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Some Notes on the Short Story

By H. E. BATES

More and more short stories are being written. Over a hundred manuscripts are sent to EVERYMAN every week. In this article H. E. Bates, who is himself one of the chief of the younger short story writers, comments on two volumes of English and American stories that have just been published

THE position of the short story in English and American letters is a peculiar one. No form of composition is more difficult for the writer himself

whereas the lavish, big-scale magazines, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New Yorker*, *Scribner's Magazine*, *Harper's Magazine* and *The Cosmopolitan* are all represented, sometimes with three stories each, as in the case of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

This seems like a plain indication that the American short story is still in the commercialized and depressing state in which Sherwood Anderson found it and from which he tried so hard to rescue it. But Mr. O'Brien has more hope, and analysing the volume still further one sees that he has justifications.

My own first thought in opening the American volume was "Is there a story by Anderson or Hemingway?" and secondly, when I saw that neither was represented, "Are the Hemingway imitators here again?" To my delight I found that Mr. O'Brien had thrown them overboard, retaining not one writer in whose technique one could see the influence of Hemingway's writing, so simple, and yet by its very simplicity and the peculiar philosophy behind it, so difficult to imitate or absorb.

Anderson and Hemingway

The influence of Sherwood Anderson, however, is apparent in several stories, and either because his writing is outwardly less strikingly individual than Hemingway's, or perhaps because his influence is no new thing, the stories do not strike one as being mere blatant imitations, though at the same time they are not themselves among the most striking tales. Trying to select the best of Mr. O'Brien's own selection, one finds the titles full of significance—*Only we are Barren*, *Water Never Hurt a Man*, *Babylon Revisited*, *That Evening Sun go Down*—all of which strike an unusual lovely note, full of imagination, just as the stories behind them turn out to be. *Water Never Hurt a Man*, by Walter D. Edmonds, is a story of strong and beautiful texture, an uncommonly fine work; and *Only we are Barren*, by Alvah V. Bessie, is written with some of that marvellous rhythm and burning imagination that one finds in the work of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, whose name also is not included this year. Here, one sees, are the writers of to-morrow, writers who must surely raise the American short story to a still higher level even than Anderson did.

The English volume is packed with well-known names, though there are no stories by A. E. Coppard, David Garrett, Dorothy Edwards, Pauline Smith, Liam O'Flaherty or Sean O'Failain. Indeed, comparing the volume

with, for instance, the 1927 volume,

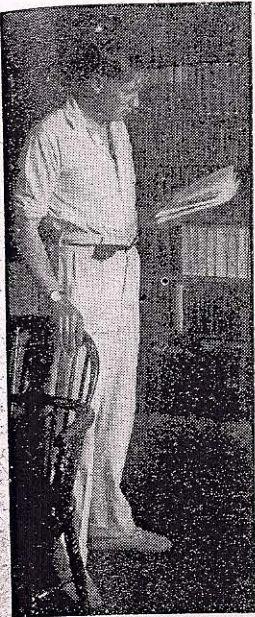
one finds only one name in common. Many new names have sprung up, all as tribute to Mr. O'Brien's sympathy and foresight regarding younger or newer writers. Mrs. Malachi Whitaker, whose stories have a wise and tender air that instantly recalls Tchegov and his shorter pieces, is included for her *Postal Order*, which is as quiet and skilfully made as a piece of lace.

In fine contrast to her stands Mr. H. A. Manhood, whose stories have hitherto been marred by a too extravagant imagery and by his tiresome habit of making all his characters, however diverse, speak in his own idiom. But in *Lonely Camp*, an Irish fishing tale, he stands purged and stronger, and his story has some of the fine imaginative quality of the best American work. *Blodwin*, by Mr. Rhys Davies, is full of his shrewd, ironical, very telling writing, and is spoilt only by some hills cum stars cum flowery-nakedness melodrama in the Lawrence manner. There are other memorable stories: *Liars*, by Florida Pier, is brilliant; Mr. H. W. Freeman's *Right of Way* is sound stuff; Miss Dorothy Richardson's *Ordeal* and Miss Kathleen Coyle's *The Limit* are both sensitively done.

Mr. O'Brien has contributed a special preface to the American volume, and one hopes that in future years he will consider doing as much for the English volume. There is less opposition to the literary short story in this country than in America, but the public nevertheless remains uninitiated and ignorant, still blind to the enormous growth of the short story since Katherine Mansfield, and to the increasing number of important and delightful artists the form is attracting.

Never So Healthy

A feeling also exists that the short story is rapidly becoming to resemble an essay, a mere description of common lives or commonplace facts or of events which lack the dramatic excitement of the old short story, which was often nothing more than a pocket novel. I seem to remember that these criticisms were and still are directed against such writers as Tchegov and Sherwood Anderson. It would be interesting and useful if Mr. O'Brien were to discuss such criticisms in a preface to next year's volume, and to see if he were to deduce from them, as I myself do, that the English short story has never been so green and flourishing as now.



David Garnett

and none, I suppose, more easy for the reader, which would seem to indicate at once a scarcity of writers attempting the short story and an overwhelming demand by the literary public for the few short stories that were published. But the position is in reality the exact reverse of this.

It seems fairly safe to say that in England and America, at all events, there was never a time when so many important or potentially important writers found the short story so attractive to themselves as artists and when so many fine stories were being produced. The public itself, however, still regards the short story as something which the writer knocks off in his sleep or while on holiday, either because he needs money quickly or because the idea of the story itself is not worthy of more elaborate treatment. To libraries and book societies a volume of short stories remains about as attractive as a scientific treatise on the frog.

Among the critical public and among critics themselves the position is different, and one critic at least continues to look upon the short story with enthusiasm and fine judgment. Probably no one in England reads more short stories than Mr. E. J. O'Brien, whose two yearly volumes, *The Best Short Stories of 1931*, No. 1, English; No. 2, American (Cape, 7s. 6d. each) have just been issued. Mr. O'Brien is not infallible and no reader will agree entirely with him in his choice, but his taste is more sound than most critics', and his knowledge of the contemporary short story of England and America is probably unsurpassed.

Opposite Ways

Some analysis of this year's volume is interesting. Setting aside the authors themselves one notes that of the twenty-five English stories only one has previously appeared in a popular paper, every other story having appeared in what one might call intellectual journals, *This Quarter*, *The Criterion*, *Life and Letters*, and papers of similar literary reputation. Turning to the American volume one notes the extreme opposite; literary journals are represented by obscure group-magazines formed by the younger writers out of self-preservation,



Liam O'Flaherty