Back to middle-class American-suburban-kid-growing-up blues with this interesting and "different" story. Typically well-crafted.

- Another question begged and another nail in the coffin of the actual meaning of that phrase.

- "air force" ought to have been capitalized

Joyce Carol Oates - "ID"(as in eye-dee, not id) - Ms. Oates returns to her familiar territory = All-American craziness in a tale of pathetic-trailer-trash-teenager-dysfunctional-family-life blues. Well crafted, but UGH! Reminiscent of T. C. Boyle's "Chicxulub"(also in The New Yorker - about 20 or so years ago...

Richard Powers - "To the Measures Fall" - a pretty straightforward and amusing tale of obsessed-lifetime-reader's-blues. I now have to check and see if Elton Wentworth was a real writer or made-up. I suspect the latter, a composite based on the many English early(and to varying degrees obscure) 20th century word-slingers - like John Cowper Powys, for instance.

Jess Row - "The Call of Blood" - More middle class urban relationship/loneliness blues. Plus multicultural blues. I'm not that crazy about this one. Does anyone REALLY have conversations like the people in this story????

- no quotation marks = confusion

George Saunders - "Escape from Spiderhead" - One I'm sure I read in TYN already. As one reviewer already put it, Mr. Saunders is reliably entertaining. This one could easily fit in a sci fi collection. Funny and weird ... of course! And in the end, even moving ... reminds of "A Planet Named Shayol" from Cordwainer Smith, "A Clockwork Orange," "Brave New World" and more. The best story in the collection, and no surprise if you like Mr. Saunders and his gift - I certainly do.

Mark Slouka - "The Hare's Mask" - another good one, combining holocaust memories with escape and

redemption. Life goeth onward ...

- Finally .. the last two stories managed to pull an overall 4* rating(3.75 actually) out of the fire.

Dan says

Stories so taut they twang

The most compelling part of the 2011 American short story anthology just may be the introduction by this year's editor, author Geraldine Brooks.

She writes about short story form: setup, reveal, reversal and release. "If one element fails, the edifice crumbles." Brooks writes that she likes stories that, well, tell a story.

She doesn't care for short stories that treat plot "as if it were a hair in the soup." If a story is bleak it ought to have clearly earned its bleakness. The best short stories she tells us have a lot in common with the good joke. Each relies on economy and suggestion and I'd add timing.

Brooks tells us why she admires those she has selected. She offers advice to a new generation of writers who chose the short form: go out and live life, and if possible go someplace where "you have to think in one language and buy groceries in another." Carry home in your soul what you learn and then write about it, Brooks advises.

Every story has earned its place in the anthology but a number of the stories especially grabbed me and won't let go.

"Housewifely Arts" by Megan Mayhew Bergman hangs on more than any of the other nineteen. It's a wrenching tale of a single mother reaching for atonement by seeking out the parrot that had been her dead mother's pet so she could hear the bird mimic her mother's voice. It's a story that looks at the things in life that define our humanity. "What maniacs we are – sick with love, all of us."

"A Bridge Under Water" by Tom Bissell is hilarious, erotic and ultimately sorrowful story that follows a young couple as their new marriage begins to crumble during a honeymoon tour of a Rome synagogue. Bissell throws in descriptive zingers that include people with "hydraulically sincere eyebrows" or American tourists from "one of the overfed states."

Richard Powers' "To the Measures Fall" examines a woman's entire adult life and records the cultural and political events of a generation by reflecting how an obscure English novel (a fictitious book by an author who doesn't exist) can have influence over a lifetime.

Reading the book for the first time as a student bicycling in the Cotswolds, the woman is captivated. "The thing took you underwater and held you there for the better part of thirteen hours, and two days later you're still winded."

Each of the twenty stories in the 2011 edition has that power to pull the reader underwater. Of the hundreds

of stories Brooks read she said she was seeking out those “so taught they twang.” I don’t think there’s any question that she found them.

Sara says

Picked it up in an airport. Would recommend for a long flight. Some were good, some were weird, some were bizarre. It was a nice mix to keep me interested and focused on something other than the rampant farther sitting in the next row.

Jessica says

I always forget how often short story anthologies make me want to grab the nearest metal kitchen implement and trepan the part of my brain that knows how to read. Really not sure why this is, but there's something about a lot of short stories in succession that makes me wish I didn't understand written words anymore.

I'm sure all these stories are, on their own, extremely fine. In fact, I clearly remember weeping in my bathroom back in Queens as I read the Richard Powers one in *The New Yorker* a couple years ago. But there is something about all of them in a row like this that makes me cynical. Maybe because when they're put all in a heap like this, the contemporary short story starts to feel like a formulaic genre, or emotionally and/or intellectually manipulative smoke and mirrors? But you know, I also have a hard time with single-author collections and really do best with short stories one at a time... Ideally someone would ride a bike by my house and throw a brick through my window with a single short story wrapped around it, maybe once ever two or three weeks or so, because I do struggle with most of the standard delivery systems.

I dunno. Obviously I'm just crabby. Gonna try a novel next.

John says

Overall this year’s stories were a bit disappointing. Although there are some phenomenal stories, there were a lot that seemed ordinary to me. I have been reading the yearly publications for perhaps a decade now and usually I love nearly every story. This year’s stories are still worth reading, but seemed to lack the connection to make it a great read. A 3.5

Ceiling – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie 3

Well woven and written, but did not blow me out of the water.

Housewifey Arts – Megan Mayhew Bergman 4.5

Wonderful! Touching. Great characters who came alive in their uniqueness. A good plot. Quirky. Very vivid in its descriptions of places that seem unique, yet familiar. One of the best. I read it twice it was maybe even better the second time.

A Bridge Under Water – Tom Bissell – 4

A great mash-up of a relationship in trouble and diatribe on religion. I love stories that end with doubt and let you guess at what happens next. It also demonstrates the sacrifices one must make to be in a relationship.

Out of Body – Jennifer Egan – 3.5

A tough story to read both for the writing style as well as the subject matter. It took me nearly the whole story to find any rhythm. But Kudos for using the 2nd person.

Free Fruit for Young Widows – Nathan Englander – 4

A classic style short story where more of reality is revealed as you go with the big reveal being near the end. Challenged me to think and not to be too quick to judge an act out of context.

La Vita Nuova – Allegra Goodman – 3.5

Concise, even by short story standards. Left me wanting more which is a compliment, but also I think it could have been flushed out more. Full of very rich details.

Gurov in Manhattan – Ehud Havazelet – 3

Indeed it feels like a Russian novel as desired. I've not read Chekov, but plenty of others to know it's the mark. Not enough plot for me.

The Sleep – Caitlyn Horrocks – 4

Fun and creative. Love short stories that explore or an idea that is slightly fanciful. Captures small town America well and how it is outside the mainstream.

Soldiers of Fortune – Bret Anthony Johnston – 5

Wow! Stunningly wonderful. I love stories about loss of innocence and growing up and when life changed for them. This is one of those stories. It is beautifully written and revealed and laid out. Another story I read twice and noticed even more wonderful little things the second time through.

Foster – Claire Keegan – 3

Longish without a payoff that spoke to me. Fine, but nothing special.

The Dungeon Master – Sam Lipsyte – 2

Not sure what it is doing in the collection. Seems cliché.

Peter Torrelli, Falling Apart - Rebecca Makkai – 5

Loved it! Pulled me in from the first paragraph and never let me go. So many things weave through the story in different times and places, but it is coherent and natural in its flow. On my second read it struck me as much sadder, perhaps because I knew the ending. Humanity is so tied up in “important” things that end up meaningless a short time later.

Property – Elizabeth McCracken – 5

Brilliant! This story knocks it out of the park from the incredible writing full of local color, to the unique and wonderful characters to the touching plot. Chalked full of so many emotions. I think it is my favorite of the book.

Phantoms – Steven Millhauser – 2.5

Meh. Moderately interesting, but was expecting a bigger payoff.

Dog Bites – Ricardo Nuila – 3

Interesting of sorts, creative and unique, but failed to make a meaningful connection.

ID - Joyce Carol Oates – 4

Tough story to read. Sad on a few levels. Great capture of the young teenager with all her doubts and fears and anxieties only compounded by her home life.

To the Measures Fall – Richard Powers – 2.5

Unique in style but hardly memorable. Bonus applied for using 2nd person.

The Call of Blood – Jess Row – 4

Complicated. The flow of the story seemed to purposefully be full of potholes and breaks, choppy, forcing me to read and think hard. A brave attempt to figure out what culture means.

Escape from Spiderhead – George Saunders – 4

A sci-fi exploration of chemically controlled brain reactions. I love the premise since I often wonder personally about all the chemical reactions causing me to act/feel. A little disappointed with the ending.

The Hare's Mask – Mark Slouka – 3

Interesting interweaving of generations and childhood misunderstandings, but failed to really move me considering the topics involved.

Jerry says

File this one in the category “odd things editors say in the foreword”. Both editors complain about the sameness of the short stories then-current. Interestingly, at least at first, it seemed as though they were choosing stories to prove their point. The second story in particular seems to hit all of their complaints.

Another, *Peter Torelli, Falling Apart*, in a way relating to the editorial concerns, tangentially involves Hopper's *Nighthawks*.

I've noted before that the stories I tend to like most in these collections are the ones that flirt with science fiction/fantasy themes. I enjoy stories that put the strangeness in the background. Here, the editor mentions her pride in helping one story make it past the “anti-sci-fi forcefield”. But the story they took, they took from a literary magazine. Previous editors were un-self-conscious about choosing stories from the other side of the forcefield. Part of the problem is not recognizing fantasy/sf when they see it. Brooks labels Caitlin Horrock's *Sleep*, for example, from *the Atlantic Fiction for Kindle* as satire, but it is pure Ray Bradbury fantasy/sf. (Which doesn't preclude it from being satire, of course—see about half the things Stanislaw Lem wrote—but the satire component, if it even exists, is much more subtle than the fantasy component.)

Steven Millhauser's *Phantoms* is also an interesting fantasy-oriented story, about a town that has relatively boring phantoms pop up and then disappear for no apparent reason or history. It's a lot more interesting than it sounds.

One of the better stories was Tom Bissell's *A Bridge Under Water*, about a woman who discovers that she has just married an insufferable dick. It was better than it sounds, possibly partly because Bissell claims in

the back that he is personally an insufferable dick, and that he made the story semi-autobiographical.

Joyce Carol Oates's *ID* is also one of the better stories, and also semi-autobiographical (albeit far more semi than Bissell's story, assuming both are telling the truth about their inspirations).

Chris says

Making my way through this one. So far, on a scale from (1) "Wish I had those 15-30 minutes back" to (5) "Read, Reread, Repeat":

Five Stars

Four Stars

George Saunders "Escape from Spiderhead" 4.5
Saunders now; Saunders forever.

Bret Anthony Johnston "Soldier of Fortune" 4.5
No surprise here, btw. Pretty much bought the collection for BAJ

Claire Keegan "Foster"
A quiet but lovely tale of a Scottish kid passed off to another family while her mother births a baby brother for her. The estrangement of early childhood done very well.

Nathan Englander "Free Fruit for Young Widows"
Hunh. This didn't stick with me at all years ago last year when I first read it. So much so that, as I reread it last night, I had no recollections of having done so before. But last night it had me in its grip and struck me as a fabulous meditation on grief, loss, context and forgiveness. Diggin' me some Nathan Englander this week. (1/31/14)

Richard Powers "To the Measures Fall"
No surprise, but I'm not a sucker for a story about a mysterious text that lingers to slowly reveal itself. The Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-But-Not-Really nature of the text is intriguing and little confusing.

Sam Lipsyte "The Dungeon Master"
A hilarious and ultimately jarring tale of isolation, the desperation of outsiders, and the need to seize power, no matter how small.

Caitlin Horrocks "The Sleep"

Megan Mayhew Bergman "Housewifely Arts"

Three Stars

Allegra Goodman "La Vita Nuova"
Not sure why it did, but this short-short about a jilted bride and dismissed teacher who takes a job as a nanny and makes paints biographical babushkas really stuck with me. I reread it last night, dug it again, and

probably still can't articulate what I like about it. 2/2/14

Mark Slouka "The Hare's Mask"

A bite-sized tale to finish the collection. Like Englander's story above, it's a multi-generational story of Jewish identity told through the eyes of a child watching truth and legacy emerge from mystery. Of the two, I prefer Englander's.

Rebecca Makkai "Peter Torrelli, Falling Apart"

"This one time, my buddy lost all his mojo and disappeared," the story said in limpid and often luminous prose.

Ricardo Nuila "Dog Bites"

"Syndrome" kid and dad story. Baseball game gone awry. I liked this line by line but don't expect it to stick for long.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie "Ceiling"

Jennifer Egan "Out of Body"

Joyce Carol Oates "ID"

Oates is occasionally too clinical for me. Here, I can hear all of the pieces clicking into place in this story of a thirteen-year-old girl with an abusive, AWOL father on the lam and a blackjack-dealing mother who vanishes for days only to show up on the ID table at the morgue. It should be a powerful story of dislocation and terror as the young kid faces entry into foster care after the loss of both parents, but I'm distracted by technique. Rather than feeling the moment with the protagonist, we're at a distance, aware of each move and trick Oates pulls as she constructs. So then let me not be the first to say that Oates is good but occasionally foregrounds herself and her chops rather than her characters.

Jess Row "The Call of Blood"

Army medic home from Iraq tends to Korean woman with Alzheimer's, falls into a new life with her daughter.

Meh

Elizabeth McCracken "Property" 2.5

Man rents house.

Steven Millhauser "Phantoms" 2

Here's this wondrous thing I do better elsewhere.

Tom Bissell "A Bridge Under Water" 2

Ehud Havazelet "Gurov in Manhattan" 1

Angie says

Short stories are a gift to e-book readers--we end up using our devices during the in-between moments of our lives and, sometimes, the stories in this collection felt a bit like filler, actually. But most of them are amazing and serve as excellent introductions to the authors' work. I loved the story, "Foster" by Claire Keegan, in which an Irish girl discovers how parents are supposed to act when she is temporarily fostered by a loving couple. I liked the story by Jennifer Egan, "Out of Body," about a suicidal former college student. But the story had so much going on in it I felt the characters would belong better in a novel. I also liked "Phantoms" by Steven Millhauser, which is an interesting mix of fiction writing and scientific writing.

The story I could not forget, however, was written by Caitlin Horrocks. Called "The Sleep," it chronicles a small Midwestern town's attempts at hibernation. Don't laugh--it's brought on by economic hard times and, in one family, prompted by grief. One of the few residents who stays awake through the winter is the town librarian. She reads the entire time!

Kimberly Faith says

I find that these collections are strongest when a favorite writer of mine is editing them (similar taste, perhaps). This was one of the more disappointing volumes. Which is a shame because my good friend Sara Batkie's story "Cleavage" was listed as a distinguished story in the back of the book!!! I love looking over that list after reading the collection and sighing to see which stories that floored me throughout the year of lit journal reading didn't make the volume or didn't make the distinguished stories. But, it's only fair to note that we as readers have different tastes. Geraldine is on a different page from me. It's also discouraging to see so many stories selected from *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, and *Harpers*. There are a good bit from *McSweeney's* too which has become as difficult to get into as the aforementioned heavyweights. Out of 20, 7 are from *The New Yorker*. On the other hand, it's nice to see *Tin House* and *One Story* in the mix as they are both super fine journals. I love *The New Yorker* and all but there are just so many top literary journals struggling it's always my hope that smaller journals will wash forward onto the BASS list.

All of my favorites except for one were stories I'd already read this year (in their original printing at each journal) but one new surprise was "La Vita Nuova" by Allegra Goodman (somehow I missed it in *The New Yorker*). It's filled with perfect sentences and nary a stray lazy word. It's a lesson in a simple, but perfectly crafted story about loss. The narrator is an art teacher whose fiance has left her. She takes her wedding dress into her class of young kids who then proceed to draw and paint over it as she watches. From there, she continues to use her art skills on children's toys as she deals with the loss of her fiance and the gain of a young boy that she babysits and takes on adventures throughout Cambridge, Massachusetts. It's a swift story of a few pages but packs in such a believable world that the last sentence broke my heart.

My second favorite was Megan Mayhew Bergman's "Housewifely Arts" which I'd read earlier in the year in *One Story*. It's beautifully written, funny, and slyly moving. Essentially, a daughter mourning her mother's death drives to a zoo to find the former house-pet parrot that can mimic her mother's voice.

I loved Bret Anthony Johnston's story "Soldier of Fortune" from *Glimmer Train* up to the ending, which rang so sadly false and flat to me.

I enjoyed Rebecca Makkai's story "Peter Torrelli, Falling Apart" from Tin House which, yup, I'd read in the journal earlier. Lastly, "Property" by Elizabeth McCracken from Granta and Tom Bissell's "A Bridge Under Water" from Agni were great reads.

Six wonderful stories out of twenty isn't the best percentage for me as a reader but as with anything give it a go. Stories don't just entertain but answer questions we can't solve ourselves. This volume may be better meant for you than it was for me.

Christina Gagliano says

I've only read the first 3 1/2 stories so far; however, "A Bridge Under Water" by Tom Bissell is one of the best short stories I've ever read and would be worth the price of the entire book. If, as the author said in the end note "a large part of the reason I wrote this story was to determine why I can sometimes be an insufferable dick," well, I'm glad he went through this exercise and, whether or not he's still an insufferable dick, he wrote an amazing short story! I'll just make sure never to go see him speak at an author event. Okay, back to the rest of the book now. . .

Ally Armistead says

Every year, I look forward to BASS with breathless anticipation. As a great lover and writer of the short story form, reading this collection is the holy mecca of genius and inspiration. My favorites over the years have included Stephen King's 2007 edition, and last year's (2010) Richard Russo's edition, so when I found out that Geraldine Brooks--author of March and A Year of Wonders--was 2011's guest selector, I was psyched.

However, while there were a handful of truly exceptional stories in Brooks' line-up, I was left with an overwhelming sense of "is that all there is?" It's true: 75% of the collection left this reader with the question "this was the best of 2011?" and it is this question that dampens the magic of BASS that I have come to expect year after year after year. The stories in this 75% camp were, to put it mildly, without spark or drive--they were missing that "gem" that makes me want to read a story compulsively, lap up its voice, revel in its structure.

However, rather than spend the next five minutes dissecting these stories, I'd rather focus instead on the 15% of excellence, including "Housewifely Arts" by Megan Mayhew Bergman; "La Vita Nuova" by Allegra Goodman; "The Sleep" by Caitlin Horrocks; "Peter Torrelli, Falling Apart" by Rebecca Makkai; and "Foster" by Claire Keegan. These are absolute reads for anyone who loves short stories, and for anyone who writes in the form.

christa says

I'm trying to become a short story writer, or better yet a novelist, and it is tricky. I don't know what's good. I don't know if I'd read my own work if my work was by a stranger. I wonder if I'd close the anthology I was

featured in and sigh, contentedly, at the way I tugged a heart string or made a reader feel bile burn in the back of her throat. Mostly I just want to a) tell a good story in a new way and b) make a reader want to barf.

I don't have many idols in the world of short stories. I'm not like, "Oh, Bradbury. His vision of the blah blah blah is really something to behold and his sentence structure is so blah blah blah." Every once in awhile I make a pledge to myself: "Every Monday I will read the short story that appears in the New Yorker and I will think about the construction of the short story. What I like, what I don't like." I do this for awhile and then I get preoccupied with a new hobby. For instance, Sephora has trotted out a system of nail care that makes it look like your nails are covered in velvet. Lovely or trashy? What would the Pretty Little Liars, my nail-color inspiration team, think of it? Also: Have you seen "Gallery Girls" on Bravo? What a delicious time-waster. In a perfect world, this show would air 24 hours a day.

The other day Regina Spektor was on Fresh Air and she told Terry Gross that she is really lazy and I thought, "Hey, me too! I'm just like Regina Spektor!" That felt good.

I gave myself an assignment: One short story from "The Best American Short Stories 2011" per night. My theory is that if I'm not doing, I should be reading so that when I do do, I'll be that much more well-read. See also: Another way in which I justify my procrastination.

The best you can hope for in an anthology of short stories is that it is at least 50 percent readable and that you walk away from it with a) some ideas about structure, content, story arc and dialogue and b) an interest in a new-to-you writer. BASS, curated by Geraldine Brooks, totally succeeds. Out of the 20 stories:

1. I skipped one;
2. Loved at least four;
3. Liked twice as many;
4. Decided one of the writers was an asshole;
5. Decided a writer I thought was an asshole really was not;
6. Thought a lot about Jennifer Egan;
6. Added a novel by Allegra Goodman to my Amazon Wish List.

The hidden gem of this compilation is the contributors' notes, which not only list accomplishments and spouses, it also gives a little blurb on how the story came to be. In many cases, if you're using this as a textbook, this is just as much of a teaching tool as the stories. So many times the writer says something like: "This story took me 10 years to write" which means I have a longer deadline than I previously imagined. Allegra Goodman says that whenever she finishes a novel, she likes to write a short story because she can have fun and experiment. Her story, "La Vita Nuova" was my favorite. I'd eat there again. Tom Bissell writes in his note that his story has touches of autobiography, which tells me that not only do I not want to hang out with his self-righteous character, who is honeymooning in Europe with his pregnant wife and causes a huge scene while on a religious tour, I probably don't want to hang out with him.

All in all, bravo, Geraldine Brooks, for putting together a compilation that made me both eager and terrified to write.

daniel says

there is some very good writing, of course, that does not stir the blood. it's cool, cerebral. tricky, clever. i

admire it in the same way i admire the technical proficiency of a cirque de soleil acrobat: 'look what she's doing up there. i didn't realize a rotator cuff had that range of motion.' but i'm not moved by it. and by the end of the show, so many amazing things have been done that amazement becomes a kind of boredom.

-- ms. brooks's introduction

with these best-of collections, it often strikes me as cruel to put stories in a collection with the likes of stories by richard powers, or steven millhauser, or george saunders. that being said: sam lipsyte's 'the dungeon master' made me read it again i enjoyed it so much; allegra goodman's 'la vita nuova' made me fall in love with style (and the protagonist despite the trope of 'the perfect child' who was her babysitting charge); nathan englander's 'free fruit for young widows' took themes/settings i don't usually enjoy (holocaust, war, moral intellectual debate) and riveted me; and caitlin horrocks's 'the sleep', her story of a town that decides to hibernate the winter months away, was, by far, my favorite of the whole collection.

but george. oh george! thank you.
