Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story since 1950*
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In this volume on American short fiction, published in 2010, Kasia Boddy offers a concise panorama of the genre’s evolution since the Second World War. Contextualizing the topic in the introduction, she describes the paradox of the short story in the United States. While its focus on locality and the different voices that constitute the nation made it an appropriate form for conveying the essence of American experience, granting short fiction the status of a national art form at the turn of the 19th century, it was also increasingly despised by the American intelligentsia. The author recalls that the short story was indeed decisively shaped by large-circulation magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harper’s* which turned it into an ephemeral and standardized consumer good. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, when the first anthologies of short fiction gave it some durability and established standards for it that the American short story gained nobility.

Chapter 1 — entitled “How to Write Short Stories,” focuses on the postwar decade and explores the symbiotic relationship between the short story and academia. It suggests that New Critical approaches to literature were instrumental in the perception of the short story as a teachable technique, which caused writing programs to thrive in American universities. As a product of Workshop New Criticism, the work of Flannery O’Connor is given special emphasis. Boddy shows how, in keeping with New Criticism tenets, O’Connor’s stories make literature an instrument of cognition, offering the reader an insight into the mystery of existence through experience rather than interpretation.
The author, however, also takes care to accentuate the specificity of O’Connor’s narrative voice whose unambiguous irony deviates from the suggestiveness and ambivalence favored by New Critical textbooks.

Chapter 2 — “The New Yorker Short Story at Mid-Century”—looks into the role played by the influential New Yorker on the evolution of the American short story in the 1950s. It describes the polished and brilliant style it sponsored, the preference given to suggestiveness and the creation of atmosphere over the invention of plot. Though J. D. Salinger, the “archetypal New Yorker writer” (41), whose stories picture the spiritual pain of upper-class urban Americans, features briefly in this chapter, the main focus is on John Cheever, the keen observer of what David Riesman called “suburban sadness.” Boddy thoroughly describes some of the characteristic features and typical figures of Cheever’s work and style, so much so that the chapter ends up being more informative about Cheever’s writing than about the New Yorker short fiction itself.

Chapter 3 — is devoted to “Experimental Fiction in the 1960s and 1970s.” Thomas Pynchon’s “Entropy” is concisely described as a transitional text, expressing both the Beat Spirit of the early 1960s and the sense of closure typical of the 1950s. The works of John Barth, Richard Brautigan, and William Gass are analyzed as prime examples of the reaction against the formulaic qualities and stylistic uniformity fostered by the New Yorker school and Workshop New Criticism. Attempting to escape enclosure in existing literary models, these writers draw their inspiration from structuralism and Borgesian experiments on narrative form, revisiting in an ironic way the greatest works of literature. Boddy notes that short fiction particularly fits the critical agenda of metafiction, the brevity of the form forestalling the reader’s immersion into diegesis and forcing her to retain a critical perspective. The author also insists on the philosophical and moral dimensions of experimental short fiction which aims at making literature an instrument of cognition. William Gass is presented as one of the typical “moralists of form” (66) whose work “take[s] the world apart and replace[s] it with language over which you can have control” (67). These notions are well illustrated by an extensive analysis of In the Heart of the Heart of the Country. The work of Donald Barthelme is also given special consideration. The writer’s nostalgia for structure and meaning is revealed through his quest for controlling images capable of making disparate assemblages cohere into a new reality. The end of the chapter looks on the influence of new media (television and computers) on Robert Coover’s short fiction. Shelley Jackson, Stuart Moulthrop, and John McDaid are also mentioned, only too briefly. Non-sequential writing, hypertext, and hyperfiction in the 1990s are presented as an extension and fulfillment of the experimental project of the 1960s, a somewhat summary view which may need qualification.

Chapter 4 — “Experiment is Out, Concern is In”—is devoted to Raymond Carver’s work, which Kasia Boddy describes as an instance of “the renewal and revitalization of the realist mode” (84) advertised in the 1980s as “neo-realism,” “minimalism,” or “dirty realism.” After a passage on Gordon Lish’s severe editing of Carver’s work and how it accentuated its bleakness and laconism, the author concentrates on the moral aspect of Carver’s writing. Designed to bring some light into the darkness of life, it strives towards this goal through either the construction of epiphanies or a painstaking and forever provisional structuring of an unremittingly chaotic reality.

Chapter 5 — which centers on “Turning Points and the American Short Story Today,” moves away from the book’s chronological approach and considers the impact of the
short form on content from a more general angle. Boddy suggests that brevity makes for the representation of “moments of condensed significance” (101), such as turning points or moments of crisis. That is why the initiatory path of adolescence, which offers a point of vantage on childhood and on adult life, is a privileged theme of short fiction. The author holds that this trend may also reflect the concerns of young students attending creative writing courses whose growing influence on the country’s literary life the chapter proceeds to analyze. The tight relationship between American university and the short story is discussed. Whether this relationship may threaten to turn the short story into fine art for editors and teachers rather than for readers is a debated question to which the author is inclined to answer in the affirmative, as her reassessment of the notion of turning point in contemporary short fiction intimates. Boddy notes indeed that turning points tend to grow more rhetorical than narrative and concludes, in O’Connor’s words, that “it is only too easy for a short-story writer to become a little too much of an artist” (114).

Chapter 6 — “Sequences and Accumulations”—studies the degree and kind of organization between the parts and the whole in short story collections. Kasia Boddy points out that major short fiction writers like Poe, Faulkner, Coover, and Barth think of short-story collections in terms of book-unity and tend to make the novel the ultimate model for them. This pressure towards book-unity shows in the various ways short-story collections are designed to produce continuity through carefully thought-out sequences of stories. However, short-story collections may produce continuity and discursive coherence in ways that distinctly differ from the novel, through juxtaposition and accumulation. The “narratives of communities,” which are often criticized for failing to grow into fully-fledged novels though they have all the makings of the genre (the stories are set within small, close-knit communities and sometimes feature recurrent characters), are a case in point. Analyzing Edward P. Jones’ Lost in the City, Junot Díaz’s Drown, and Grace Paley’s works, Boddy explores the different ways in which a lack of narrative coherence, gaps and fissures between stories, or absence of resolution can successfully create their own kind of continuity.

The conclusion recalls some of the familiar and powerful discourses that the short story has tried to expose and transcend since the 1950s. Much too briefly, the author refers to David Foster Wallace, A. M. Homes, Toni Morrison, Lorrie Moore, Lydia Davis, Sherman Alexie, Annie Proulx, and a few others to suggest how discourses on identity, stereotypes, and clichéd language have been relentlessly challenged and subverted by these writers. The last pages of the book tend to read like scattered notes which Boddy fails—or doesn’t care—to gather together into a consistent whole, but then, as she puts it, quoting Lydia Davis, “[l]ife is always ‘unfinished business’” (151).

Considered as a whole, the book touches on the crucial developments and key issues of short fiction in the United States since the 1950s. It offers a thorough introduction to the genre and deftly combines global perspectives with illuminating studies of the major writers of the period. The concision of the volume, however, forces the author to make choices and one may regret that recent short fiction should not be given more emphasis. References to Steven Millhauser, Joanna Scott, or Brian Evenson, to name but a few key writers of contemporary American short fiction, are surprisingly absent from the book. The American Short Story since the 1950s is nonetheless an enlightening account of the significant transformations of the genre over the last fifty years or so. It is a fine piece of research which offers useful insights into the intellectual and editorial contexts of the
period. As such, it provides a valuable read to both teachers and students interested in postwar American short fiction.

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