

Book Review

Andrew Kahn. *The Short Story: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2021.

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Kahn presents in this book a pithy, informative and lucid account of the short story across several literatures and languages, (Kahn is Professor of Russian at Oxford University). It isn't a typical history of the form though, as it focuses on exploring aspects of the genre, chapter by chapter, rather than being a straightforward continuous history organised by authors and periods. Acknowledged landmarks in the history of the short story, like Edgar Allan Poe, Maupassant, Chekhov, or the modernist masters of the genre, such as Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield, rub shoulders with lesser studied works by James Baldwin, Grace Paley, Alice Munro, Elizabeth Taylor, William Trevor and Helen Garner. A definite strength of the book is plenty of detailed practical analysis of how various aspects of different short stories work. It's also an asset that it seeks to be inclusive and deals not only with the United States and Great Britain, but Canadian, Irish, Australian, Russian, and French as well as many other countries. The short story has, as Kahn (xxi) says, become a very international genre: 'globalisation and translation have opened up and stimulated other traditions. It may be the compact scale of the form [...] that gives the genre its cosmopolitan passport'.

At the same time as detailing the genre's history, he examines the short story's development of plot and narrative, (from the deliberate plot twists of the nineteenth century short story to the deliberate ambiguity and inconclusiveness of some twentieth century examples), as well as the genre's interest in emphasising characterisation and psychological acuity. He also explores how

the short story became associated with intensely focused experience (xxv): ‘there are states of being and mind, such as rapture, loneliness, and grief, where the short story, like the poem, is proportionately suited to emotional intensity.’ The well-known epiphany of the modernist short story springs to mind here. Length, is perhaps not the ultimate defining aspect of the short story as opposed to the longer genre of novel (though many readers would think of a short story genre as continuous fictional prose that is less than 10,000 words) and Kahn’s (xxvi) objective in the book is he tells us: ‘not a potted history of the genre [...] [rather] it explores how a set of forms, structures, and themes common to the genre across national boundaries combine and recombine to give the genre a protean life’

In chapter 1, ‘The Rise of the Short Story’, the author charts how the genre was originally strong linked to print culture in newspapers and magazines and therefore popular culture and entertainment rather than literature in many reader’s minds. In that respect, the short story sometimes appears (unfairly) to be the novel’s impoverished relation due to this historical relationship to print publication and the desire for shock and surprise (hence the plot twist common to many examples of the genre). Even in the twentieth century this association continued with the thrillers, science fiction and detective stories of the pulps, the cheap magazines that flourished in 1930s America and Britain. The short story has often been important to the development of various examples of genre fiction, such as Science Fiction. But at the same time, more aesthetic emphasis was also important and early in the nineteenth century Edgar Allan Poe had tried to refocus the genre, even if he was best known for his lurid Gothic offerings.

Chapter 2, ‘Openings’ surveys the types of openings used in short stories, from Mansfield’s beginning *in media res*, to the directed openings of so many short stories, presenting ‘the first act’ and swiftly delineating ‘subject, event and motivation’ (16). Chapter 3 ‘Voices’ shows how the often-performative nature of the speaker in short stories can serve to effectively probe character, motivation and emotions. Chapter 4, ‘Place’, argues that short stories tend to

use place more as a stage set, rather than something they wish to analyse and draws on a detailed account of several short stories set in Paris, the epitome of decadence, vice and erotic excitement (at least as far as short story writers considered it).

Chapter 5, 'The Plot thickens ... and thins', focuses on how many realists, nineteenth century exemplars create suspense and a taut plot, drawing on the traditions of thrillers and gothic stories. Though this eventually led on to using that same plot to create stories of existential dread we associate with modernists like Kafka and the ludic playfulness of post-modernists like Calvino. Chapter 6, 'Ironies and reversals', focuses on one of the best-known features, that of ironic reversal or 'sting-in-the tail', often associated with the influence of Maupassant and those he influenced and where characters often get their just deserts, or else a moral lesson is implied. Chapter 7, Chekhov's Heirs', explains the legacy of the Russian short story and why his influence on subsequent writers of the form was so pronounced with its emphasis on situation, self-deception and apparent artlessness. Chapter 10, 'Endings' as its title suggests look at how short stories conclude, which is arguably one their most important elements. Should they resolve an original situation as Isaac Bashevis Singer believed, or should they leave a situation unresolved as with Chekov, or point to a fundamentally unresolved contradiction, as with Joyce or Edna O'Brien? All of these types of endings are possibly and legitimate.

The book concludes with a very useful list of further reading where the student of the short story form can follow up their individual interests. There are many accounts of the development of the short story available nowadays, and while this is probably the briefest, its approach is less conventional than many and some readers might prefer a more explicitly historical approach, that places, for example, the innovations of the modernist short story writers in a separate chapter or section. Yet, despite its brevity (or perhaps because of it), this is a very perceptive volume which anyone wondering about the short story as a genre is likely to find valuable. Readers short on time but interested in how the genre has developed, will find the book makes them think more carefully about

the stories they are reading and perhaps most importantly, to consider the wide variety and range of this most mutable of literary genres. When Alice Munro became, in 2013, the first writer to win the Nobel prize for literature whose work featured only short stories, Kahn tells us she remarked (xix): ‘I would really hope this would make people see the short story as an important art, not just something you played around with until you got a novel’. In many ways, this slim volume responds to Munro’s hopes.