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THE "BEST" SHORT STORIES

Reviews by H. E. BATES

THE Best Short Stories of 1939: English and American, edited by Mr. E. J. O'Brien (Cape, 7s. 6d.), provides, like its predecessors, a key to the best contemporary short story writers on both sides of the Atlantic, but it has also, this year, a distinction of special interest to readers of this journal. For of the twenty stories included by British writers no fewer than one-third made their first appearances in JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY, which in a world of bankrupt and dying periodicals remains a very steadfast haven and hope for the short story writer. Among the contributors to these pages were such distinguished persons as Mr. Walter de la Mare, Mr. Gerald Bullett, Mr. Martin Armstrong and, not least, Mrs. Malachi Whitaker, who returns to activity with a story remarkable not so much for itself as for a confirmation of her incomparable ability to radiate the bright, sad, ironical truth about things: "... there was none of this shabby half-and-half business, where nothing really happened, and where husbands left their wives, not for a great and perfect love, but for something exceedingly like that which they were leaving." Among the remaining British writers Miss Elizabeth Bowen and Mr. V. S. Pritchett are both highly competent and sophisticated; Mr. Rhys Davies, whose best gift is a sly sense of humour, has a good story told with tart irony; and Mr. Geraint Goodwin, Mr. T. O. Beachcroft, Miss Winifred Williams, Mr. G. F. Green, and Mr. Leslie Halward make up a list in which there are surprisingly few unknown names.

On the American side, by contrast, the lesser known writers outnumber the known, among whom Mr. Allan Seager, Mr. Morley Callaghan, Mr. Albert Maltz, Mr. Jesse Stuart, and the irrepressible William Saroyan offer sound and distinguished work. The only criticism I have to make of the volume is that Mr. O'Brien's preface has outlasted most of its usefulness. The year 1940 will, I think, be the quarter-century mark of his yearly volume's appearance in one form or another. No other anthology of its kind has been such a consistently valuable and catholic influence on the short story to-day; and I suggest that next year Mr. O'Brien gives us a special preface to commemorate an auspicious occasion.

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Mrs. Dorothy Parker is not included in the year's best stories; but her collected volume of stories (*Here Lies*, Longmans, 7s. 6d.) stamps her without doubt as one of the best American writers of short fiction to-day. She takes a small, despicable, fashionable, diseased section of society and proceeds to operate on it with a style as efficient and clinical as that of an operating surgeon. Under her merciless hand the stupidities, meannesses, immoralities, and duplicities of the human mind are as remorselessly exposed as the ulcerations, appendices, and cancers of a diseased body. Her dialogues are classic examples of bitter implication. Her character sketches reveal her as the Ruth Draper—more merciless, however—of literature. The cold efficiency of her technique, hiding in reality depths of pity, is unparalleled.

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Mr. Damon Runyon, like Stephen Crane, arrived with a style already brought to perfection. There was no need to improve it and, like Crane, Mr. Runyon could only remain static or decline; and in *My Wife Ethel* (Constable, 7s. 6d.) Mr. Runyon fans will, I think, find a big deterioration from the standard of the earlier classics contained in *More than Somewhat* and *Furthermore*. Only Josef's illustrations, worthy of the Nicolas Bentley tradition, compensate for a rather dull, repetitive book.