

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-06017-2 - The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story

Andrew Levy

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Since 1980, the American short story has undergone a renaissance of sorts, as students flock to creative writing workshops, sales of anthologies and writing textbooks mushroom, and large publishing houses overcome their traditional resistance to short story collections. *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* is an account of the birth and development of the short story from the time of Poe. It describes how America – through political movements, changes in education, magazine editorial policy, and the work of certain individuals – built the short story as an image of itself and continues to use the genre as a locale where political ideals can be rehearsed, debated, and turned into literary forms. Although the focus of this book is cultural, individual authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Edith Wharton are examined. The book also contains a history of creative writing and the workshop dating back a century. Andrew Levy makes a strong case for the centrality of the short story as an American art form and provides an explanation for the genre's recent resurgence and ongoing success.

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SHORT STORY**



ANDREW LEVY

*Butler University*



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The astonishing thing about the contemporary short  
story in America is that there is so much of it.

Katharine Fullerton Gerould, 1924

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## PREFACE

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I wrote this book in Philadelphia during 1988–92. To say I had help would be an understatement; to say that I wish I could express my gratitude to the people I have listed below, and about twenty others I have not mentioned, in some more compelling way than a brief acknowledgment is an equal understatement. For reading the entire manuscript through every draft, and making formative suggestions throughout, I would like to thank Peter Conn, Myra Jehlen, and Gregg Camfield. For providing advice and background at key times, I thank Michael Gilmore, Shannon Ravenel, Jan Radway, and Drew Faust. For an hour of informal conversation that made me redraft the fifth chapter (and for the pleasure of the conversation itself), I am grateful to Bobbie Ann Mason. Hilene Flanzbaum, Paula Geyh, and Andrew Weinstein provided advice and encouragement; I might have written this book without them, but it would have been a more neurotic proposition. For guiding me through the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, and providing me with insight into the spheres of writing workshops and publishing, I thank John Barth and Steve Dixon; for all that and for their friendship, I thank Fred Leebron, Kathryn Rhett, Eberle Umbach, and Julie Fishbein. Richard Burgin taught me how a good magazine is run, and gave me invaluable support. I thank Bill Walker and the Humanities Department of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science for giving me a job I truly enjoyed. For showing me Iowa's offices, thanks to Connie Brothers; for making Penn's offices less labyrinthine, I thank David Coleman. For their support during the last stages of manuscript preparation and acceptance, I am grateful to Eric Sundquist and Julie Greenblatt. Thanks to Charles E. May for writing the book that got me started, to Patricia Caldwell for inspiring me to be an Am Lit student, and to Phil Baruth and Erik Huber for making literary study at once relevant and irreverent. Thanks also to my friends outside of academia (who should feel understandably slighted here), and thanks lastly and always to my family: This book is dedicated to them.

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PREFACE

Currently, the short story is moving faster and evolving more rapidly than this book could be written, a circumstance that justifies my reasons for undertaking this study as it dates my conclusions. In 1991, for instance, the year after I wrote Chapter 4, at least four major publishers released short story handbooks to capitalize on the growth of writer's workshops, and several smaller presses also released offerings. This new wave of creative writing handbooks suggests that my comments on pedagogy may require rapid addendum that, unfortunately, cannot be given here. Similarly, in 1988 I wrote the first draft of the chapter on Bobbie Ann Mason, and discussed the dominance of "minimalism" as a short story style; it is perhaps less dominant now, though it seems likely that Mason has little difficulty publishing her new fiction, and that Raymond Carver has more imitators than ever before. Although literary fashion may date some of the specific observations that I offer within this book, however, I believe in the resilience of the larger themes, just as I believe in the resilience of the short story and its place within American culture. It would not surprise me, in fact, to discover that someone has written this book already, nor would it surprise me if someone wrote it again in thirty years.