

JAMES NAGEL, *The American Short Story Handbook* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 315 pp.

This book is part of the Wiley Blackwell Literature Handbooks-series, which, as the blurb reads, “offers the student thorough and lively introductions to literary periods, movements, and, in some instances, authors and genres [. . .] in volumes that are as stimulating to read as they are convenient to use.” James Nagel’s *The American Short Story Handbook* delivers on all these promises and more. After a brief introduction the book falls into three parts. The first of these is a historical overview of major periods, which is subdivided into four sub-chapters, predictably the American Renaissance, here called the Age of Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism, American Modernism, and the Contemporary American Short Story. Not so predictably, this historical overview begins with a chapter on the American Story to Washington Irving, counteracting the wide-spread cliché that the American short story starts with Washington Irving. The period section is followed by an author section, discussing twenty notable short story writers from Irving, Poe, and Hawthorne to Jamaica Kincaid, Tim O’Brien, and Louise Erdrich. The third and last major section is devoted to the presentation and interpretation of thirty-two individual stories, ranging from Benjamin Franklin’s “The Speech of Polly Baker” (1747) and Ruri Colla’s “The Story of the Captain’s Wife and an Aged Woman” (1789) to Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” (1982), Amy Tan’s “The Joy Luck Club” (1989), and Judith Cofer’s “Nada” (1992). Although not all of the authors discussed are represented by stories, there is a certain overlap of stories which are presented in both the author and the stories section. This is useful for many readers who will foreseeably consult individual sections rather than read the whole book.

The book is rounded off by a glossary of critical terms and a selected bibliography. The latter lists many useful studies of aspects of the short story from Fred Lewis Pattee’s groundbreaking history of the genre of 1923 to *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories*, edited by Margaret Reynolds in 1994.¹ It also indicates Nagel’s own stupendous expertise in

¹ Pattee, Fred Lewis, *The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey* (New York: Harper, 1923); Margaret

the field by listing his authored books on the contemporary short story cycle and on New Orleans story-telling, as well as the *Anthology of the American Short Story* (2008) he edited and *A Companion to the American Short Story* (2010) he co-edited with Alfred Bendixen.² Both these last-mentioned volumes are ideal companion pieces to *The American Short Story Handbook* for the more dedicated student of the American short story. The voluminous anthology contains most of the stories discussed in the *Handbook*. Unfortunately, it carries a far steeper price tag than the reasonably student-friendly and purchasable *Handbook*. The glossary of critical terms contains a host of concepts that come in handy when students begin to discuss short stories independently. These terms range from elementary categories such as narration, protagonist, setting, and theme to more complex figures, genres, and techniques such as allegory, anthropomorphism, *Bildungsroman*, diegesis, epiphany, myth, and parable.

From the introduction to the glossary, Nagel’s *Handbook* is characterized by an approach that is both exemplary and interpretive, largely inductive and pragmatic. Nagel considers the short story “a window on a society” (4) and a transnational phenomenon, “a blending of narrative traditions from a broad spectrum of sources and languages and a means of presenting characters, action, and speech inherited from virtually every country of the world” (5). He mentions and discusses theoretical concepts, such as determinism, and cultural contexts, such as interethnic living conditions, when necessary for the understanding of periods, movements, authors or individual stories, but his book is not informed by a particular theoretical approach or by a cultural or political mission other than understanding the American short story as adequately as possible. He neither privileges specific modes and styles nor issues and themes. In the discussion of both periods and authors, and even in the explanation of terms in the glossary, he relies on the interpretation, sometimes in only a few sentences, of individual stories, which

Reynolds (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

² Bendixen, Alfred and James Nagel (eds.), *A Companion to the American Short Story* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Nagel, James (ed.), *Anthology of the American Short Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

he succinctly characterizes with an emphasis on their most important aspects. As the index documents, the reader becomes thereby acquainted with many more than the thirty-two stories discussed in detail. Reading Nagel's account of the American short story resembles following a well-informed and circumspectly organized lecture series, in which the individual stories may be exemplary of wider and more general trends but are always appreciated in their own right, both as individual works of art and comments on the human condition. Nagel displays an enviable talent for a jargon-free and lively conversational style which does not leave technical terms without explanation and never descends to simplification. Discussing a plethora of stories from the eighteenth to the end of the twentieth century from multiple angles, Nagel's book also makes a powerful statement for genre, here the pre-eminently American genre of the short story, as an indispensable critical category.

The first of the chapters on periods, titled "The American Story to Washington Irving," draws attention to the development of story writing in and about America prior to Washington Irving. Nagel belongs to the small number of critics who foregrounds this long neglected historical dimension of the American short story, which Oliver Scheiding's and Martin Seidl's recently published anthology *Worlding America* opens up as a more easily approachable field of research.³ Nagel persuasively argues that eighteenth-century tales, such as "Indian Fidelity," "The Negro," or Colla's "The Story of the Captain's Wife," question both ethnic stereotyping and gender ascriptions. With regard to the Romantic period, the discussion of stories by major dead white men such as Poe, Hawthorne and Melville is counterbalanced by the assessment of Harriet Beecher Stowe's, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's, Harriet Prescott Spofford's and Elizabeth Stoddard's work, highlighting the allegorical and symbolic textual strategies constitutive of Romanticism as well as the cultural work of these texts.

The chapter on "Realism and Naturalism" provides concise distinctions between these two movements and considers the diversification of writing styles and topics between the

³ Scheiding, Oliver and Martin Seidl (eds.), *Worlding America: A Transnational Anthology of Short Narratives before 1800* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015).

end of the Civil and the Great War, supported by new technologies of communication and the advent of new magazines in a vast area, by then ranging from coast to coast. Nagel touches upon variants of Local Color fiction by Mark Twain, Bret Harte and George Washington Cable, the psychological realism and narratological subtleties of Henry James, Civil War stories by Stephen Crane, Ambrose Bierce and Hamlin Garland, the portrayal of women's problems and their newly developing options by Grace King, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather and Charlotte Perkins Gilman as well as the multiplicity of ethnic voices in stories by Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Jessie Fauset, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Maria Christina Mena, Zitkala-Sa and Sui Sin Far. The existential entrapment of individuals by natural, economic or social forces in Naturalist fiction is highlighted by Garland's "Under the Lion's Paw," Crane's "Bowery Tales," Jack London's "The Law of Life" and "To Build a Fire," Theodore Dreiser's "The Second Choice," John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums," Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods," and Ruth Suckow's "A Start in Life."

The chapter on American Modernism from the end of World War I to the early sixties mentions a yet wider range of new magazines, which help establish the short story "as a dominant form" (40). Stories and story collections turn into seismographic instruments that register the sensibilities of Modernism. Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *Tales of the Jazz Age* and *Flappers and Philosophers* indicate the mood of the twenties and the different social standing of women in their very titles. Hemingway's laconic initiation stories probe the psychology of the Lost Generation. Faulkner's short fiction, as well as his novels, lay open the upheaval of Southern society since the Civil War and oxymoronically create a universalist regionalism. However, as in the case of the previous period, Nagel not only has an eye for predictable male giants of the genre but also for women writers such as Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter and Tillie Olsen, as well as for ethnic diversity in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Hisaye Yamamoto, Anzia Yezierska, Abraham Cahan, Arna Bontemps, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright and James Baldwin.

With regard to the contemporary period from the early 1960s onwards, Nagel discusses writers as different as the realists Andre Dubus and John Cheever, the minimalist Ray-

mond Carver, the psychological women writers Bobbie Ann Mason and Susan Minot, and the Vietnam War veterans Tim O'Brien and Robert Olen Butler. But he again emphasizes most the ethnic diversity of American short fiction, ranging from Caribbean Jamaica Kincaid and African American Toni Morrison to Latina writers Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes and Judith Ortiz Cofer, from Native Americans Sherman Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and Susan Power to Asian Americans Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Yiyun Li, Frank Chin and Sylvia Watanabe. The wealth of authors and texts described suggests that ethnic self-definition and interethnic encounters fit the episodic genre of the short story exceptionally well.

The author section presents portraits of twenty writers of short fiction, describing both their careers and their oeuvre and providing helpful references to important publications on these authors. The way in which Nagel structures the often voluminous output of major writers renders his *Handbook* extremely helpful to students and scholars alike. This is true for his remarks on Scott Fitzgerald and the epochal significance of some of his stories, like "Mayday" for the beginning and "Babylon Revisited" for the end of the Jazz Age. The Steinbeck chapter with the interpretation of all four stories in *The Pony* is equally informative. In Faulkner's case, Nagel discusses the decline of the Southern ruling class, as represented by "A Rose for Emily," the increasing impact of poor whites, as represented by "Barn Burning," and the fate of African Americans, as represented by the collection *Go Down, Moses*. Categorizing Faulkner's short stories according to that aspect of Southern society they primarily focus on, develops useful contours for an, in many respects, labyrinthine oeuvre. Nagel's chapters on authors also include detailed historical information and cultural contextualization. In the case of Louise Erdrich, for example, he discusses Indian legislation and Native American resistance since the late nineteenth century as the background of her work (157).

In most cases, Nagel's interpretations of individual stories are polyvalent and highlight the genre's complexity. For Colla's "The Story of the Captain's Wife and an Aged Woman," one of the eighteenth-century tales he interprets, Nagel offers a pluralistic scrutiny of "multiple levels of interpretation" (170). Discussing Bret Harte, Nagel provides

a multifaceted reading of "Tennessee's Partner" (84), demonstrating the complexity and ambivalences of storytelling in model fashion. This emphasis on complexity is not as marked in some other interpretations. The characterization of "Rip Van Winkle" (18, 58-59, 172-76) as exuding "the charm of this kindly naïveté" (175) seems to underrate the tale's potential for the devalorization of the American Revolution from the perspective of a villager for whom only the persistence of the village inn and its offerings, not the sign above it, counts. The story has also come under fire from feminist perspectives. Judith Fetterley, for example, views Rip as an exploiter of his spouse and Dame Van Winkle a kind of Benjamin Franklin in drag.⁴ There is, of course, good reason to read Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in the way Nagel reads it, as primarily the story of the lawyer with Bartleby as catalyst (184-88). But the character of Bartleby has also provoked wild thinking by poststructuralists such as Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze.⁵ While it may be true that Chopin found personal fulfillment in marriage, which is denied many of her protagonists, most notably Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, her stories often transcend the "startling honesty about feminine needs inside courtship and marriage" (94) attested her by Nagel. Several of Chopin's stories Nagel discusses, from "Athénaïse" and "The Story of an Hour" to "The Storm," make clear that marriage as a legal institution may have very little to do with romance and the feelings of the partners entering into it. As in the work of Edith Wharton, convention and emotion become tangibly separable, which seriously questions the groundwork of an institution that is understood as the outward expression of an emotional bond. Nagel's take on Chopin, and also on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, tends to tone down the paradigm changes their works register. Nagel's caveat, expressed with

⁴ Fetterley, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978) 1-11.

⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, "Bartleby; Or, The Formula," *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 68-90; Agamben, Giorgio, *Bartleby oder die Kontinenz gefolgt von Die absolute Immanenz*, trans. Maria Zinfert and Andreas Hiepko (Berlin: Merve, 1998).

regard to the glossary but also valid for the entire study, should not be ignored, however. His *Handbook* is not meant “to resolve intellectual controversies with learned societies but rather to establish a baseline from which students could begin their own consideration of literary history” (8). And yet, an occasionally more precipitous dip into the uncertain epistemological and moral depths of the American short story might have signaled from yet another angle the profound fascination which this field of study radiates.

What the student of the short story can glean from Nagel’s *Handbook* are both a large number of factual details and important information about the cultural background of the American short story. Nagel explains the etymology of the word “roquelaire” in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” (181), land taxation and “the reforms advocated by the Populist movement” (192) in the context of Garland’s “Under the Lion’s Paw” and the post-Civil War transformation of the South as the indispensable background of Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” (254), to name only a few examples. Something else is even more important. Read attentively, Nagel’s discussions of individual stories imply a crash course on how to interpret short fiction (or, for that matter, literary texts in general), as they always scrutinize both structure and composition before they venture into value

judgments. Nagel first identifies “Bartleby,” for example, as “essentially a first-person retrospective narrative” (184), before he discloses the story’s structural principles following from this insight. This procedure does justice to Melville’s text as a work of art, whatever its philosophical ramifications. One may not share Nagel’s limited sympathy for Flannery O’Connor’s private metaphysics, but his analysis of “narrative point of view,” “structural principles, especially parallelism and juxtaposition” (258) and the composition in four sections of O’Connor’s story “The River” expertly unravels the way in which it is constructed. This procedure is prominent in many of the interpretations of individual stories from Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” and Edith Wharton’s “The Other Two” to Jean Toomer’s “Blood-Burning Moon” and Amy Tan’s “The Joy Luck Club.” In this regard, Nagel’s interpretations teach that strength of opinion must not obscure or replace structural analysis. This is not the least important maxim for students of the short story and literature in general.

For all these reasons, in addition to its sheer scope and Nagel’s exceptional expertise and critical acumen, *The American Short Story Handbook* is an outstanding landmark for the study and teaching of the American short story.

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