

## Short Stories at the Nichols Library

Conventional wisdom has it that the greats of fiction are the novel. From Melville and Henry James to Tom Wolfe, John Irving and Mark Chabon, the swaggering ambition of the novel rules the roost, certainly so with publishers. But there is something about the miniature frame of a short story allows “more of life [to be] glimpsed, and glimpsed more clearly through the finely ground lenses . . . of crystalline prose.” Here are some recent story collections at the Nichols Library in Center Harbor, whose blend of ‘grotesque comedy, moral seriousness and steel-trap intellectual rigor’ has the potential to captivate.

*Tenth of December* by George Saunders. Saunders is an “undisputed master” of the short story, and “*Tenth of December* is his most honest, accessible, and moving collection yet (*NYT*).” Writing brilliantly and profoundly about class, sex, love, loss, work, despair, and war, Saunders cuts to the core of the contemporary experience. Readers will encounter an abduction, a rape, suicide, a veteran's post-traumatic impulse to burn down his mother's house—all of it “buffeted by gusts of such merriment and tender regard and daffy good cheer that you realize only in retrospect how dark these morality tales really are.” Dark, but (says the *Washington Post*), with an” added pinch of semi-sweet salvation.”

*News from Heaven* by Jennifer Haigh. The stories in this collection are set in a dwindling “coal company town” where “everybody knows your business.” But the mines have failed and the residents have been left to flounder. Some leave for better opportunities, like 16 year-old Annie who heads to New York City, hired as a housekeeper by an Upper West Side family. And there are those who stay, such as Joyce, who could never leave because “freedom is, to her, unimaginable, as exotic as walking on the moon.” Along with these themes of disappointment are those of “quiet strength.” Says the *Post*, “this small town is a large canvas, one filled in with precise, poignant strokes.”

*Dear Life* by Alice Munro. In story after story in this brilliant new collection, Alice Munro pinpoints the moment a person is forever altered by a chance encounter, an action not taken, or a simple twist of fate. Her characters are flawed and fully human: a soldier returning from war and avoiding his fiancée, a wealthy woman deciding whether to confront a blackmailer, a young teacher jilted by her employer. Illumined by Munro’s “unflinching insight,” these lives draw us in with their quiet depth and surprise us with unexpected turns. “The stories of *Dear Life* establish yet again Munro’s psychological acuity, clear-eyed acceptance of frailties and mastery of the short story form (*The Post*).”

*Best American Short Stories* (Tom Perotta, editor). Readers seeking a sampler of recent short form should try this “stellar” collection, which feature the authors already mentioned, along with Mary Gaitskill, Steven Millhauser, Nathan Englander, Roxane Gay, Lawrence Osborne, Kate Walbert, and Eric Puchner. Editor Perotta prefers “stories written in plain, artful language about ordinary people,” which makes this a particularly accessible set. One of the most powerful, “Diem Perdidi” by Julie Otsuka, was written as a “way of keeping my mother with me,

even as she was slipping away." Such context "deepens the resonance of a formally inspired narrative (Kirkus Reviews)."

Other notable collections here include Anne Beattie's breakout *New Yorker Stories*. Her voice was "so original, and so uncannily precise" that she was "instantly celebrated as a voice of her generation." Beattie is a "master observer" of the unraveling of the American family, and also of the myriad small occurrences and affinities that unite us. Each Beattie story, says Margaret Atwood, is "like a fresh bulletin from the front: we snatch it up, eager to know what's happening out there." Tobias Wolfe's collection *Our Story Begins* presents 21 handpicked favorites and 10 new stories that alone would be cause for celebration. For readers who aren't acquainted with his writing, this set concentrates some of his best work in one place. These are, says *Kirkus*, "crisp, urgent little dramas."

Inspired readers might want to look back and explore earlier masters of the short form. Some, like Melville, Twain, James and Hemingway, are better known as novelists but their short fiction includes gems (*Billy Budd*, *The Mysterious Stranger*, *Turn of the Screw* and *A Clean Well-Lighted Place*) that shine as brightly as their better known works. Others, among them Flannery O'Connor and John Cheever, were short form specialists. O'Connor (*Collected Works*) wrote gothic tales of wayward Southerners, whose paths were marked by wild behavior and violence in their pursuit of all things holy. John Cheever (*Stories*), the "Chekhov of the suburbs," explored the disparities between a character's decorous social persona and inner corruption.