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form. . . . All that can be claimed is that our writers have shown honesty and skill in learning from the techniques they have found in the universal literature of the short story." And C. K. Stead, editor of the second collection, observed: "There is still in New Zealand . . . evident devotion to the *craft* of the short story, not as a thing in itself, but as a means of getting at the exact flavour, the distinct feel, of our experience." Stead was writing in 1965. I fancy the devotion has been chipped a bit since then. Only one or two of the New Zealand authors I have mentioned are still writing short stories. Craftsmanship, after all, is merely the beginning of the battle. Ask any Gissing man.

England: H. E. Bates

The history of the short story, both past and present, is beset with odd myths, some of them plain silly, and a considerable number of contradictions, some of them difficult to explain. The notion that people do not read short stories in volume form, whereas they read them avidly in magazines, is itself a good example of both myth and contradiction and was already an old chestnut when I first began writing short stories more than thirty-five years ago. There was in fact little truth in it then, as the publishers of Hemingway, Maugham, Katherine Mansfield, Erskine Caldwell, Thurber, Lawrence, and many others could testify. There is even less today.

Another myth, which I shall proceed to demolish in more detail in a moment or two, is that the demise of so many so-called literary magazines in the twenty-odd years since the beginning of the war has been a source of serious discouragement to short-story writers, with the result that the contemporary scene is illuminated with nothing like the luster that burned so brightly, on both sides of the Atlantic, in the '20s and '30s.

This odd notion takes no notice of the fact that there has been a revolution in the magazine world in England since the war; or that the general level in interest in the short story, thanks to that revolution and the vast influence of radio, tele-

vision, and paperbacks, has risen; or that really purposeful short-story writers simply do not succumb to suppression just because magazines like *The London Mercury*, *Life and Letters*, *The Criterion*, and *Horizon*, excellent as they may have been, eventually fade away. In fact, discouragement might well be said to spur on writers of the short story. In America it used to be claimed, before the war, that there were something like 20,000 short-story writers struggling for recognition, and I should be greatly surprised if the figures were not many times larger today.

That the situation in England is much the same is proved pretty clearly by two astonishing sets of figures: namely the number of entries in two short-story competitions run by two English Sunday newspapers some four or five years ago. To one newspaper no less than 10,000 stories came rolling in; to the other a mere 6000. But this is not all. These figures, remarkable enough in themselves, are capped by others even more remarkable.

The staggering fact is that out of 10,000 stories submitted to one journal not a dozen were worth printing, whereas the other journal could claim to have been just a little more fortunate; it, at least, managed to gather together a small, though undistinguished, anthology of winning entries. I find these figures a source of endless wonder and speculation. The readers of these newspapers were, presumably, a cut above those specializing in scandal, rape, and blood-and-thunder. It is even possible to assume, I suppose, that they were literary-minded. Behind them, also, lay an incomparable mountain of inspiration built in the '20s and '30s by a body of modern masters, both male and female, on both sides of the Atlantic, who gave to the short story a greater distinction than it had ever known before.

All, apparently, in vain. Prophecy, like lending money to friends, is a mug's game, but when I prophesied in *The Modern Short Story*, in 1941, that the inevitable distrust and dislocation of war's aftermath would surely lead new writers to find in the short story the essential medium for what they had to say, I felt certain I was right. Time has proved me wrong. It is true that a certain number of new short-story writers, notably

Angus Wilson, Alan Sillitoe, John Wain, Roald Dahl, Elizabeth Taylor, and others have appeared, but the results have, on the whole, been thinnish and disappointing. There has not even been what Elizabeth Bowen once so aptly called "a minority-fervor."

The reasons, I confess, largely elude me. It would be possible, I suppose, to lay some blame at the door of publishers, who are all too ready to take the short story's unpopularity for granted and in consequence to publish volumes of it in apologetic despondency, not to say reluctant pain. Nor has their eternal opening question to young short-story writers, "When are you going to write a novel?" been of very great help. To my mind this is rather as if you signed on a soccer genius and then promptly asked him when he was going to play baseball. Similarly, it seems to me, literary editors are not entirely blameless. Like some innocent watcher at the night sky, hoping to detect an unknown comet, I still hopefully look forward to the day when volumes of short stories, expressions of prose's most exacting and difficult form, will *not* be strung together for review like links of chippolata sausages or relegated to the bottom of the book page, there to derive such comfort as they can from the chill company of those awful "shorter notices." Mr. Robert Shaw, who is both actor and writer, recently remarked with some pungency that he had come to the conclusion that literary editors as a whole didn't care much for novels; there are times when I think they don't care much for short stories either.

Back to the myths—in particular the one so beloved and fostered by reviewers, particularly so-called intellectual ones: namely that no greater blight can descend upon a writer than that he should contribute to a woman's magazine. This searing insult is even more degrading than the damnation expressed in "I suppose it will please the library readers" (which library, *Times*, *London*, Municipal, or Fred Smith's the tobacconist is never stipulated). This, as I said earlier, is a myth to be demolished: I hope once and for all.

With this in mind, I now present two lists of distinguished writers of fiction. One: Rebecca West, Isak Dinesen, Ludwig Bemelmans, Nigel Balchin, Margaret Irwin, Marghanita Laski,

John Masters, David Walker, Robin Maugham, John Wyndham, Ray Bradbury. Two: Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, Elizabeth Bowen, Morley Callaghan, Eric Linklater, André Maurois, Angus Wilson, Somerset Maugham, Ian Fleming, Richard Church, William Sansom, Elizabeth Taylor, and William Saroyan.

To which two editors in London falls the distinction of having printed short stories by these and many other writers of equal standing since the war? No less, I tremble to tell you, than Miss Dorothy Sutherland and Mr. James Drawbell, editors respectively of *Woman's Journal* and *Woman's Own*. When you add to these names the even longer and more imposing list, including such figures as Graham Greene, Maurois, Pritchett, Thurber, and Huxley, which Miss Sutherland has gathered about her on *Argosy*, our one and only serious magazine in England exclusively devoted to the short story, it can firmly be claimed that the stigma long attached to women's magazines and their editors is palpably a false and stupid one.

In fact, as I have said, a revolution has occurred in the world of magazines, and a very good revolution too. A vastly widened field of readers is now able to find its diversion among the work of short-story writers many of whom, when they first began writing, felt themselves fortunate indeed if they were published with "minority-fervor," in obscure coteries, at a couple of guineas a time. I am one of them; I know.

Yet the fact remains that for all their enviable distinction these lists contain less than ten per cent of postwar writers; the rest were already names of distinction well before the war. Why then the failure of the short story, the most felicitous and fascinating of all prose forms to handle, the nearest thing—indeed the natural heir—to poetry: why the failure to attract more new writers? The strange paradox is that it continues to attract new readers, not only in magazines, as we have seen, but also, in spite of the general foreboding of publishers, in book form. Twenty or thirty years ago a figure of 10,000 copies for a volume of short stories would have sent its publishers, author, and indeed everyone else connected with the book on a wild and astronomical champagne spree. Today *Kiss, Kiss*,

a work by a comparatively new writer, Roald Dahl, reaches something like that figure in no time at all. Nor is Mr. Dahl alone in his happy achievement.

I have long maintained, and shall always maintain, that the short story is a poetic form; it is very much an affair of balance and distillation. At its best it has qualities both lyrical and pastoral. To a sour and abrasive younger generation these qualities, of course, are a little out of fashion. Something more than an angry sepsis has eaten into the bone of some of our younger writers, and I cannot think that poetry flourishes on the smell of gangrene. I am also unfashionable enough to think that the object of a story is to divert; it is no vehicle for messages, sermons, or self-dramatization.

There may, of course, be other reasons. Perhaps the age's chief distraction, television, the goggle-box, is in part to blame. Perhaps it is also a mug's game to bother to go through the tough mill of mastering the difficult art of the short story for the prospect of modest checks, when you can write television scripts for fat ones. Or perhaps it's just safer to take a job.