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Introduction

What is the English short story? Where does it figure in the larger literary field? And who can lay claim to its invention as a modern literary form? Twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics of short fiction have spent the best part of a century debating these and other questions about the short story genre, with few (if any) unanimously agreed answers to offer – but with broad agreement on two counts: the short story in its modern sense is notoriously elusive, and it is perpetually struggling to assert itself in the face of a host of practical, critical and aesthetic challenges. Any new volume attempting an account of the English short story needs to offer some answers of its own as to defining and placing the short story, and this volume is fortunate in being able to draw on a long tradition of short story criticism.

A transatlantic discrepancy in approaches to defining the short story in English can be traced back to the boom in short story criticism during the 1980s, represented on either side of the Atlantic by Clare Hanson and Susan Lohafer, two critics who sought to explore and define the short story in new ways. Hanson's *Short Stories and Short Fiction, 1880–1980* (1985) approached the modern short story historically by identifying two major strands of short prose, the short story as a plot-based narrative, associated largely with popular magazine culture, as opposed to plotless short fiction, including symbolist, modernist and postmodern narratives such as the prose poem, psychological sketch, Bowen's 'free story' and postmodern experimental fiction. Lohafer's *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (1983), by contrast, adopted a theoretical approach in exploring the short story in terms of its story-ness and reader reception, specifically readers' progression through the story. While both critics deal with remarkably similar time frames and acknowledge similar influences on their work, their methods of working towards a framework for the analysis and appreciation of short fiction thus differ markedly, and in many ways exemplify the divide between

theory-driven genre criticism in North America compared to the dominance of historical and thematic enquiries in British approaches to the short story.[1]

Despite their different approaches and divergent national contexts, and despite the fact that Hanson primarily scrutinizes British and Irish writers where Lohafer looks almost exclusively at American authors, Lohafer and Hanson are in broad agreement that the origins of the modern short story lay with Edgar Allan Poe and American magazine culture. Indeed, criticism of the short story in the English language for many decades centred primarily on American short fiction: while the United States was seen as the birthplace of the modern short story proper, Britain was regarded as the latecomer to the game and its nineteenth-century periodical culture considered in thrall to serialized three-decker novels rather than the short tales printed in American magazines. In 1941, H. E. Bates – himself an English writer of short fiction – readily identified Gogol and Poe as the true originators of the modern short story, revealing the strong orientation even among British writers towards the work of their American and continental counterparts.[2] Charles E. May is but one later critic who traces back the 'modern' short story in English exclusively to American authors such as Irving, Hawthorne and Poe,[3] while Barbara Korte has explained this perception of American origins in part by Poe's pre-eminence as a 'genre *Übervater*'.[4] Korte and others have contested this bias, observing that short stories were written and published in Britain as early as in America, even though they did not achieve the same importance as in the United States and other (former) British colonies, where they were valued as 'a form of literary expression comparatively independent from the literary market of the "mother country"' because they could be published and distributed 'in a medium – magazines and newspapers – producible within the respective regions themselves'.[5]

The strong American slant in English-language short story criticism does mean that the best-known writers of the genre during the nineteenth century are mostly American: critical works on the short story up to the 1990s feature first and foremost American masters of the genre such as Poe, Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce, besides short story writers in other languages such as Anton Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant. In recent years, however, British and European critical opinion in particular has shifted towards a greater appreciation of earlier examples of the British and Irish short story, as well as other English-language short fiction distinct from the North American tradition of short story writing. In the past couple of decades alone, several scholars' work on British (and Irish) short fiction has redressed the previous imbalance, not least Korte's *The Short Story in Britain* (2003), David and Cheryl Alexander Malcolm's *Companion to the British and Irish Short Story* (2008), and Emma Liggins's, Andrew Maunder's and Ruth Robbins's

The British Short Story (2011). More period-specific works include Harold Orel's *The Victorian Short Story* (1986) or, as a more recent example, Tim Killick's *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century* (2008), which details early developments of the short form in Britain by looking at pre-Victorian short fiction, particularly of the Romantic era. Dean Baldwin's *Art and Commerce in the British Short Story 1880–1950* (2013) moreover stresses the intimate links between publication, creation and reception of short fiction in Britain, serving as a useful counterpoint to Andrew Levy's *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (1993) published two decades earlier, which despite its similar title had focused less on commercially motivated writing and more on an attempt to define the short story as an American national art form. Other recent volumes – most notably Paul March-Russell's *The Short Story: An Introduction* (2009) and March-Russell and Maggie Awadalla's *The Postcolonial Short Story* (2012) as well as numerous other volumes on contemporary and/or postcolonial short fiction – adopt an international approach and consider the short story more broadly along thematic lines, combining various theoretical angles (such as postmodernism and postcolonialism) with attention to particular subgenres.

Looking at short story criticism today, we seem to have come full circle from historical enquiry by author and what Lohafer has called 'practical poetics',[6] through an intense phase of theorization and into a second wave of historical, thematic and practical enquiry. From the late 1970s (marked by the publication of Charles E. May's *Short Story Theories* in 1976) to the late 1990s, theoretical short story criticism experienced a heyday, largely but not exclusively based in the United States. Critics such as May, Lohafer and Mary Rohrberger strove to move towards a more unified theoretical approach to the short story genre, despite numerous acknowledgements of the 'protean nature of the literary short story',[7] and with an implicit exclusion of the non-literary, non-artistic (i.e. popular and/or genre fiction). Their enquiries utilized a wide variety of fashionable theoretical approaches and ranged from endeavours at categorization and definition of the short story, to investigations of the relationship of the short story to the literary canon, and cognitive and reader-response-based approaches to short fiction. March-Russell suggests that the cognitive approach to short fiction in particular should be seen as located within 'the context of universities seeking to legitimate their relevancy to contemporary society' by adopting the methods and terminology of the social sciences and psychology.[8] Cognitive approaches to short fiction continue to be topical today,[9] and the trend in the cognitive analysis of short fiction is part of larger endeavours to grasp our understanding and processing of a text or story. This method

of analysis generally runs parallel to a move away from attempts at formulating universal theories of the short story in favour of more specialized, subgenre-, theme- or period-specific research as well as a revival in practical criticism in the shape of writers' manuals and numerous volumes on short story writing and teaching.[10] This move away from more broadly conceived definitions and towards a more practical or pragmatic approach, however, does not mean that the vexed question of how to define the short story has gone away.

Attempts to define the short story in specific formal or aesthetic terms – starting with Poe's 'unity of effect'[11] – have all come up against the fundamental problem that one size simply does not fit all. Any definition based on content, function, formal or aesthetic features is likely to capture only a subsection of short fiction, leading to a neglect of historical development and/or variety. The joint problem faced by attempts to define the short story in formal or aesthetic terms is that they tend to exclude short stories that have variously been labelled as popular, commercial, written for entertainment, plot-based, traditional or mimetic.[12] In March-Russell's words, '[c]ritical attempts to gloss the short story as a "well-made" structure omit […] the irreducible complexity of the short story form', not least with reference to its popular subgenres.[13] Indeed, the more popular forms of the short story, particularly its perceived magazine variety, have repeatedly been branded as detrimental to the prestige of the genre as a whole, as in Thomas A. Gullason's argument that the commercially successful formulae imposed by fiction magazines had

> further damaged the short story and made it seem a standardized and mechanized product. *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Mademoiselle*, the old *Collier's* and others – all have set up, whether consciously or unconsciously, certain taboos and formulas to impose further controls on the short story. As if this were not enough, the magazines further created controls by the simple expedient of word count. This has helped to create another unhealthy image for the short story: art as a filler. And the filler suggests the newspaper world, something of short duration, a thing of the moment. Moreover, the fact that the short story is continually linked with popular magazines makes it seem a cheap potboiler.[14]

An exclusion of the popular and the commercial from an understanding of the short story 'proper' is not perhaps entirely accidental. The influence of modernist, and in particular New Critical ideas of what constitutes a 'literary' short story pervades twentieth-century short story criticism, both implicitly in terms of the selection of authors whom critics included in their work, and explicitly in statements such as Lohafer's claim that 'Poe's theories and

practice were co-opted by the hacks of later decades when the short story was too often seen as a formula-driven genre for slick magazines': in her eyes a debasement of the form that led to a loss of prestige for the short story in the hierarchy of genres.[15] While it is certainly true that, as Ailsa Cox notes, '[s]hort fiction was at the heart of the modernist experiment', it is important to remember with Cox that 'the short story has also been integral to the development of popular genres, including science fiction, tales of the supernatural, crime fiction and horror'[16] – and, one might add, that the form owes as much to the mass-market magazine as the literary periodical.

The aim of this collection is not to offer an exhaustive overview of the many different subgenres and contexts of the short story, but to trace the development of some of its varying forms and concerns over time. Rather than pin definitions of the short story to particular aesthetic characteristics such as fragmentariness, a capacity to capture the moment, a lack of historicity, the ability to speak of and for marginalized experiences or groups, or similar – all of which tend to apply only to specific kinds of short stories at specific points in time – it seems helpful to conceive of the short story genre as open and, in Joyce Carol Oates's words, sufficiently 'democratic' to contain within it the greatest possible degree of variety and idiosyncrasy.[17] Norman Friedman's proposal of distinguishing between what he calls 'genre traits' (in the case of the short story, its relative shortness) and 'period traits' (such as a modernist, non-narrative reliance on symbols and images in many early-twentieth-century stories) serves this purpose of accommodating the largest possible base of texts, and helps pre-empt any unnecessary confusion of genre characteristics as opposed to fashions in literary writing that apply to all prose genres.[18] Friedman's distinction serves excellently to counter the argument that the short story is not inherently different from the novel or novella, and can be linked to a practical definition of the short story as a piece of prose fiction that is too short to ordinarily be published on its own, as proposed by Helmut Bonheim.[19] Whatever commercial or aesthetic principles short stories follow, they are ultimately circumscribed by this essential if variable brevity. As Cox has pointed out, 'it has become increasingly obvious that the search for a closed definition must be self-defeating' and fortunately the realization that 'we no longer need to preface every argument with a declaration of specificity' has taken a wide critical hold.[20]

Just as short story critics have struggled with matters of definition, they also tend to deplore the genre's perceived lack of canonicity. 'Canon' and 'canonization' remain contentious terms in the early twenty-first century, and we find ourselves faced with radically divergent conceptions of canonicity even within the field of literary studies: a 'practical' canon of classroom texts; an ideological canon furthering the political interests of the ruling

classes; an aesthetic canon whose choice is based on particular literary merit and amounts to a list of texts of timeless aesthetic value; or a canon of availability, of texts preserved as opposed to texts lost and forgotten in archives and libraries.[21] Looking at canonization from a more practical angle, a literary text may be of supreme aesthetic value, but as long as it fails to be printed and made accessible to the right kind of audience, it has no hope of entering any canon at all. Publishing and marketing concerns; the matter of who reads a text and for which reasons; these practical factors have a significant impact on canonization. This is where the particular predicament of the short story lies: whereas a novel will usually be published (potentially following serialization) in one autonomous piece, and re-published as long as it sells, a short story is usually first published in a newspaper or magazine, and depends for its re-publication on the choices made by anthology editors. The exception are short stories by successful authors, which may be reprinted in a collection of short stories by that author and will usually lag far behind that author's novels in sales; an independent publication, while possible, usually happens on the costly initiative of the author or – these days – online. While the findings of a 2003 survey of short story reading habits and publication, carried out by the British Council, confirm that publishers and readers alike prefer short story collections by already established authors,[22] the new possibilities for more flexible publication offered by the Internet may well serve to further an ever-increasing democratization of the short story form. Although this is in many ways a positive development as it potentially makes short fiction more accessible, it brings with it problems of its own, not least the problem of a new kind of obscurity in the vast and hard to navigate landscape of online publication.

As a number of chapters in this *Companion* explore, most short fiction over the past two centuries was produced for gift books, magazines and periodicals. It was frequently written to order, often highly formulaic, and closely bound to particular subgenres such as the detective story or the supernatural tale. Consequently, short stories belong to a highly transient genre, and many of them have never received any critical attention because they disappeared from view almost as soon as they were published. In most cases, scholars and critics devote their attention to stories written by well-known authors, seen as supplementing their longer prose, or stories that serve to exemplify particular literary fashions or movements. The result is a skewed critical awareness of British and Irish short fiction in particular, which tends to focus on very specific, primarily experimental forms of the short story in Great Britain and Ireland. At present, the short story is a frequently state-sponsored and popular form in Britain as well as North America, not least thanks to the spread of creative writing programmes,

short story competitions and the use of short stories in teaching, discussed in greater depth in March-Russell's chapter. New Critics Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren based their influential textbook, *Understanding Fiction* (1943), on a selection of short stories they considered superior examples of narrative fiction, and even today, Cox explains the popularity of short fiction in teaching by its capacity to be a useful vehicle for close reading practice.[23]

Given the short story's firm place in the curriculum, whether taught as the subject of critical analysis or as creative expression, it seems short story critics can afford to be generous, and, as Oates suggests, 'democratic' in their definition and understanding of the short story as an old genre flourishing today in a diversity of old and new forms. What sets this *Companion* apart from other accounts of the short story in English is its awareness of the changing publishing environments for short fiction, and its consideration of the diversity of authors and influences in each period and subgenre covered. Without laying claim to completeness, the chapters in this volume endeavour to capture the complexity of the short story's evolution from the early nineteenth to the twenty-first century by tracing the effects of perpetually changing modes of publication, the wide variety of audiences for short fiction, and the diversity of commercial and aesthetic influences across a range of periods, themes and subgenres.

This volume sits alongside a separate *Cambridge Companion to the American Short Story* and consequently provides an introduction to and overview of short stories written in the English language outside of North America. Its focus is not only on authors native to England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, but also on writers from Commonwealth countries and former British colonies writing in English (other than the United States). The short story in English can naturally not be seen as divorced from the American short story altogether, and influences on the English short story exerted by North American writers as well as authors in other languages are repeatedly addressed as part of a chapter structure focused on socio-historical contexts, historical development and a number of important subgenres. Similarly, rather than devote chapters or sections to writers of a particular gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background or nationality, individual chapters treat the fullest possible range of writers and short stories alongside each other wherever possible. In adopting this approach, this volume hopes to avoid pigeonholing particular groups of writers in favour of a more inclusive and comparative approach to different kinds of short fiction. This means that the short story's engagement with issues related to gender, race/racism, sexuality, feminism or identity (national or otherwise) is scrutinized across a range of different chapters. Barbara Korte's chapter on the short story and

anxieties of Empire, for instance, looks at writers on both sides of the colonizer/colonized divide; David Malcolm's discussion of space and place in short fiction includes explorations of gendered and racially defined space(s); Maebh Long's account of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century short fiction engages with the gender politics underlying postmodern fictions and Marc Botha's contribution investigates the potential of microfiction to give poignant expression to homosexual and postcolonial experience among others.

This *Companion* adopts the view that 'it was a print medium, the periodical press, which helped the short story shape itself into a genre in its own right'.[24] Rather than begin with early modern prose tales or – as is more common – with mid- to late-nineteenth-century tales, the starting point of this *Companion* are the prose sketches and stories published in literary magazines and story collections of the early nineteenth century. This choice of a point of departure is motivated by a focus on the short story's close relationship with its principal media of publication, the magazine or periodical on one hand, and the story collection or anthology, on the other. While collections of short tales or novellas predate the Romantic period, and while the influence of these earlier forms is acknowledged in individual chapters, the literary magazine and its impact on the short prose form came into its own in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Research such as Tim Killick's and David Stewart's has shown the centrality of the Romantic magazine market to the development of the short form, particularly with the establishment of major literary magazines such as the *London Magazine* (revived in 1820) and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817 onwards).[25]

Part I (Contexts) scrutinizes a number of key social, historical and political factors that constitute significant backdrops for or influences on the short story genre. The chapters in this initial section range from investigating processes of writing and publishing short stories to ways the short story addresses broader social concerns and issues of race, gender and identity. Paul March-Russell's opening discussion of the contexts in which short stories are written and published goes a long way towards disproving Frank Cottrell Boyce's recent claim that one 'can't read a short story online', and complicates if not entirely refutes Boyce's observation that '[p]ublishers – with heroic exceptions such as Comma in Manchester and McSweeney's in San Francisco – hate publishing [short stories]'.[26] Anthony Patterson's chapter on social realism in the short story explores the genre's enduring capacity for revealing 'how social class forms and affects the individual', pitching the short story against the dominance of the social novel in this field. Korte's chapter extends this enquiry to look at the ways short fiction

in particular can reveal the fissures and anxieties of colonialism and post-colonial identities in Britain and beyond, while Malcolm addresses the issue of space. His chapter reflects on not only the limited space of the short story itself – its essential brevity – but also its engagement with different kinds of space: space as place, and the marginalized, mimetic, non-mimetic and fantastic spaces opened up by short fiction.

In Part II (Periods), the broad approach of this volume means that each period covered will not simply be equated with one particular school or movement of short story writing. Moving from the Romantic period to the present, chapters will take into account a variety of different writers and publishing contexts for each period, from the literary to the popular. David Stewart's chapter on Romantic short fiction clearly identifies annuals and magazines as the 'home' of short fiction, and traces the development of Romantic-era short stories and tales alongside other kinds of texts published in early-nineteenth-century periodicals, as writers and readers alike were trying to determine what constituted a short story proper. In the same spirit, John Plotz's chapter offers an alternative interpretation of the relationship between the long Victorian novel, the British short story and the magazine market by locating short fiction not simply alongside but indeed *within* the three-decker novel. The emphasis on means of publication, on magazines, collections and anthologies, is continued in chapters by Einhaus and Victoria Stewart. Einhaus's chapter focuses on the early twentieth century as the heyday of both magazine stories and modernist short fiction, concluding that the boundaries between these seemingly distinct categories are fluid and subject to similar vagaries of the publishing market. Victoria Stewart traces the development of the short story further into the twentieth century, capturing the impact of wartime experience and changes to the publishing industry on the genre. Maebh Long's chapter on short fiction from postmodernism to the digital age takes this section into the present, stretching from the heyday of postmodern experimental short fiction in the late 1960s and 1970s to the effect of digital and online publication with the advent of the Internet.

To supplement the overview of different contexts and periods, the third and final part (Genre) engages with a selection of the most significant subgenres that have fuelled the short story throughout its development as a modern literary form. Kate Macdonald's chapter on comic short fiction redresses a long-standing tendency on the part of literary scholars to ignore or belittle the humorous in fiction, and offers the first-ever investigation of comedy in short stories as 'the salt that enhances taste, and crosses the boundaries of form and genre'. In his chapter on short detective fiction,

Martin Priestman explores the origins of this perennially popular form of modern entertainment in short stories rather than novels. Similarly, Luke Thurston's contribution scrutinizes the manifestation in short fiction of a literary mode – the gothic – commonly associated with longer novels. Andrew M. Butler's chapter on short science fiction links the development of sf closely to developments in the magazine market, arguing that '[t]he contours of the field of SF have been shaped by editors and economics, as well as the emergence of particular writers'. Last but not least, Marc Botha's account of short fiction – or microfiction – closes this volume with an in-depth and wide-ranging discussion of the shortest in short fiction, which adopts a particularly broad temporal approach from antiquity to the present, and takes into account not only problems of definition and scope, but publication and particularly the new possibilities opened up by online publication and social media tools. While the list of subgenres covered here can by no means be exhaustive, the forms chosen for this final section – comic, detective, gothic and science fiction stories as well as the particularly prolific subgenre of what Botha terms microfiction – best reflect the short story's close relationship with its various means of publication, from the magazine to the Internet.

NOTES

1 One should note, however, that by the time both critics followed up their book-length studies on the short story with edited volumes of short story criticism – Hanson's *Re-reading the Short Story* (1989) and Lohafer's *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989, with Jo Ellyn Clarey) – Hanson was also beginning to move in the direction of a cognitive and reader-centred enquiry in her own essay on the poetics of short fiction. See Clare Hanson, '"Things Out of Words": Towards a Poetics of Short Fiction', *Re-reading the Short Story*, ed. Clare Hanson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 22–33.

2 H. E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey* (1941; Boston, MA: The Writer, 1965), p. 26.

3 Charles E. May, *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (1995; London; New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 6–7. See also Susan Lohafer's claim that 'the first theorist of the short story was Edgar Allan Poe', in Barbara Lounsberry, Susan Lohafer, Mary Rohrberger, Stephen Pett and R. C. Feddersen (eds.), *The Tales We Tell: Perspectives on the Short Story* (Westport, CO: Greenwood, 1998), p. ix.

4 Barbara Korte, *The Short Story in Britain: A Historical Sketch and Anthology* (Tübingen: Francke, 2003), p. 7.

5 Korte, *Short Story in Britain*, pp. 7–8.

6 Susan Lohafer, *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 5. Prominent practitioner-critics include Poe, of course, but also British, Irish and other English-language writers