

Michael Basseler and Ansgar Nünning (Eds.)

A History of the American Short Story

Genres – Developments – Model Interpretations

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Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning

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PREFACE

This handbook aims to provide students, teachers, and other readers with a concise survey of the history of the American short story while at the same time critically reflecting the many intricacies and problems involved in the writing of literary history and canon formation. In contrast to the many introductions to the American short story that focus primarily on individual authors, the order of contributions is based roughly on the diachronic sequence of what can be considered as the major eras of the short story, with the emphasis on the dominant thematic and formal developments of the time. The chapters offer a series of introductions to the main genres and model interpretations of stories that serve as paradigm examples of the respective (sub-)genres of the American short story. They thus present a broad overview of key periods, genres, and major writers as well as in-depth analyses of selected stories. Moreover, both the volume as a whole and the individual chapters attempt to provide students with a large collection of texts, topics and analytical techniques that can be adopted, drawn on, and expanded in the process of exam preparation. The authors discussed in this volume include such ‘classic’ short story writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, and Eudora Welty as well as contemporary authors such as Bharati Mukherjee, Simon Ortiz, Nicole Krauss, and many others.

All literary histories carry the sorrow of their own exclusions, and the present volume is surely no exception to this rule. Authors that are missing from this collection include such prominent figures as Ring Lardner, Willa Cather, Dorothy Parker, William Saroyan, Elizabeth Bishop, Vladimir Nabokov, James Salter, Harold Brodkey, Kurt Vonnegut, Tillie Olsen, John Irving, Tim O’Brien, Barry Hannah, Annie Proulx, Thom Jones, Richard Bausch, Mary Gaitskill, E.L. Doctorow, Amy Tan, and Jamaica Kincaid. Others are only mentioned in passing, such as O. Henry, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Shirley Jackson, Ursula Le Guin, Denis Johnson, Grace Paley, Joy Williams, T.C. Boyle, Louise Erdrich, Ana Castillo, and David Foster Wallace. However, since the focus of this volume is on periods as well as representative genres and their formal and thematic characteristics rather than on individual authors, the selection presented in this volume seems justifiable and should not be understood exclusively, but as an invitation to further explore the many facets of the genre.

Of course the multifariousness of the short story genre has made this selection more and not less difficult. Many attempts at defining ‘the short story’ have been made in almost every decade of the genre’s history, few of which are uncontested. Among the more recent ones, Richard Ford’s short-hand definition from the introduction to *The New Granta Book of the American Short Story* strikes us as a particularly vivid one: “‘Real-life improbably rendered fictively plausible by authorial main force inside a small space of words’ may be one provisional, exploded description of a good short story and part of the source of its pleasing torque.” (Ford 2007: xi) Apart from crediting the author, once pronounced dead by literary theory, and mentioning the unbroken

potential to evoke pleasure in the reader, this short quotation also alludes to the seeming contrasts that characterize many short stories discussed in this volume. These contrasts, for instance, center around the tension between the depiction of (a slice of) ‘real life’ and the often improbable incidents the stories deal with, or the tension between factual (i.e. historical, social, etc.) ‘truth’ and fictional plausibility. Moreover, Ford’s definition – consisting of no more than 16 words – is itself a nice illustration of the short story’s linguistic economy, where every element carries meaning and no word is superfluous.

But Ford’s definition of the short story, with a few minor alterations, also serves to describe the work on this handbook: We as editors are hugely indebted to the incredible authorial main force of our contributors, who not only managed to render probable, or in fact possible, this whole project by willingly limiting themselves to a rather small space of words. Their contributions also constitute the source of the pleasing torque that we have experienced in the editing process, a pleasure that will hopefully be shared by the readers of this volume. Therefore, we would like to thank all the contributors, who went out of their way to make our editorial work as easy and as pleasant as possible. We are also extremely grateful to Christina Mohr, who did a great job in helping with the copy-editing, and to Rose Lawson and Simon Cooke for carefully proofreading the chapters. Moreover, a special thank-you note goes to Robert Vogt as well as our student assistants Lea Gleixner, Natalie Krümmelbein, Dominique Lerch, Katharina Schwertfeger, and Anna Weigel for their competent help with formatting and numerous other tasks throughout the editing process. Last but not least, we would like to thank Dr. Erwin Otto and his WVT team for their untiring support during the editorial and production stage.

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Michael Basseler & Ansgar Nünning