

About

The purpose of this assignment was to find a short story by an American author and analyze the style, convention, canon, and Americana found in the story. The students were also required to have a short biography of the author, summarize the short story, and pose a research question.

Any errors in this document are from the student. The instructors did not revise or make corrections to these submissions. Students posted these submissions to an open platform, SpringShare, as part of their library guide assignment for sharing content with public users. The content was transferred to this document for archival purposes and can only be used under the CC BY-NC-SA license.

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A Lucky Man by Jamel Brinkley

Brinkley, Jamel. A Lucky Man. Graywolf Press, 2019.

“A Lucky Man” is a collection of nine short stories by Jamel Brinkley. These stories are held together by the theme of manhood and fatherhood in the context of African American masculinity. This is the author’s debut collection.

Brinkley uses slang and language often associated with black people sparingly, just enough to paint the image without it dominating the rest of the descriptions and inner monologue. He creates the ideas and mindspace of his characters very clearly, sharing their thoughts and opinions and letting the reader decipher the societal implications for the most part. When he does spell out a point, such as what society expects black men to find attractive, he does so in a way that dangles the idea in front of the reader and lets them grasp it for themselves.

These stories are contemporary, with reality-bound stories dealing with societal expectations. The stories tend to focus on “coming of age” or fatherhood. Perhaps the biggest twist on these ideas is that the characters tend to be lost or lacking in guidance, and must find their way mostly alone through the world around them.

This collection discusses masculinity from the African American male perspective. Masculinity in and of itself has been discussed quite a lot, but this kind of dive into it from this racial context isn’t one I’ve seen very often.

This collection captures at least part of an entire section of American culture. One often used as subplots or sidenotes rather than the full purpose of the story. The discussion of these themes is important to American culture, regardless of race.

Jamel Brinkley, author of *A Lucky Man*, was raised in the Bronx and Brooklyn, New York. He is a graduate of Columbia University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He lives in California.

Consider what you know of white masculinity. How does it compare to the stories here? What are some differences? Similarities? What do those differences and similarities say about American culture and society?

Alien Virus Love Disaster by Abbey Mei Otis

Otis, Abbey Mei. *Alien Virus Love Disaster: Stories*. Small Beer Press, 2018.

Otis' new collection of short stories explores a variety of science fiction related adventures from children, robots, and blue-collar workers who come close to a toxic substance. Otis incorporates these bizarre stories with issues pertaining to social, gender, violence, immigration issues, and economic strains.

- Stories that contain social strains:
 - "Teacher"- The teacher has a simple conversation with her students. However, the topics are socially unacceptable and taboo, such as drug use and one child stating their father uses PCP.
- Stories about gender:
 - "If You Could Be God of Anything"- Children come across a sex robot that came from the sky. The story embellishes self-discovery in young children and the loss of innocence.
 - "Sex Dungeons for Sad People"- The story illustrates the role of sex and how it's viewed by each gender and how vulnerable women are during sexual encounters.
- Stories containing violence:
 - "If You Could Be God of Anything"- The robot is pulled apart and destroyed by "crushing the circuitry" (68).
 - "Blood, Blood" is a story centered around two young children fighting for the amusement of aliens.
- Stories about immigration:
 - "Moonkids"- The children in this story are mistreated because they immigrated from the moon. They are social outcasts and considered to be

"the other." Due to this fact, they experience inequality and work for practically nothing.

- "Sweetheart"- A mother's disgust when her child befriends an alien baby. It teaches us that children do not see race, they look at everyone else as their equal.
- Stories dealing with economic/environmental strains:
 - "Alien Virus Love Disaster"- A town becomes "unfit for habitation" (20) and the townsfolk have strange bumps all over their bodies.
 - "Rich People"- The story focuses on the power and overindulgence of the rich by setting up a lavishly bizarre party.

Otis' style of writing is different because she is able to create bizarre scenarios that demonstrate serious issues we are facing in today's America--they're contemporary. She's humorous, quirky, and oftentimes crude. She is descriptive with her ideas and characters. Although her stories are associated with real-life issues, they have a fantastical and unrealistic plot line. For instance, many rich parties don't feature people hanging from hooks, there is no scientific proof that aliens exist, and sex robots are not flying out of the sky. The issues themselves are modern and pertain to today's society. Her writing style incorporates Sc-Fi, fantasy, and dystopian literature. The collection itself appears to be a part of one collective world and the characters themselves represent youth. All of the stories are interconnected in some way with this dystopian/futuristic world where reoccurring issues arise that can be seen in today's society.

For instance, "Teacher" demonstrates a scenario in which school systems start to slowly diminish and become ineffective and in "Moon Kids," the beach town parallels how the earth could look in the next few years with immigration as more countries become oppressed and slowly diminish.

Science Fiction is the largest literary genre being used in this collection. A lot of her stories are also great examples of Modernism because she is rejecting social norms. For instance, she writes about a sex robot that falls from the sky, a teacher discussing drugs with her students, the corruption of rich people, and human sacrifice.

Otis' writing is innovative because it's just plain bizarre. All of her stories are taboo and disturbing. She's willing to think outside of the reader's normal comfort level and make them feel uncomfortable to prove a point about society.

Examples:

In "Sweetheart", the role of inequality affects the aliens living on earth. One quote depicts this inequality.

"Things start to change. On the radio, on TV. Human Pride is a big deal with advertisers" (133). The quote demonstrates how a certain community can be pushed away from society for being different. It's a great example of Modernism.

"If you Lived Here, You'd Be Evicted By Now" deals with economic issues including poverty and the destruction of homes. The mother in the story goes as far as saying that she would die in order to prevent the home from being broken down.

"That's the kind of thing that won't happen once you kill me...they'll know they can't touch it" (177). The people living in these poverty-stricken areas knew that their homes would become "trading posts...[featuring] face massages and [selling] luxury lotions and herbal bath infusions" (178).

The role of social issues is prevalent in "Alien Virus Love Disaster." She incorporates these issues into a fantastical dystopian world.

Otis has a strange and interesting way of communicating social issues. For instance, she uses the moon kids to depict inequality. The moon kids are treated significantly worse than humans because they came from another planet. She also addresses how sex is viewed in America and how things are sexualized. In this case, the sex robot teaches us about the taboo of puberty and how children react to their changing bodies.

Examples:

"Moonkids" is a short story about children who immigrated from the moon. The story depicts several forms of inequality.

"Moonkids get the illustrious task of trucking out slabs of beer-battered cod to shiny tourists who look at them like they're furniture. Yes ma'am, thank you ma'am. Would you like fries with that?" (33).

The story depicts the struggles of these moon kids moving to a foreign place and being treated less-than-human.

"If You Could Be God of Anything" follows a group of children who find a sex robot. The children are able to analyze the form of the female body and go into great detail by explaining that "between the robot's legs there was nothing. No vagina or skin or hair, just a wide square hole. Her illusion of humanity ended in a gaping plastic port that extended up inside her into darkness" (55-56).

Otis is able to utilize a fantastical and dystopian society to demonstrate the effects of social, economic, and environmental strains. Though these issues have been widely

discussed in American literature, Otis' main focus is surrounding a dystopian world that simply cannot function due to its flaws. .

Abbey Mei Otis was raised in North Carolina. She studied at the Michener Center for Writers in Austin, TX and the Clarion West Writers Workshop. Otis currently teaches at Oberlin College located in Ohio. This is Otis' first published collection.

How has this dystopian world that Otis created helped her illustrate societal issues?

Arizona by John Wideman

Wideman, John Edgar. "Arizona." *The New Yorker*, Volume 95, Issue 48, Nov. 2019, pp. 62-69.

The story is actually a letter written by an African American man whose 16 year old son is in an Arizona prison, serving a life sentence. The letter is addressed to Freddie Jackson whose music, one song in particular, touched the father deeply. The father is grappling with the fate of his son and tells his son's story (as well as a similar one about a college roommate) to Freddie Jackson because Jackson's music is so powerful – the only power that allows the father to escape his anguish, if just for a moment.

This complex story is presented through a series of dark memories with an emotionally charged and suffering tone. With lengthy syntax including several interjected thoughts, the letter reads as letters do...a one sided conversation through a stream of consciousness; for example, the second sentence includes 12 separate thoughts/ideas. Wideman continually addresses his audience with a formal "Mr. Jackson", and the level of his phrasing is indicative of his Ivy League education; however, at times he juxtaposes his word choice using "holler" and "cackle" and in the next sentence terms such as "extraterrestrial civilizations."

Without a conventional protagonist nor a beginning, middle, and end, I would consider this narrative part of the Modernism genre. The memories do not follow a time line and the major conflict in this story is the narrator's. The end of the letter does not bring closure as to what happens to his son nor is there any "wrapping up" the father's anguish.

What makes this piece innovative is that we really don't know how much of his tale is real and how much is fiction. John Wideman does have a son who stabbed his camp roommate and ended up in an Arizona jail, and Freddie Jackson is an actual musician. Only one major clue is provided when Wideman includes "[l]et me assure you I expect no response to this letter that is not even a real letter." Earlier though he includes "I am

writing this to myself as much as to you”, so it is more than likely that this pouring out of emotion and tragedy is at least somewhat biographical.

John Wideman’s son was sentenced to life in prison at the age of 16 after confessing to killing his camp roommate. Imagine the heart wrenching pain a father (and mother) must go through knowing not only what their child is capable of doing, but also knowing that there is nothing they can do to save him. Wideman is the recipient of two PEN/Faulkner Awards and authored more than 20 books. His brother, on the other hand, chose a life of crime and was also imprisoned for murder. Wideman’s letter not only illustrates the pain and heartbreak a father experiences when losing his son to a life of crime but also how different life can be for an African American man, depending on the choices made.

John Wideman was born in 1941 in Washington D.C. but spent most of his childhood in Pittsburgh. Many of his works are set in a mainly black community like the one in which he was raised and focus on African American men and the struggles they experience. His education experience is vast and includes being a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in 1963. He has served as an associate professor at the University of Washington and the Director of the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

Why was Wideman’s son, a minor, sentenced to a life in prison without parole? What psychological tendencies leads a person who has a seemingly good relationship with his family and friends to commit murder? How has American literature examined incarceration and/or parts of someone's story that leads them to commit heinous crimes?

Bad Kansas by Becky Mandelbaum

Mandelbaum, Becky. “Bad Kansas”. Athens, The University of Georgia Press. 2007. 978-0-8203-5128-5

These eleven stories, all set in Kansas, feature humor and peculiar characters to explore what it means to stay or leave their home state. This is Mandelbaum’s first book, but she has published individual short stories as well as essays and articles. This book won the Flannery O’Connor Award for short fiction.

The characters in this collection are mostly young adult to middle age people who are having conflicts with a specific relationship. Not all of the stories are romantic, but they could be classified as love stories. The characters have to come together in their relationship or let go in order to grow separately. The stories are all set in Kansas in smaller towns. The idea that sometimes it’s important to let go of your past is a major theme. I would classify this collection as both contemporary and romantic. This collection has

themes which people in this contemporary time would relate to. Also, the setting is romanticized because the characters think about where they are and miss it when they leave. The love aspect lends itself to this literary convention as well.

The stories are written in both first and third person. Conveying emotional turmoil is important to this collection. All of these stories are about relationships and the plots are definitely character driven. The realistic style is a way to make these stories relatable and human. Mandelbaum also uses figurative language as comic relief. This technique is used above all. The language is more minimalist than complicated. The emotions are conveyed using only the words that hold the most impact.

This collection adds to the literary canon because of the representation of regionalism throughout. The unifying setting, Kansas, is one of the reasons this collection is unique. The stories represent life in the Midwest and showcase the traditions of that region. When some of the characters in the collection leave, they realize how much they miss of their home state. It is peaceful and the people are respectful and honest. There is not as much pollution in Kansas in contrast with states that inhabit big cities. There are seasons in Kansas which the characters miss too.

There are many collections that tell stories of characters living in the big city, however, this collection focuses on small towns and the ramifications of that. Kansas is unique to America. This collection communicates how people live in the Midwest and the complexities of that. Stereotypically, moving away from home is a freeing experience and the characters don't miss their small town, however this collection showcases the characters who appreciate where they came from. The voices explore who they are and where they are. This region is underrepresented in literary canon.

Mandelbaum is originally from Kansas but lives in Bellingham, Washington currently. "Bad Kansas" won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, the 2018 High Plains Book Award for First Book, and was a Kansas Notable Book in 2018. Her first novel is coming out this year. Her work has appeared in many reviews including One story, The Georgia Review, and Medium. She also has received fellowships from Writing by Writers, a residency from The Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and Mandelbaum was a finalist for the 2019 Disquiet Literary Prize in Fiction.

What are the literary depictions of characters living in small towns?

Closet Without Going Over by Annie Dewitt

Dewitt, Annie. "Closest Without Going Over." *The Iowa Review*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2016, pp. 1–9., doi:10.17077/0021-065x.7768.

The story follows its narrator and an out-of-work actor who goes by Rocket. It focuses strongly on the mental-space of these characters, their dreams and their reality. It leaves the reader to figure out what is real and what is fantasy.

The story uses the senses a bit sparingly. The overall style is dreamlike, jumping from thought to thought and back again with little transition, and keeping the scenes a bit vague. There are moments we can reasonably assume to be real, such as the narrator and Rocket going through Rocket's late father's house. Others, however, are harder to tell, such as the brief mention of them being in Paris counting money. This isn't necessarily a flaw, it fits the characters well and helps to put the reader in their headspace.

The story is very post-modern and non-linear. It jumps from past to present and leaves the reader to wonder how much of it is real and how much is the dream of the narrator. It isn't concerned with having a grand point, and it deals with any issues that arise internally rather than externally. Overall, it feels a lot like "Rent" but much shorter and more subtle.

Like some post-modern works, this story floats about, sharing flashes and tidbits of life and information and cobbles them together into a story. The focus of those tidbits in this case is the starving artist. It captures the lives of one such person, the man the narrator follows. It shares this person's life through the eyes of someone else.

The story of artists trying to make a living in America isn't a new one, although this is certainly a different angle. The story mentions the 90s as an era that the characters didn't choose to be born into, though it ultimately shaped who they were. It looks into the same underdog life we've associated with the starving artist, but it does so through a calm, dreamlike lens that omits much of the drama other works tend to focus on. It puts the reader in the narrator's mind and lulls them with the memories and dreams that lay within, as opposed to wrapping them up in some dramatic climb to the top.

Author Annie DeWitt is a novelist, short story writer, and essayist. Her writing has appeared in *Granta*, *Tin House*, *The Believer*, *Guernica*, *Esquire*, *BOMB*, *Electric Literature*, *Bookforum*, *NOON*, *The LA Review of Books*, *The Iowa Review*, *The American Reader*, *art+culture*, *Poets and Writers*, and *The Faster Times*, among others. DeWitt holds an MFA in Fiction from Columbia School of the Arts. Her story "Influence" was recently anthologized in *Short: An International Anthology* distributed by Norton. DeWitt was a co-founding editor of *Gigantic*, a literary journal of short prose and art carried throughout the

US and abroad. Her debut novel [White Nights in Split Town City](#), from Tyrant Books, made The New York Times Book Review's "Short List."

As noted previously, we have seen similar themes to this in other pieces of media. Consider where else you might have seen them and compare and contrast the drama and themes presented.

The Dinner Party: And Other Stories by Joshua Ferris

There are eleven stories in this collection by Joshua Ferris. Many of these stories were previously published in The New Yorker, and Ferris has had other successful novels in the past such as "Then we Came to The End", "To Rise Again at a Decent Hour", and "The Unnamed". Each story in this collection deals with the awkward, heartbreaking, and hilarious parts of life that happen all around us. From a fighting married couple to a man dealing with loss, the stories follow a multitude of characters. The meaning of life is very different for all of the characters, and the reader gets to see these issues develop. Sometimes, the solution is to move on and start their own stories separately as their own characters. The stories in The Dinner Party are about lives that will be forever changed.

The writer, Joshua Ferris, writes his story in a narrative, descriptive style that creates a clear image in the reader's mind with relaxed structure, casual slang, and frequent narration. There is a simple sentence structure that is carried throughout all of the stories and it lets the narration provide the necessary structure. There is a "modernistic" approach to the stories that jump timelines and leave the reader to piece together the ending. The language follows a casual, laid back theme. There are multiple pop-culture references as well as slang. The narration is the most important part of the stories. While it may switch perspectives, it tends to follow a first person narrator with some help from an unknown "third person omniscient" narrator. The stories read as if the reader were the narrator because of the casual flow and informal approach.

Joshua Ferris uses a realistic and modern approach to his stories. The subject matter in the stories are personal; the majority of readers will be able to relate to at least one story throughout the collection. The details from one story often carry over into another. The eighth story of the collection is called "Fragments". It is about a man who likes to causally listen in on other people's conversations. Throughout the story, there are sudden changes in syntax and diction because those are words spoken by characters around the narrator. The story follows this man and how he deals with the revelation that his marriage is over because his wife is cheating on him. The story ends with him giving out their stuff to random strangers on the street. The story that follows had such similar diction and syntax

that I had forgotten that this was a collection of short stories, and had to remember that this next story, “The Stepchild”, was not about the same couple from before. The similar “family” subject matter carried throughout many of the stories creating one large conglomerate of families in the readers mind. Not only does the realistic and modern style continue within all the stories, various apartments and specific places mentioned run together in the collection. The innovation to take these separate stories, and create an overarching theme surrounding the hardships of life is something that is different from many modern stories. There is no “absurdity” or “meaningless lessons”, that often come with this modern trope, to be found in any of these stories. There are real lessons and takeaways surrounding these characters.

The addition that these stories add to the literary canon of American Short Fiction is by the direct, realistic nature of the narration. The stories demonstrate societal hardships, as well as their impact on the other characters. The seemingly light-hearted nature turned clinical and “real” to the majority of readers is what makes this collection meaningful. The dissatisfaction from life or a marriage, the death of a loved one, societal anxieties, and many other subjects are relatable to the reader. These stories leave a lasting impact because of the subject matter and the style.

This collection of short fiction communicates the realistic hardships of American culture for this time period. The first story of the collection is called “The Dinner Party”. It is about a couple who is getting ready for a dinner party with friends that they have grown apart from, but still feel it is polite to continue hosting their yearly dinner party. The other couple never shows, and are found to be having a party of their own. This causes discourse between the couple hosting the party because of the manner of their frowned upon marriage. The idea of marrying the wrong person, growing apart from friends, and ultimately being left out of a social gathering are all issues that all adults may face. In the sixth short story, “Ghost Town Choir”, a young boy witnesses a breakup between his mother and her boyfriend. The mother starts throwing things out of their trailer park window at her ex-boyfriend. The boy takes the man some of the things that his mother was going to throw out. The man comes back and this leads to more throwing and fighting. At the end, the mother and the boy leave their mobile home in order to start a new adventure somewhere else. This story hones in on tough family relationships. The boy and his mother have a relationship, but it is distant. The son never has a consistent family dynamic because of an ever-changing line of boyfriends. These two stories are just a small look at all of the relevant and impactful Americana topics that this collection covers.

Joshua Ferris is an American author known for his debut 2007 novel *Then We Came to the End*. Joshua studies at University of California Irvine and the University of Iowa. His work is

frequently published in “The New Yorker”, and many of his collections and short stories are critically acclaimed. He has won the PEN/ Hemingway Award, and is currently working on another collection.

How are family dynamics addressed in American Literature? Is there a relation to other topics such as friendship dynamics and societal anxieties that are discussed in congruence to family dynamics?

Effects on the Side by Serge Shea

Shea, Serge. “Effects On The Side”. *The Stinging Fly*, Issue 37, Vol. 2, Winter 2017-18.

This story depicts a day in the life of an interesting man named Laurence. He begins his day by cleaning out his household junk drawer and finds a key which belongs to his neighbors’ house. Hoping to return the key, Laurence heads over to their house; however, he begins to snoop around inside. Soon, the couple which lives there arrive at the house to find Laurence and after awkward conversation, he is eventually invited to stay for dinner. With all that is wrong in his life right now, Laurence has no reason to not accept the invitation as he makes himself comfortable, awaiting a series of questions that he might have to answer from his hosts.

This story appears to be very narrative, focusing on the thoughts of and the problems which afflict the main character, Laurence. Narrated by an outside source, the story looks into the mind of Laurence as we see not only his opinions on other characters arise, but also his miscellaneous, internal conflicts as well. Because of this style, the writing seems to be more indirect as it jumps from thought to thought, almost like a realistic mind.

This short story definitely displays some key themes of Modernistic writing. For one, it doesn’t seem to have a direct plot as we jump through a wide-range of activities for Laurence. The story begins with him simply cleaning out a junk drawer then jumps around to explain his failing job and book, crumbling marriage status and the scandal which accompanies it, and his well-established hatred for his many of his close neighbors. As we jump from these sub-stories, one might piece together that Laurence’s life is slowly falling apart and that he is a very lonely individual losing track of his current state in time. In the somewhat abrupt and open-ending, a key to Modernist writing, this fact becomes even more clear as he is filled with wariness about his future, asking questions to himself about what lies ahead.

Through its use of narrative techniques, I believe that this story could play a large role in how writers portray mental health and depression within literature. The character

Laurence was a seemingly average man in a suburban setting; he had an affluent job as a teacher alongside his equally successful wife, a strong neighborhood community filled with many he knew. Despite all of the typical positives, Laurence was on a path towards a steep, downhill slope. By writing a piece like this, critics and readers could find connections and build a community of works which could benefit or help establish relatability within readers.

This story seems to be set in arguably the idolized “American Dream”. Laurence has everything he could possibly want, but yet, his life is nowhere near perfect as things continue to go negatively for him. In a way, this story brings light to reality of being an average citizen. Moreover, its focus on mental health is the real message of importance, as Laurence is a character of not only reality, but also relatability.

Yet, his renting neighbors are also offer contributions to this large theme as well. Despite their odd relationship with Laurence, the couple invite him over for dinner and show no acknowledgement of his possible condition(s). Their nice behavior is somewhat misleading though as Laurence is left to question their honesty and intent.

Serge Shea began his career as a high school and middle school English teacher. During his years of school he received his MFA for creative writing from NYU, as well as his MA in Education. Currently, he lives in Brooklyn, New York and works as a teacher at LaGuardia Community College. More recently, he has continued to develop and publish his writings.

Through the narrator, we are able to see much of what Laurence thinks and feels. Yet, readers still might be lacking the extent of his sadness and curiosity. How could a change in narration affect the total outlook of the story?

Enid and Floyd and the Moon by Jeanne Shoemaker

Shoemaker, Jeanne. “Enid and Floyd and the Moon.” American Short Fiction, 2019. Web. July 11 2020.

Enid and Floyd are an older married couple who depend on each other for love and support. Enid is blind, and their son died twenty years ago from diabetes. They appear to be of low socio-economic status, and they rent out their third bedroom to a woman who, instead of paying rent, promises to take care of their chores and errands, which she fails to do. Instead, she racks up parking tickets on Floyd’s vehicle which he must then pay. Even though they are suffering and being taken advantage of, Enid and Floyd are still happy because they still have the one thing that is most important – each other.

Shoemaker's style is rich in sensory details, and utilizes short paragraphs in order to create a sense of awkward stiffness, which matches the awkward stiffness with which Floyd and Enid move due to their old age and Enid's blindness. The descriptions of the small house with old, rusty belongings are written in short, quick sentences, yet the sentences describing Enid and Floyd's interactions with each other are much longer and more fluid, causing one to read them slower. This indicates that for Enid and Floyd, time moves slower and is more relaxed when they are interacting with each other, and not when they are thinking about or concerning themselves with material belongings.

This story definitely draws from the traditional love story genre and utilizes the realist literary movement. First, the love story of Enid and Floyd is one in which love conquers all. They are happy in their love for each other even as their money is dwindling. Their house is in need of repairs, their furniture and kitchen supplies are all purchased from garage sales, and on top of that, their son died of diabetes, they are both getting older, and Enid is blind. Throughout all of these tribulations, Enid and Floyd have stuck together and supported each other, which is shown by the opening scene of the story in which Floyd is hand-dyeing Enid's hair. Even though Floyd is in pain from his arthritis, he massages his wife's hair "from root to tip" (Shoemaker).

The story also shows aspects of the realist literary movement because while Enid and Floyd are, indeed, still happy in their love, their life is far from "happily ever after." The story exposes the reality of the hardships they have endured, including living in their garage as they rent out their house to a woman who takes advantage of their generosity, losing their only child to diabetes, and suffering from their own health problems. It is also evident that because the couple has found peace and belonging, they have fulfilled the realist concept of fully realizing their individuality rather than becoming a cog in the mainstream machine of society.

While this story is romantic, it adds to the canon of American Short Fiction a new and modern take of the romance story with a touch of realism. It depicts an older couple who are down on their luck and struggling to survive in a capitalistic world. In our modern day society, there are many people who can relate to this struggle and who can take hope and encouragement from seeing Enid and Floyd overcome these obstacles and be content with what they have – the basic needs, and each other.

People of low socio-economic status are often ignored by the rest of society, yet they still have dreams and are worthy of society's attention. They have lives that are full of love, support, suffering, and can be targets of people who will take advantage of them.

“Jeanne Shoemaker is a graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Her writing has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Full Grown People*, and *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*. In 2013, she won the Pushcart Prize for her story, “Sonny Criss.”” (McReynolds).

This story strays from the usual convention of the love story in that it depicts the love story of an older couple. How is late-life love represented in American literature, and what does that indicate about American culture?

Go On, Eat Your Heart Out by Becky Mandelbaum

Mandelbaum, Becky. “Go On, Eat Your Heart Out”. *Bad Kansas*. The University of Georgia Press. 2007. p 45-61.

“Go On, Eat Your Heart Out” is a story of a woman at her lowest point. She is separated from her husband, living with her brother, and has no job. As a result of these stressors, Patty has gained weight. At the beginning of the story, Patty recognizes that she needs to lose the weight in order to take back control of her life. In the end after she loses the weight, she regrets how difficult she was on herself.

There are two tense moments when Patty runs into her ex-husband. The readers can understand the awkwardness of the situation. Since the narration is written in first person, Patty’s raw emotions are shown clearly. The overwhelming style though is humorous. Figurative language is used heavily in this story for comic relief. Comedy could be classified as one of Patty’s coping mechanisms. Her emotions can be sympathized with, but the language also offers comedy.

This story is contemporary because it deals with modern problems like weight insecurity and relationship issues. These problems are not largely explored in the literature of today though. This story could also be classified as modernist because the main character has inner conflict and is unstable. Patty is not a flat character and has clear development by the end of the story. The story has an open ending which is an element of modernism. In the end, the situation with her ex has been resolved, but she starts thinking about food again, after she has lost the weight. Will she indulge herself and gain some weight back? Food represents control, and by the end, she is officially taking back control. Also, the story begins with the aftermath of a breakup, which is not a common place to start a narrative. The reader meets Patty as she is spiraling into self-destructive tendencies with her eating.

This story follows a middle-aged woman who is struggling with a very modern problem which is weight gain. It's also set in Lawrence, Kansas which is specific to America. The setting influences Patty because she is back in her hometown. Her brother resents her, and her friends have all moved away from Lawrence. This is one of the reasons she gains weight, because she feels trapped in a place she believed she was free from. Local color is an aspect of this story. Places unique to this city are mentioned, as well as fashion, and food.

Being in a town which reminds you of your childhood can bring back memories. The main character is also living and relying on her brother because she is unemployed. These two elements put Patty in a situation that readers can relate to. Many Americans have the struggles Patty does. Her female experiences are uniquely American as well. She puts pressure on herself to get a "revenge body". She thinks maybe her husband will take her back once he realizes how stable and beautiful she is.

Mandelbaum is originally from Kansas but lives in Bellingham, Washington currently. "Bad Kansas" won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, the 2018 High Plains Book Award for First Book, and was a Kansas Notable Book in 2018. Her first novel is coming out this year. Her work has appeared in many reviews including One story, The Georgia Review, and Medium. She also has received fellowships from Writing by Writers, a residency from The Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and Mandelbaum was a finalist for the 2019 Disquiet Literary Prize in Fiction.

How is food representative of control in American literature?

Grave by W.C. Mallery

Mallery, W.C. "Grave." *The Dark Sire*, no. 1, 2019, pp. 5–25.

Mallery's "Grave" is the condensed narrative of a young lawyer who is tricked into meeting with the much older Dr. Wertenberg by a large check to secure his legal services. The nefarious Wertenberg uses his beautiful daughter as a succubus to rip away the young man's life essence through a mixture of ravaging sex and an alcoholic elixir of ambrosia. The daughter is then able to share the energies she takes in with her father, prolonging his life span for more than 100 years. The young lawyer develops a form of addiction to the feelings of lust and fulfillment, even though he knows that he is dying because of it, accepting his fate as he withers away.

The story is written in such a way that it is keeping the psychology of addictive sensation and the unknown supernatural darkness forefront. The sensory of being kept in a confused

state of desire and fear with a final acceptance puts the reader in the place of the young lawyer. These elements combine to adhere to the Gothic style of horror writing with a sense of the Romantic. Infused throughout the text are reflections of depression, addiction, lust, depravity, and ultimate acceptance and peace.

One of the easiest Gothic literary conventions to notice is the heavy use of darkness to signify the mystery and danger of the scenes. There is also the aspect of the young girl's beauty and physical perfection being used to hide the danger and evil that hides within the innocent facade. A mainstream horror convention is that there is a significant power differential between the protagonist and his opponent. The 'hero' has to be at a significant disadvantage in these stories or there's no dramatic atmosphere or tension to overcome. Mallery's story also encompasses a protagonist that is trapped against his will in a location that symbolizes the dark and dreary locations representative in Gothic tales going all the way back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The author stays true to the literary canon of using a female character as the evil seductress, but steers away from the norm by having her performing her seduction and sexual attacks at the behest of her father. Mallery uses darkness and the first-person narrative to present the accepted canon of using these tools to build suspense for the reader, but again he takes it one step further by having the character enjoy his demise because of his addiction to the drink and the sex. Of all of the creepy things that go bump in the night, the vampire is one of the oldest monsters. Mallery uses the same life sucking device but instead of the blood-sucking attack that has become commonplace in horror stories, Mallery uses the act of sex to steal the protagonist's life force. It is this blending of the accepted Gothic and horror canons with the different takes that are innovative and new for readers.

As Americans, the people in the law profession are suspected of having a money first mentality. The young lawyer in this story only accepts the invitation to join Dr. Wertenberg because of the large check supplied with the request for his legal assistance. Due to the large amount, the attorney goes to the meeting knowing that there will be a high risk involved, but he goes anyway. Is this resemblance of the belief that money over everything is the way lawyers view the world? Even over the nagging doubts that accompany meeting in such a dark and run-down location, the greed replaces common sense and the lawyer chases the dollar right into the trap of the life-suckers in "Grave".

W.C. Mallery is an American author who was a lawyer in a previous career among other things. As an attorney, Mallery served in Brooklyn, NY as an assistant district attorney. He also taught business law at Mount Saint Mary College and is proud of being a bartender for the Long Island Railroad while he was a student. Mallery was influenced to write this story

by watching Christopher Lee movies for Halloween. He has also been published in Tinge, an online literary journal published by Temple University.

Researchers who are looking to read this story for insight should pay attention to the way the story unfolds with dramatic effect for the young lawyer who narrates his way from fear of his situation, to the unending desire of more of the drink and the sexual proclivities of the beautiful daughter as an admission of addiction, and finally acceptance of his fateful death. There is a question that bears further observation of how female antagonists are represented in Gothic literature. Does their physical appearance grow in relation to the depths of their evilness? Are their appearances only there as distractors from their depravities, or are they more important to the plot? Is there position in culture referenced by their darker activities, or is the queen more evil than the servant? In Mallery's "Grave", the daughter is the one with the power to absorb the lawyer's life, but she only does it because her father tells her to. This would seem that even in this story, the female character plays the meat in the sandwich between a male victim and a male dominant who has her perform for his benefit.

Gravity House by Carolyn Bishop

Bishop, Carolyn. "[Gravity House.](#)" Carve Magazine, Fall 2019, pp. 20–31.

Katie is a recently-divorced mother of one teenage girl, two boys, a dog and a cat living in rural Northwest California. The family home sat contentedly against the mountain while her husband was faithful but chaos moved in when he moved out. A greater threat arrives in the form of a raging wildfire and the family evacuates. Katie's emotions alternate between begging for the fire to consume the memories along with the house against hoping that she can rescue some happiness there.

The author begins the story with "You" and continues second person throughout placing the reader in the character's situation as well as having access to her thoughts and feelings. Realistic dialogue is alternated with short paragraphs of descriptive figurative language. The author moves time ahead with an ellipsis indicator and this makes for subtle transitions. Throughout the story, normal everyday occurrences like feeding the kids are interspersed with the looming of the fire coming down the mountain.

Carolyn Bishop uses a convention of Modernism by leaving the story open ended. Other features of Modernism are also present. There is no true arc of plot with a climax. The story, by using second person, is closely associated with the protagonist, Katie, and the reader explores her motivations and doubts along with her. Katie is a complex human

being and, just like the ending, the reader is never quite sure what she will do. Finally, "Gravity House" uses the fire, the dog, the cat, and the hotel room as symbols that provide clues to many interpretations but do not prove any one explicitly.

There are some unfortunate realistic American social mores included. For instance, Megan, the teenage daughter is a spoiled sassy brat who pushes her mother's buttons expertly. American gluttony is also on display both through the family's disregard for meal times and through the hotel owner who gauges the prices simply because he can profit from catastrophe. On the positive side, even though Katie is struggling with her emotions for her ex-husband, they both try to co-parent without putting the children in the middle. Overall, America is like Megan's teenage years. She is sassy and spoiled but eventually tries to do the right thing.

Adding Carolyn Bishop to the canon is adding an American Northwest female perspective. Her story includes the common trope of the husband leaving the wife for a younger woman. However, it does not follow the stereotypical ex-husband bad guy. By breaking that stereotype, it shows that Bishop is willing to innovate her stories. Her creative writing experience is evident also in her writing in second person point of view. Because of the wild fire's destruction, I think this could also qualify as Ecocriticism.

The author, Carolyn Bishop, lives in the Pacific northwest. She is a former Writer's Program student who received her MFA in writing from Pacific University. "Gravity House" is her first time being published. The short story placed second in the [Raymond Carver Contest for 2019](#), a writing contest sponsored by Carve Magazine.

The story's is told from the perspective of a divorced mother of three with the oldest child being a teenage girl. Thinking about the angry teenage girl of divorced parents, what commonalities can be found in this direct characterization in contemporary fiction? Are there specific portrayals based on author gender? What do those findings demonstrate about divorced mothers or teenage girls or female authors?

Heads of the Colored People: Stories by Nafissa Thompson-Spires

In her debut collection, Heads of the Colored People: Stories, Nafissa Thompson-Spires presents the themes of race, identity, and black citizenship in her twelve short stories. She utilizes humor, wit, sorrow, and even horror to convey the everyday lives of her original characters and the problems which afflict them. There is a large range for these depicted issues. Some are minor, a pair of moms fighting through notes in their daughter's

backpacks, while other topics are much more serious like suicide, abuse, and gun violence. Thompson-Spires' seemingly relatable writing style, accompanied by relevant topics to the African-American lifestyle, have led this book to qualify for numerous awards and accolades as it continues to grow in popularity.

The work of Thompson-Spires features a wide range of writing styles ranging from light-hearted to poignant. Part of the reason for the variation in styles is her attempt to capture the uniqueness of each of the individual characters. In her opening story, "Heads of the Colored People: Four fancy sketches, two chalk outlines, and no apology" Thompson-Spires utilizes a highly descriptive and tense style as she describes six different perspectives of characters involved within this particular story which depicts the effects of violence and black stereotyping. Yet, in her second story, Thompson-Spires takes a much lighter tone as she captures the passive aggressiveness of two characters as they are forced to share an office at a university. These are just two examples of how different each of the stories are within this collection as Thompson-Spires employs multiple styles of writing in order to harness effects of sadness, humor, anger, and a handful of other emotions in the reader.

"Humour is my coping mechanism in life – it's a way I publicly deal with trauma. In a story humour can be helpful to disarm the reader, to think it's not going to get as dark as it does. It's a way to get to those dark places." -Thompson-Spires

Although the emotions in her stories might differ, Thompson-Spires' writing harnesses one obvious convention- Realism. These stories attempt to focus on characters and class, and feature a developed plot; additionally, many even relate to each other. Specifically, over the course of the collection, readers can see the development of a character, Fatima. She is one of two African American girls at her school and is also struggling with endometriosis as a teenager and later adult. In fact, Fatima was inspired by a young Thompson-Spires, making her one of many characters of relatability in the collection.

Thompson-Spires' collection draws on one large literary convention: the social critique. Through this collection of short stories, she is using literary strategies to expose a much larger idea in the social context of the world today. Specifically, by looking into the minds of black Americans she is showcasing to the reader what accompanies being dark-skinned (or even in one case, albino). Her real critique is apparent through her mentioning of stereotypes which often afflict black communities or individuals.

"I want to read more about people who have had experiences similar to my own. I'd grown up feeling like I was the only black person like myself, though of course that wasn't the case. I wanted to see more stories about awkward, nerdy black people, and black people

who were the only ones in a particular space, and what it meant to navigate the many different kinds of identity construct. You write what you want to read. You're reshaping an ongoing conversation." - Thompson Spires

The best example of this is present in her story, "Belles Lettres", where two black moms are arguing with each other through letters. But, more importantly, mentioned in the story is: 1. The fact that their children need to be friends because they are the only black girls at the school, 2. The labeled outlandish idea that they can both be successful women and send their children to private schools, and 3. The construct that they both made something of themselves after leaving their own "ghettos". The overwhelming theme, apparent in this story as well as many others in the collection, is that black culture, community, and citizenship is often misdefined based on racist and old assumptions. So, through writing this book Thompson-Spires is able to effectively use a social critique to make these unspoken injustices apparent; in turn, educating readers and providing a voice to those who often fall trapped within this mislabeled minority.

This collection of stories offers a few different things to the literary canon of American short fiction, of which the most important is the book's obvious offering of diversity to an arguably closed community. This collection offers a rare and modern perspective of American literature from the viewpoints of various black characters. Additionally, this contemporary perspective comes from different genders, social classes, and backgrounds, which allows for even more of a progressive offering.

Looking at the text, we see social class and gender in the stories. Thompson-Spires utilizes a wide range of characters from different backgrounds to expose the "typicalness" of being black. Specifically, readers see a mix of educated males and women successful in their fields of work, as well as young developing boys and girls learning life ideals. Nonetheless, the variation in character choice is important to the overall collection since each of the characters, whether their story is serious, humorous, or saddening, add to Thompson-Spires' realist critique of living as a Black American.

Thompson-Spires began her collection with a story depicting the death of two black men at the fault of a police officer's gun. This story alone offers much to our current society and trend in literature as our country is facing a movement for racial equality. This story and the unlawful deaths of these two men is meant to spark outrage within readers as we continue the rest of the book with a close eye for injustice as we look inside the heads of seeming usual characters who we could relate to in our everyday lives.

Another example which this collection offers to literature in a cultural sense is the stereotyping of black Americans, including slang language and violence. In multiple stories

within this book, Thompson-Spires draws on the idea that black people have their own “illiterate” vernacular. She also makes references to the violence of gangs which surrounds their origins and communities within the United States. However, she offers these two ideas as stereotypes, using the characters to disprove them.

Both of these concepts offer a lot to an individual’s interpretation and takeaways from this collection. Through an analysis of this collection, it is clear that Thompson-Spires is undoubtedly making commentary on equality and anti-blackness in America. In a sense Thompson-Spires aims to educate those who are unfamiliar with the stereotypes of black culture and citizenship and demolish these mentioned assumptions in the process.

Nafissa Thompson-Spires earned her doctorate in English from Vanderbilt University and her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Illinois. Although her career is somewhat new, her work has appeared in known publications such as *Story Quarterly*, *Lunch Ticket*, and the *Feminist Wire*. Furthermore, her writing has received support from Tin House, the Sewanee Writers’ Conference, and others. Her debut short story collection, *Heads of the Colored People: Stories* has won multiple awards including: the PEN/ Robert W. Bingham Award, the Aspen Words Literary Prize, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, as well as being longlisted for the 2018 National Book Awards and a finalist for the Kirkus Prize. Currently, Thompson-Spires is working on continuing her writing as she teaches Creative Writing as an assistant professor at the University of Illinois.

Referenced within the collection are remarks towards books of literary merit that serve purpose to teaching the black community or educating others about it. With this in mind, what does this particular book teach a reader through its portrayal of black culture, values, etc.? Where would Thompson-Spires’ social critique of blackness in America fit into the literary spectrum? How does the variation in Thompson-Spires’ characters affect her overall delivery and themes?

Her Body and Other Parties by Carmen Maria Machado

Machado, Carmen Maria. *Her Body and Other Parties*. Graywolf Press, 2017.

This debut collection of eight stories represents wide-ranging styles and subjects that investigate common themes of sexuality, love, and gender roles.

These stories exhibit conventions of Naturalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. In the metafictional “Inventory,” the main character refers to writing lists. The story itself is a list, an inventory of lovers that constructs a larger narrative about a pandemic. The naturalistic treatment of the subject of a pandemic occurs when the protagonist realizes the powerlessness of humans.

Several stories contain elements of modernism, which are evidenced in non-linear timelines and the rejection of plot. “The Husband Stitch” is unique in its modernist point of view shifts. The narrator moves from the first-person point of view to the second person to directly address the reader. The point of view shifts are jarring but allow readers to interact with the story on a deeper level.

Styles differ between the stories. One story is told through an inventory of the narrator’s lovers, another reimagines Law and Order: SVU, and others are written in a more traditional style of the short story. The stories are humorous at times and expose disturbing realities at others. A blend of styles and tones adds a level of unpredictability to the collection that keeps readers interested in what comes next.

These stories add to the literary canon of American short fiction by introducing blends of genres that are unlike other stories. The frank portrayal of female desires and struggles reflect current feminist attitudes. As the current feminist movement gains traction, stories of this type can be expected to become more prevalent.

This collection reveals the prevalence of gender inequality and the sexual objectification of women in American culture. Although progress has been made, more change is necessary as women are still valued for the sexual pleasure they provide men. This is especially prevalent in “The Husband Stitch” and “Inventory.”

While healthier relationships are sometimes portrayed between women, they are not represented as perfect. Rather, a realistic view of relationships highlights the absurdity of how humans sometimes treat the ones they love. By writing frankly about various types of sexual relationships, Machado shows that multiple ways of life and love are becoming more acceptable in the United States.

This collection reflects American identity because Machado blends genres and styles just as Americans consist of a blend of cultures and ideologies. These stories are as unique as the individuals that make up the nation, and the characters in the stories reflect this mixture of personalities and attitudes. The individual character and mindset of Americans comes through in the individuality of the characters.

Carmen Maria Machado is an American author who has won multiple awards for her writing. Her works have appeared in many journals and magazines, and she has published two books. Machado's writing is creative, fresh, and bold. Although young, Machado has already carved a name for herself in contemporary literature, especially in the LGBTQ+ community.

How is women's sexuality addressed in American literature? If patterns emerge over time, how do these trends reflect society's attitudes towards women's sexuality?

Homesick for Another World by Ottessa Moshfegh

Moshfegh, Ottessa. *Homesick for Another World*. Penguin USA, 2017. ISBN 9780399562907.

This is Moshfegh's first collection of fourteen short stories and was named the 2015 book of the year by *The Washington Post* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The horror stories within the collection are not only haunting, but also funny, with characters who are defined by and loved for their flaws. Her main characters represent aspects of the human condition and communicate the horrors that accompany that condition. Through the terrifying and grotesque realist collection, Moshfegh ultimately communicates that hope and beauty can lie in the darkest of places.

Moshfegh's style uses bold, with almost abrasive verbs communicating the blunt nature of her characters and the gruesomeness of everyday life. This style effectively communicates a sense of distaste and anger within each of her stories, and creates tension that subtly builds to each story's chilling ending.

These stories exhibit conventions of the horror genre and display a tendency towards a Realist/Modernistic hybrid through an investigation of character psychology, a rejection of the ideal hero, and a preoccupation with the "inner-self" and consciousness of the main characters. The characters, or "heroes," within these stories inhabit real-world situations, yet they find themselves dissatisfied with their lives and their identities, which is most often the cause of the open - and often chilling - ending.

This collection of short stories draws attention to the materialistic emptiness of American culture. In one of the stories, there is a doctor who has a beautiful life – something many people would dream of – yet he is still dissatisfied and finds himself longing for something more. This reflects the feeling of emptiness and eternal longing that comes with living in a capitalistic and materialistic society.

These stories are unique in that the main characters are often not portrayed as being likeable, but rather, their flaws, quirks, and less attractive qualities are their most notable traits. Unlike most other literature, Moshfegh does little to redeem her characters, and instead allows their own poor decisions, along with their blunt and to-the-point attitudes, to paint a realistic picture of the character. These characters are appealing to modern readers, as they find themselves living normal lives yet longing for something more.

The focus on the main characters' dissatisfaction with life strays from the notion of an ideal hero and presents a Modernist hero - a flawed hero. This adds to the American literary canon through a contemporization of the American horror story by indicating that true horror lies in the mundane nature of every day life.

Ottessa Moshfegh is a fiction writer from New England. Her first book, *McGlue*, a novella, won the Fence Modern Prize in Prose and the Believer Book Award. She is also the author of the short story collection *Homesick for Another World*. Her stories have been published in *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *Granta*, and have earned her a Pushcart Prize, an O. Henry Award, the Plimpton Discovery Prize, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. *Eileen*, her first novel, was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Man Booker Prize, and won the PEN/Hemingway Award for debut fiction; *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, her second novel, was a *New York Times* bestseller (Moshfegh).

Moshfegh's characters experience an alienation from society which leads to the chilling events within the stories. How does the horror genre represent alienation as a form of horror?

House of Stars by Joy Baglio

Baglio, Joy. "House of Stars." Gulf Coast. April, 2020.

The story is centered around a woman whose husband has left and she is having trouble imagining how she will go on without him. She is cooking an egg and begins to notice galaxies forming in her food. She expresses the emptiness of space and equates that image to her feelings. The galaxies begin to spread and eventually engulf her and the life she built with her husband.

"House of stars" is very unique in that it uses magical realism to describe the emotion in a sensory way. The author equates a galaxy to the main character's emotions by first vividly describing the physical appearance of the galaxies and then describing the motion of the galaxies as the story progresses. The style is very sparse and is still able to pack a lot of

imagery in the language. The story spans only four pages but it does examine deep emotions through the galaxy metaphor throughout the narrative.

The story exhibits modernist traits through its use of internal conflict and the lack of plot resolution. The story has no set plot but rather spends the whole story exploring emotion. This is also evident in the story's reliance on symbolism to further the story. The innovation lies in the inclusion of the galaxy that our main character is seeing is the only thing that gives the story depth and literary value. It also shows characteristics of realism because of the melancholy topic and the author's decision to not romanticize the main character's relationship with her partner.

The author's use of magical realism allows the reader to blur the line between genres and see how imagery furthers our understanding of a character's emotional state. She also questions the idea of the importance of length in short fiction. There is a lot of information and value within the narrative that is unspoken and allows the reader to understand mental illness and divorce. This improves on the canon surrounding the love story because it reinforces that love stories do not always end positively. It also shows that love stories can be implied rather than being the center of the story. The story also proves that no major event has to take place in order to have a meaningful piece of literature. The author's choice to not give our character's names or character traits is an innovation in itself because her emotion is the only thing that allows the reader to connect and empathize with her.

The story demonstrates the complexities of American relationships and the need for emotional connection, which is explicitly stated by the main character when she says, "She wants to say, "You forgot a lot more than your things. You forgot how to be kind, how to listen, how to be patient; you forgot how to have fun, how to compromise; so many things that you forgot—why don't you come for those things?" (Baglio, 3.) It also demonstrates America's struggle with mental illness and the lack of attention that it is often given because of the lack of attention it receives.

Joy Baglio is a speculative fiction writer with a significant catalog of work. She received a master's degree from The New School and has been the recipient of dozens of grants and awards such as the Gulliver Travel Research Grant from the Speculative Literature Foundation. She has been published in many literary magazines including *American Short Fiction*, *Gulf Coast*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*. She currently teaches writing at Grub Street in Boston. Some of her recent work includes "Belly of the Beast" and "We Are Trying to Understand You".

What traits of magical realism are present within the story and what value does it add to the story? Is magical realism often utilized in order to express emotion? Was magical realism primarily meant to be a tool used in literature? The narrative being examined here uses a lot of sensory languages, is that common in magical realism narratives?

How Long 'Til Black Future Month? Stories by N.K. Jemisin

Jemisin, N. K. *How Long 'til Black Future Month?: Stories*. Orbit, 2018.

Kleeman's "Intimations" is her second book and consists of twelve stories dealing with mortality from its conception to life after death. The dreamlike and surreal stories focus on the three stages of existence: birth, life, and death.

Sensory descriptions are used heavily in these stories. The physical appearances of the characters in these stories (both human and otherwise) are often provided. The surroundings, cities, and lands they inhabit are also described in great detail. While a few of Jemisin's stories have a relaxed, almost meandering tone, most of them tend to build in tenseness to the ending action or reveal.

The works in this collection tend to lean toward more modernistic approaches to story telling while managing to avoid being completely incomprehensible. Take *The Evaluators* for example - the story is told through several transcripts of alien interactions and posts by several members of the scientific community. While it jumps between the past and the present, each section comes together in the end to form a clear picture of what happened.

While not being completely either modernistic or realistic in her writing, N. K. Jemisin appears to favor a mix of the two instead. This blended style is present in most of her stories. Take the "Red Dirt Witch" story for example - every character in it speaks with very strong local coloration, the White Woman who comes for Em's family also adopting a very southern genteel manner when she speaks with them. Instead of favoring local color at the expense of theme, however, Jemisin conveys both very strongly in her mystical take on race relations and hope in the future with her story. This specific story also innovates on old folk warding tales. Instead of facing the White Woman with the traditional rowan, thorn, and ash, Em has adapted her protections to fit with the land they live in by changing them to rosemary, sage, and sycamore.

The American spirit of preservation in the face of difficulties is on wide show here. Though they face incredible odds and sometimes even supernatural enemies, the American characters in this collection fight tooth and nail for their safety and the safeties of their loved ones, often adapting in unexpected ways (like fighting a supernatural enemy with the

very roads and building of a city, as described in "The City Born Great") to find victories over the hostile forces, people, and obstacles they face.

. K. Jemisin's characters are very racially and religiously diverse, providing far from the typical white male or female POVs for their stories. Who they are often guides their actions and beliefs but Jemisin avoids having these things be their sole defining character trait or motivation. While they're a diverse cast of characters they're also characters, not just walking representations of the communities they come from. Take "The Brides of Heaven" for example - while Dihya strictly follows the tenets of Islam, the other women have adapted their beliefs to fit with their surroundings.

We live in a time where the world isn't black and white and our country is seeing many shades of gray. Jemisin's focus on those gray areas of action and intention reflects our own complicated humanity.

N. K. Jemisin was born in Iowa City, although she now lives in Brooklyn, New York. She studied counseling and got her Master of Education at the University of Maryland - she then worked as a counseling psychologist and educator before devoting herself full time to her writings. Her website (which includes descriptions of and links to her books) is at: <http://nkjemisin.com/>

Do you see other explorations of interactions between humanity and others in works like this? While these stories had a mix of positive and negative conclusions to these interactions, do you see that balanced representation continued on in other stories or do they skew more positive or negative?

Insistence of Vision by David Brin

Brin, David. INSISTENCE OF VISION: a Short Story Collection. Natl Book Network, 2016.

ISBN: 978-1-61188-220-9

This collection is a chaotic gathering of text which all correlate to emphasizing issues designed to encourage the reader to think of the "what if" aspect surrounding the circumstances presented. The stories vary from first-person to third, from stories which resemble believable situations to the way we see our lives now to stories of humans gaining the ability to fly. While the conditions relayed seem fantastic, readers still come away with the appreciation for the human potential and the potential social issues of our future.

David Brin uses vivid detail to create short stories that at times can be scary, exciting, inspiring, or all three at once. He adds historical figures, such as Galileo, to create a stronger sense of believability and relatability between readers in today's world with the futuristic concepts imagined by Brin.

This book follows the science fiction convention of using technology that doesn't currently exist, but which may be entirely possible as our technology of science advances. There are also elements of using humor and psychology used to build up elements appropriate to each story.

This collection enhances the American short story canon by seeming to address each tale in a chronological fashion, using short stories to hint at a bigger story that encompasses all. Brin's *Insistence of Vision* communicates American culture to its readers by hitting on our increasing desire for better technology and our seeming vainness in the way we look at the way we fit in the world around us.

David Brin is one of the science fiction authors that has an actual background in science. He has a Ph.D. in Physics, a Master's degree in optics, and another degree in astrophysics. Brin is also one of the world's leading authorities on transparency, personal privacy, and cyber security. As such, he is used to seeing the technology advances as they occur and seeing the potential growth on the horizon. Brin gives talks to various businesses around the world and has done consultant work for NASA and the National Security Agency. He uses these communication skills in his writing to capture the attention of his readers quickly and then to keep the attention over the course of his stories. Currently Brin is doing interviews and addressing how election candidates, presidential campaigns, and normal everyday citizens are affected by living in a society where cameras are everywhere from street corners to cell phones and social media availability.

A research question that can be addressed by reading this collection would be to see how far the imagination can take current technology and use linear logic to wonder how far it can go. This entire book ensures the reader comes away wondering whether we are pushing the limit too far, too fast, and to be aware of the dangers that could exist if we continue to do so.

Intimidations: Stories by Alexandra Kleeman

Kleeman, Alexandra. *Intimations: Stories*. New York. HarperCollins Publishing. 2016.

Kleeman's "Intimations" is her second book and consists of twelve stories dealing with mortality from its conception to life after death. The dreamlike and surreal stories focus on the three stages of existence: birth, life, and death.

Alexandra Kleeman's stories have a sardonic tone as she vividly describes situations ranging from a man stabbing a woman with the contents of a linen closet to giant lobsters greedily gorging on people hanging out on a beach. Several of the stories include a character named Karen; however, it isn't obvious whether the characters are the same person. Kleeman's style swings from realistic (a woman going out for pizza and a beer with a guy from work) to hauntingly peculiar (a woman showing up to dinner with her parents and fifty plus men show up and introduce themselves as her boyfriend). Each tale is easy enough to read with accessible diction and plots that have us anticipating what will happen next.

Much of the collection draws from the Love Story category with a gothic twist and includes being pursued, love triangles, and sexual conflicts; however, there are no "happy endings" with the woman either being killed or simply alone. In "I May Not Be the One You Want, But I Am the One for You", there are two incidents where rape is anticipated, and in "Fairy Tale", the woman is locked in a closet after her fiancé attempts to stab her in the chest.

These stories are haunting and surprising; Kleeman's presentation of family dynamics, romance, and conflict are difficult to decipher and leave us considering what is real and what is not. They make us consider the absurdities of the world around us and what dimensions may exist beyond

This collection portrays our culture's obsession with sex and violence in original ways and through unique relationships.

Alexandra Kleeman is a young author (born in 1986) and an Assistant Professor at the New School in New York and her fiction has been published in The New Yorker, The Paris Review, and The Guardian among others.

Why are people attracted to gothic themes? Why do we entertain the possibility to know when and how we will die?

Killers by Susan Steinberg

Steinberg, Susan. "Killers." Machine. Graywolf Press, 20 Aug, 2019.

This short story is about how a young girl feels during the summer, but in a more thriller way. Rather than perceiving the summer as fun and adventurous, there's a more predator

vibe surrounding these guys the girl and other girls are following. The girl is interested in the boys because they offer popularity, a boat for the summer, and attention. She may feel fear when around the boys, but she ignores it as she's having fun. It's a rebellious stage for her as her parents get mad, but it's almost like she doesn't hear them. She's drowning in her own thoughts and her parents can't see that.

I would classify this short story as a psychological thriller. The narrator almost seems to want the reader to believe there's a price for fun when it comes to being a young adolescent. This story is relatable to younger and older generations I believe as there are many people who take advantage of others. The girls described in this story are doing what they think they have to do. Although these boys may not actually be killers, could their actions taken upon these girls lead one to death?

Throughout this short story, there is never a period. Commas and semicolons are the only punctuation used. I think this adds to the story because it shows how this story is a continuous thought that only needs pauses. There is no end to this story even at the last sentence. There is little capitalization, but she does use capitalization when it's the girl's thought screaming her mind and saying something her father or mother may have said. The I's are also capitalized in the story.

The story is told in the first-person, but the narrator never reveals her name. She includes "we" a lot when narrating because she's talking not just about herself, but the other girls around her.

The lowercase adds a sense of honesty and being unedited like it's actually written by an American teenage girl or teenage girl in general. The reader feels as if they're reading the girl's thoughts as she explains her summer. She drinks and has fun with the boys and girls, but is she really having fun.

In today's society, many young people – including myself – feel that they have to act or look a certain way in order to fit in. These girls don't actually want to hang out with the boys, but it makes them look cooler and popular. The boys even force themselves upon the girls and if the girls don't allow it, they're basically kicked out. This is the normalization of rape culture in society. Girls are so use to being harassed and although they say no at first, the guys either guilt or threaten to leave them making the girls choose.

Susan Steinberg is the author of *Machine*, *Spectacle*, *Hydroplane*, and *The End of Free Love*. She is a professor at the University of San Francisco. She earned a BFA in Painting from the Maryland Institute College of Art and an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She has been awarded the United States Artists Ziporyn Fellow, Pushcart Prize, and National Magazine Award.

When reading this short story, I would suggest paying attention to how Steinberg uses lowercase and never ends a sentence with periods. How does Steinberg's writing style make the story more honest and feel like it's written from a teenage girl?

Look How Happy I'm Making You by Polly Rosenwaike

Each of the twelve diverse stories in this collection covers a different aspect of motherhood. Difficult subjects such as infertility, abortion, and loss are addressed with equal care and candor. Published in 2019, this is Polly Rosenwaike's debut collection.

The writing is very straightforward and accessible, accentuating the author's willingness to tackle complex issues head on. Internal dialogue plays an important role in helping us understand the main characters. While figurative language is used throughout, it is done with restraint, keeping the writing grounded.

The writing style in this collection is conventional overall. I would argue that this is one of the reasons it is an important book on the subjects it addresses. For so long topics surrounding motherhood were either written about in a flat way, or were so sensationalized as to no longer reflect the actual experience - becoming a piece of art, inspired by motherhood. When it comes to such emotional topics as abortion and miscarriage, it is frankness not dramatization that stands out.

This collection is representative of a notable evolution in American society. Women are more frequently delaying having children or deciding against it all together. The options for how and when to have a family are being discussed more openly which should be reflected in American literature from this time period. In this collection Polly Rosenwaike tackles a broad range of experiences in a down to earth way, representative of how these experiences are actually felt by those living them.

Pregnancy and motherhood have been discussed in literature throughout history but we've recently entered an era where the dialogue is changing. Flowery prose about all the wonders of motherhood is no longer what women relate to. Women are having new conversations about these intimate topics, addressing aspects that are alternately skipped over or sensationalized. Her openness and frank writing style speak to the new American woman.

Polly Rosenwaike is a writer, teacher, and editor. She has been published in the San Francisco Chronicle, Glimmer Train, and written reviews in the New York Times Book Review and others. Look How Happy I'm Making You is her debut short story collection, published in 2019.

Motherhood is a subject that has been written about at length. How is this subject being addressed differently now than it was in the past?

Love Letter by George Saunders

Saunders, George. "Love Letter." *New Yorker*, vol. 96, no. 7, Apr. 2020, pp. 54-57.

"Love Letter" is an epistolary short story from a grandfather to his grandson. The email is a response to a letter sent from the grandson. The grandfather gives his grandson advice and reflects on how his lack of prior political action may have contributed to the current political turmoil.

Saunders' writing mimics an email written in a conversational tone. The sentences are short and concise, and the topic changes abruptly as the narrator's mind jumps from one idea to the next.

"Love Letter" is an example of postmodern writing because it exposes the absurdity of the government's actions without being able to provide solutions to the problems. The political situation has made the narrator wary of the government he once trusted wholeheartedly. This rejection of the institution which once unified U.S. citizens reflects the disillusionment early postmodern writers felt. However, the circumstances are new and separate earlier postmodern writing from Saunders' story.

Saunders writes of a situation in the near future that is eerily similar to the contemporary political situation. In doing so, he adds to the literary canon of American short fiction by moving away from a plot-based story to a form that attempts to warn Americans of a dystopian future.

"Love Letter" ponders the duties and rights of American citizens. After the extreme corruption of the government, the narrator reflects on his role and says people belonging to his political party were not willing to "drop everything in the defense of a system that was...like oxygen: used constantly, never noted" (56). The narrator adds people belonging to the other party were "willing to tear it all down because they had been so thoroughly nourished by the vacuous plenty in which we all lived" (56). Everyone, regardless of political beliefs, took their security for granted and failed to maintain a just government. This illuminates Saunders' warning that Americans must be aware of and resist injustices before the problems grow too grand. This also shows that Americans' identities are built around the concept of freedom and a responsible government, and when the government fails to uphold their side of the bargain, Americans must act to restore order.

George Saunders is an American author who teaches for the Syracuse MFA writing program. He has written a variety of works, including novels, short stories, and screenplays. Saunders has lived an interesting life, and his works appear in several anthologies and magazines. He is also well known for his novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* and for the short story collection *Tenth of December*.

What techniques do authors employ to unite readers politically? How does Saunders use these techniques in "Love Letter?"

Make Something Up: Stories You Can't Unread by Chuck Palahniuk

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Make Something Up: Stories You Can't Unread*. United States, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015.

If you are actually wanting to read this book I just wanted to give a little warning just in case someone is uncomfortable with some certain subjects! Content warning: Self-harm, drug use, sexual content, abortion, suicide

This debut novel published in 2015 gives us twenty-one short stories and one novella. *Make Something Up* is a compilation that disturbs and delights in equal measure. Palahniuk often creates characters that have been marginalized in one way or another by society, then the characters react with self-destructive behaviors. Embellishing in the fact 'truth is stranger than fiction', Palahniuk has accomplished a strong cult following by infusing the personal experience with enjoyable exploits. In his short story "Expedition" we see the return of his infamous character from *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden. Just about every piece in this collection is noteworthy in some way.

Stories in this book such as 'How Monkey Got Married, Bought a House, and Found Happiness in Orlando,' 'Why Coyote Never Had Money for Parking,' and 'Why Aardvark Never Landed On the Moon' were an interesting and a twist on the use of fable storytelling, with the gritty sort of charm about the anthropomorphic characters.

These stories are all very character-based and follow closely to those that feel as if they have been marginalized in one way or another by society, then reacts with self-destructive behavior. Each character has a distinct and unmistakable voice. Even in the book's lesser stories, the twisted personalities, and detailed prose make up for where it lacks in certain areas. Some stories are told from a first-person perspective where we the readers get to experience a whirlwind of emotions firsthand, and other stories are told from a third-

person perspective where the reader is able to witness from afar the absurdity the characters go through.

Filled with taboo subjects and stories about the unexpected side effects of soul-sucking 9-5 jobs and a turn of inexplicable acts of depravity, this book is filled with the grotesque things in everyday life that people are too afraid to acknowledge. There is a destruction of oneself and society that echoes through each other as well as the struggle of adults trying to recapture their youth as a way of rejecting society.

Transgressive fiction is a term used to describe a genre of writing in which characters intentionally attempt to undo cultural norms that they personally find unsatisfying and what to break away from their conventional lifestyle. The transgressive genre has a reputation for being shocking and/or repulsive and often gets labeled as smut due to its tendency to glorify violence and sex.

Some popular transgressive literature includes:

- Fight Club by Chuck Palahniuk
- A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess
- American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis
- Trainspotting by Irvin Welsh

Labeled as "literature's favorite transgressive author" Palahniuk has written twenty (and counting) novels, written graphic novels, and even has a few coloring books. He is most known for his 1996 novel, Fight Club, which later became a cult classic movie that was released in 1999. Palahniuk is the king of grotesque, disturbing stories that sometimes can be hard to read with the graphic details, but beneath the blood and guts are thought-provoking messages about individuality and society as a whole.

Does transgressive fiction make accurate points about societal norms by looking at it through an absurd lense? Or is transgressive fiction absurd and graphic just for shock value? Does transgressive literature need to be grotesque to make a point or gain attention?

Mirrored by Jennifer Hudak

Hudak, Jennifer. "Mirrored." Edited by Suzanne W Vincent, Flash Fiction Online, May 2020.

Years ago, a mother saved her daughter from being taken by changelings. The being meant to replace her now watches through the girl's mirror as their relationship deteriorates.

“Mirrored” is written with a heavy focus on the senses. The changeling describes the locations and items she can see with great detail. The two main locations in the story - the forest the changeling lives in and the girl’s own room, are visually highlighted through her descriptions. Strong emotions are also another focus for the story, especially the feelings the changeling harbors for the mother and towards the daughter. Finally, the writing becomes increasingly tense as the relationship between the mother and her daughter worsens, a contrast to the rising hope the changeling has.

“Mirrored” draws from two specific love story conventions - gaining knowledge about a relationship and the crossing of distances between two people. Hudak innovates on these by reversing the usual people the relationship would be happening between. Instead of the mother and daughter growing closer and more loving, the daughter continually pushes her mother away. While she can’t physically touch the other side, the changeling can see, hear, and mimic what the girl does. These experiences let the changeling use their souring relationship to her advantage. She is able to then reach out to the mother and remind her of her existence to strengthen their own connection.

America’s materialistic nature is shown through both the daughter’s actions and feelings along with the changeling’s. Where the daughter once treasured the things she had, time and age have made her careless with them. They’ve become old news; junk to her as she moves on to new things. Her room becomes cluttered with all her possessions and the unicorn she used to care about has been broken. Meanwhile, the changeling who has had only the forest, twigs, and dirt for all of her life shows continued longing for and appreciation of the objects the daughter doesn't care for. This highlights the differences between the haves and have-nots in our land where people come from varying backgrounds of wealth and poverty.

This story has the unique message that sometimes the love a mother feels for her own child sometimes can’t conquer all. While other love stories portray this emotion between mother and daughter as a bond able to withstand the test of time and any negative actions, “Mirrored” joins a subgroup of this idea that says the opposite. That sometimes, when pushed far enough and hard enough, even a mother’s love can fail.

Jennifer Hudak was born in Boston but now lives in Upstate New York with her family. She specializes in speculative fiction and has expanded to try her hand at several personal essays. Her stories have been published in the anthology *Endless Apocalypse* and in other venues like *Daily Science Fiction* and *PodCastle*.

What do you think could be said about the mother’s relationships with both her daughter and the changeling, especially since it’s implied that she chooses the changeling in the

end? Would you consider this an act of love from her towards the replacement, or simply a moment of weakness from her strained relationship with her daughter?

Natural Light by Kathleen Alcott

Alcott, Kathleen. "Natural Light.", *The Best American Short Stories of 2019*. Edited by Anthony Doerr, New York, Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019, pp. 19-35.

In Kathleen Alcott's "Natural Light", a woman is visiting a museum when she finds an explicit photograph of her mom. Her mother had passed away years ago, and now the narrator must deal with how to process this new outlook on her mother's life. The woman must navigate this new information about her life that she had never been exposed to.

The story is written in a descriptive narrative style with elevated diction. The story is in first person, and does not switch perspectives. There are very important issues being focused on: suicide, family dynamics, and a new outlook on relationships; however, the story does not shock the reader or try to surprise them with a twist at the end. The first line of the story describes this photograph of the narrator's mom. There is no surprise, the reader is already informed. The way that the story addresses the narrator's suicidal thoughts and issues in the father-daughter relationship are only brought up in fragments, and not entirely discussed. The elevated diction plays a role in making these issues blend into the story. The issues are discussed, but the reader has to slow down and fully process what the narrator is saying. At first glance, the topics are diluted. It is only upon a closer examination that the reader can pinpoint all of the little details.

Something "Natural Light" does is play off of the "realistic" genre. The story focuses on tough situations that readers can relate to, but the story has a unique style so that the issues are portrayed in the background. The real life events surrounding family dynamics and suicidal thoughts are hardships that many go through. When she lost her mother, there was the initial "warm and soft" support from her husband; however she began to feel unable to trust him because he would seek "any dip in" her feelings as proof that "the roots of the (suicidal) thoughts had taken" root in the narrator (Alcott, 23). For Alcott to give us a character who is smart and accomplished because of her education and job, yet still struggles, is what realism is about. There is a strange family dynamic with her father where they text "hope you're well" (Alcott, 19), and noting else. They have not spoken in a year. The innovation of her failed marriage because of trust issues and the weak relationship with her father all help the story build off of realism.

This story helps add to the canon of American Short Fiction because of the under-discussed topics that need to be more vocal in society. The use of the realism genre is to

help the readers see the true impact that these issues have to the narrator. The cannon of American Short Fiction is transitioning towards being more active with social issues. Something interesting about this story is that it is personal. Nothing globally or even locally is directly impacting the narration in this story. The women are the focus of the story and how these events impact her individual life rather than a large event impacting a lot of different people. These small events impact a lot of people separately, but all the characters are separate and have their own issues that they are dealing with.

The hardships that the narrator faces, as well as focusing on the men in her life, provide an interesting take on “The American Dream” because of the modern issues. She is no longer married, does not have a family, and struggles with her mental health. The majority of readers can relate to this story because they can see themselves in her shoes. Finding out a family secret, getting a divorce, going through loss, and having a struggling family dynamic are happening everyday, and the story highlights these for the reader to digest. These topics should be spoken about because those issues are impacting everyone.

Kathleen Alcott is an American novelist, short story writer, and essayist from Northern California. She taught Creative Writing and Literature at Columbia University and Bennington College. She is published in The New Yorker, Times Magazine, The Guardian, The Los Angeles Review of Books, and The Bennington Review. She has three novels: America was Hard to Find, Infinite Home, and The Dangers of Proximal Alphabets.

What traits of magical realism are present within the story and what value does it add to the story? Is magical realism often utilized in order to express emotion? Was magical realism primarily meant to be a tool used in literature? The narrative being examined here uses a lot of sensory languages, is that common in magical realism narratives?

Sabrina & Corina by Kali Fajardo-Anstine

Fajardo-Anstine, Kali. Sabrina & Corina Stories. New York, One World, 2019.

ISBN: 9780525511304

Sabrina & Corina is written by a new talent in her debut collection of short stories originally published in 2019 and recently issued in paperback. Eleven stories centered around emotionally-scarred Indigenous females, descendants of Hispanics and Native American cultures. All stories either originate or are set in Denver and honestly expose its current existence in the tragedy of homelessness and the gentrification of the historical city. The author sprinkles in repeated venues like local neighborhoods such as Northland or Galapago street.

The stories' protagonists are females of a mixed descent of Native American and Hispanic. Fajardo-Anstine's female characters all survive broken families. In the very first story, "Sugar Babies," the mother walked out one morning while her daughter, Sierra, ate breakfast. Like Sierra, each story contains a devastating absence or loss. However, the protagonists are strong in spite of their weaknesses and do exhibit hope. The stories relate the experiences of these characters in a realistic and linear style. All of the author's characters are believable and flawed. The stories bring to light cultural challenges and faults as well as the effects of racism on Native American and Hispanic characters.

There is evidence of different movements and conventions found in *Sabrina & Corina*. All of the stories are examples of Realism. They contain the commonalities of real life. Most of the characters could easily be represented in society. However, they are also shaped by their surroundings in time and place. Fajardo-Anstine especially uses place to make the statement that both Hispanic and Indigenous peoples have lived on the land in and around Denver long before European Americans showed up. Not only are the times (as in age) of the characters important but also the times of the city. Making a statement about gentrification is another social critique offered by the author.

There are no wealthy characters or even characters living comfortably. In fact, everything is uncomfortable. All of the major themes are uncomfortable characters in uncomfortable situations. The author knows the characters well enough to criticize their experiences. In doing so, she is socially commenting on the edges of a Denver society that is often overlooked. All of these things are conventions of Realism.

Fajardo-Anstine is a woman proud enough of her mixed heritage to write them on the page for all to see. Upon first look, her characters' hearts are exposed, open and raw. Sandra Cisneros recommends the collection and declares "these working class women haven't seen themselves in American lit before" (book jacket review). Themes of broken families and violence are more true than we care to admit.

This collection of short fiction sets the reader down in the middle of events to experience them along side the character. While, there are other stories about skin color and racism or bias, these stories are specific to the time and place of Denver. A golden city is juxtaposed against downtrodden characters who are truly American but rarely seen as American. A name such as "Morales," a skin color, and an assumption because someone lives in a specific neighborhood all contribute to the anger that these characters feel when prejudice hits them between the eyes. An undercurrent of racism adds tension to these "only in America" stories. Only in America will a troubled teen be jailed for a broken family and a drinking problem. Only in America will a young boy be passed along by teachers who don't know he has a reading problem. Only in America will racism thrive while those with

less fortunate skin color try to beat the system. Fajardo-Anstine shows us facets of American culture yet to be seen.

Kali Fajardo-Anstine was born and raised in Denver, Colorado and her roots spread from the Southwest before the Gold Rush. She earned her MFA from the University of Wyoming fully funded. Sabrina & Corina is her first book (multiple-award winning) and she is working on a new historical fiction novel for her publisher.

Several of the author's stories involve broken families and, specifically, an absent mother. Do children of working-class mothers suffer more mother loss or absence than higher socio-economic stratifications? If so, what other literature proves this claim? Finally, in our society, is this due to simple economics or are there other determining factors? What are they?

Suicide, Watch by Nafissa Thompson-Spires

Our character, Jilly is a young woman grappling with social media obsession and narcissism. She struggles with mental illness but nothing that garners the attention she craves, driving her to consider if suicide might be the answer.

Based on the serious subject matter discussed in this story one might expect it to be told in a serious or tense tone. Instead it's told simply, allowing the reader to be in Jilly's mind and experience her uncertainty and discontent but notably - not despair. Until the very end it reads as nothing more than a straightforward introduction to Jilly's internal struggles.

Convention and Innovation

The focus on interior action and an open ending make this story an example of Modernist literature. While time does move in a linear fashion, it doesn't rely heavily on plot for organization.

Canon

From its beginning the revolution of the modernist movement was driven by women and minorities. This story fits into a new, 21st century wave of modernism.

Analysis as an American Cultural Artifact

It is as a cultural artifact that this story seems particularly important. Mental illness and social media use are two crucial topics being discussed in our society. The mental health of black women is especially necessary to bring into the conversation since it has historically been ignored.

Raised in Southern California, Nafissa Thompson-Spires earned her PhD in English from Vanderbilt University. Her work has been published in *The White Review*, *Lunch ticket*, and other publications. Her debut short story collection, *Heads Of The Colored People*, was released in April 2018.

There seems to be a lot of subtle symbolism in this story. Might the author have created the character of Jilly as a metaphor or commentary on something else?

Sweetness by Toni Morrison

Morrison, Toni. "Sweetness", *The New Yorker*, 2015.

The three characters in the story are the ex-husband Louis, the mother known as "sweetness", and their daughter Lula Ann. Sweetness is embarrassed by the color of her daughter's skin which is significantly darker than hers. When Sweetness grows older, her relationship with her daughter is strained by how she treated her when she was a child

The short story is written in a way that is tense, emotional, and psychological. The readers are sent spiraling into a series of emotions involving sweetness and her daughter. At first thought, the reader is able to feel sympathy for Lula Ann and her mothers' colorism against her own race. Towards the end of the story, it's evident that Sweetness is clearly ignorant but she does not neglect the way that she treated her daughter. Sweetness states that "[she] wasn't a bad mother, you have to know that, but [she] may have done some hurtful things to [her] only child because [she] had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges." Sweetness pities herself because her daughter does not visit. She does not feel remorse for the pain that she caused her daughter.

Moments of tension:

"Her birth skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes. I know I went crazy for a minute, because—just for a few seconds—I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color."

"I didn't take her outside much, anyway, because, when I pushed her in the baby carriage, people would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning. That hurt. I could have been the babysitter if our skin colors were reversed."

Moments of emotional turmoil and psychological strain:

"It was safer. Her being that black and having what I think are too thick lips and calling me "Mama" would've confused people. Besides, she has funny-colored eyes, crow black with a blue tint—something witchy about them, too."

"She didn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and try to trick her."

Local color and Realism

The mother says certain words as if she were raised in the South. A lot of the colorism that is defined in this story depicts the issues that are deeply rooted in American society. The work is an example of Realism. This story depicts what can occur in an everyday situation where people can relate to or have similar experiences such as this in real life. More so, Realism tends to look at psychological motivators for characters. Sweetness struggles with many psychological issues associated with her upbringing and the role of society in her life.

The way that Sweetness treats her daughter stems from having a deeply-rooted form of colorism. Sweetness grew accustomed to being around white people and despite being black, judged her own daughter for simply having darker skin than her. She believes her reasoning is strong and that she's protecting her daughter from the outside world. However, she ultimately pushes her daughter away with her irrational and racist actions.

American culture is racially biased and uneducated. People are far too worried about what society thinks.

- "It was hard enough just being a colored woman—even a high-yellow one—trying to rent in a decent part of the city. Back in the nineties, when Lula Ann was born, the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it."
- "Each time she came to see me, I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes."
- "We argued and argued till I told him her blackness had to be from his own family—not mine."

Morrison's short story analyzes the role of racism that American writers fight so hard to disassemble. The themes in her story dealing with family strain, colorism, and the pressures of society have all been seen before. However, as issues about race continue to increase in American literature, Morrison's "Sweetness" will remain a staple of American writing when pertaining to social issues.

Chloe Anthony Wofford, best known as Toni Morrison, was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. She attended Howard University and experienced segregation. She learned about racial hierarchy and its impact on society. After she graduated with a Bachelors in English, Morrison attended Cornell University and received a Master of Arts in English. She taught at Texas Southern University and Howard University. After teaching for seven years, Morrison moved to New York and became an editor for Random House Publishing. Morrison did not publish her first novel until she was 39 years old. In 1987, Morrison published *Beloved*, a novel that won Bestseller 25 weeks in a row. She was the first-ever black female to win a Nobel Prize in Literature. She was also honored with the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Morrison continues to inspire readers with her novels, plays, and stories focusing on African American issues. She passed away in June 2019 of pneumonia.

How will Morrison's story leave a lasting impact on American literature when it comes to social issues?

To The Horizon by Brian Dolan

Dolan, Brian. "To The Horizon." *The Bangalore Review*, April 2020.

"To The Horizon" is the story of young man living with his family on a rundown farm in an unforgiving landscape that has figuratively sapped the life out of everyone who lives there. The narrator and his younger brother William actively avoid his alcoholic father for the most part, that is until William is ran over by his father while he is driving to town for more alcohol. It is this event that finally, seemingly, pushes the narrator to leave his family for good.

The overall style is pretty basic. It is told from a 1st person point of view in the present tense and finds its strength in the description of the landscape and the feelings it imposes on the narrator and his brother.

The story is based in realism, presenting an unforgiving setting and situation for the narrator, who is seemingly trapped by fate having been born into a bad situation. The trope of the drunken dad who is sometimes physically abusive and all the time emotionally abusive is used to good effect. It is not an original idea of course, but works for the situation and is a very real convention of realism (showing the world as it is for the narrator).

While I would not say this story is innovative in any particular way, it does a good job of creating an atmosphere of the setting. It is simple, tells a simple story, and makes a point

to focus on the result and possibilities for the narrator after the death of his brother. The tone of the story is serious and introspective, which gives the story more weight despite a few familiar plot points.

As a cultural artifact, the story is a good example of American culture in many parts of our country. The setting is unnamed, but could be a thousand places in America. Farm land in many states could be envisioned by the reader. The narrator could be one of thousands of young men who have grown up in a hopeless life with an abusive father. For me, the setting and the situation make this a very American story. The narrator could be many of us. He for so long has thought life is terrible and meaningless, but his brother would succeed and make it out. When tragedy strikes, the narrator is the one to leave.

Brian Dolan is a lawyer who lives in Portland, Maine, although he is originally from Westchester County, New York. He studies the craft of writing online through the New York-based Writers' Studio, and he writes short fiction and flash fiction during his spare time in the evening and over the weekend. His writing is previously unpublished.

You Know You Want This by Kristen Roupenian

Roupenian, Kristen. *You Know You Want This*. Gallery Publishing Group, Jan 15, 2019.

There are thirteen short stories contained in this collection. Roupenian's writing style captures a way of making readers uncomfortable as well as being unable to stop reading. There's a dark side that she puts in these stories. There are so many mixed reviews on this collection, but I enjoyed it.

"Among its pages are a couple who becomes obsessed with their friend hearing them have sex, then seeing them have sex...until they can't have sex without him; a ten-year-old whose birthday party takes a sinister turn when she wishes for "something mean"; a woman who finds a book of spells half hidden at the library and summons her heart's desire: a nameless, naked man; and a self-proclaimed "biter" who dreams of sneaking up behind and sinking her teeth into a green-eyed, long-haired, pink-cheeked coworker" (Goodreads).

Her well known short story, "Cat Person," is also included in this book. This short story is what she's best known for. She published this book two years later.

The style of writing is very uncomfortable. Roupenian writes very disturbing, cruel, kinky, and violent short stories, that capture your attention instantly. It's well-written, but the topics in the short stories make the reader feel disturbed, such as a twenty-year-old man

talking to a twelve-year-old girl. She has a dark humor and sets a good narrative pace while writing these stories, though.

Each story is in third person as the characters constantly change. Each story has the characters going through different situations.

This collection contains signs of being an erotic and psychological book as Roupenian she creates these different stories. I think her stories would classify under Modernism as she includes sex in many of stories such as "Bad Boy" which has a couple trying to help their friend get over his manipulative ex-girlfriend only to create a more dysfunctional relationship with him. It also explores how the people in the story develop and what effects them internally. In "Bad Boy," it's rather disturbing because although they were helping their friend, the relationship became so kinky and by the end of it, the couple seems to control their friend.

Another short story that shows Roupenian's difference in writing is "Sardine." It's a game created by Tilly, Marla's little girl, and it starts out as a fun little kid's game, but by the end it turns for the worse. Roupenian hooks you in with "the incident" and it turns darker. By the end it's hard to tell what's real or what happened as Roupenian leaves the reader hanging.

She writes about many taboo situations such as a couple being dominated over their friend, a woman conjuring a naked man with a book of spells, and real problems a couple goes through. Roupenian explores the sexual and ghosting culture of society. Each story mentions sex or the lack of sex in the character's life. One of the characters, Margot, doesn't have interest in the male Robert, but has sex with them even though she's not interested. She ghosts him, and he signs off calling her a "whore." This happens to girls and women daily when they express their disinterest to a male.

Kristen Roupenian holds a PhD in English from Harvard, an MFA from the Helen Zell Writer's Program at the University of Michigan, and BA from Barnard College. Her best known short story, "Cat Person," was published in *The New Yorker* and selected by Shelia Heti for the Best American Nonrequired Reading 2018.

Each character is going through something different, but Roupenian is constantly using a darker humor to serious situations. How does Roupenian's dark humor and cruel stories bring a light to social issues?

You Think It, I'll Say It by Curtis Sittenfeld

Sittenfeld, Curtis. *You Think It, I'll Say It*. Random House: New York. 2018.

The collection is comprised of ten individual stories that explore different aspects of life in modern America and uses mundane situations and dialogue to examine questions of morality, marriage, class, and gender roles. The stories also provide snapshots into multiple backgrounds to highlight questionable decision making and the power of coincidence by writing the stories in multiple perspectives. These techniques are used to effectively paint a picture of the world that accurately represents all people and common experiences like divorce and poverty rather than focusing on one version of what living in America looks like. The book chooses to discuss the common issues that are present in the world we live in. This helps to depict a more accurate overview of America and allow a wider range of readers to see themselves within stories, especially minorities and people of color.

The stories are written in both first and third person and rely heavily on conversation between characters to provide information to the reader. The author puts less emphasis on physical description and works to allow the reader a deeper understanding of a character's motivation and relationships with other people. The casual language and lack of structure the author portrays allows the reader to see the author's intention, thus reinforcing the satirical nature of the work. The stories all have a dry sense of humor and utilize sarcasm. The stories also make reference to cultural events to place the reader in the story.

The author exemplifies realism by depicting a marriage that is devoid of romance, while also posing questions of morality in the process. This is evident through the attitude that the husband has toward his wife and the actions of his brother throughout the story because it does not stick blindly to the conventions of the love story according to scholars. For example, "Is this the point where we both start pretending you haven't spent the last few years confiding your adulterous fantasies?" (Sittenfeld 73.) The brother spends most of the story claiming he is in a higher moral position than his brother despite having an emotional affair with his wife over email. The transparency of their interaction removes the romantic lens that is usually applied to marriage. Although tending toward social critique, the stories exhibit a Modernistic tendency toward open endings.

The collection contributes to the canon of American short fiction by depicting a diverse group of people and conflicts within the same collection, but focuses on a common theme of relationships; romantic or otherwise. The author's stories also add satirical value to her narrative by highlighting gender stereotypes, violence, and sexual orientation. Although satire is not a new concept, it is used casually, not confronting the reader. For example, the author's story entitled "Gender Studies" shows how women were perceived in the past as malleable and simply depicted as mistresses and love interests and then shatters that stigma by showing a woman find inner strength and ability to stand up for herself and

separate herself from the man she was with for 11 years., all without specifically stating this idea.

In keeping with the idea that relationships between people are the author's main focus, the stories show the contrast of how the character is responding inwardly versus what they actually communicate. This seems to be a common issue among Americans, especially when it comes to social media and the need to agree with peers. The socio-cultural influence that is present in the stories shows the attention it gives to American culture as well as the value it has to the reader. Also, the diversity of issues and people demonstrate the attention it gives to our culture and understanding of it. It adds to this idea by using modern language such as mansplaining and the “half my age plus seven” rule to demonstrate the relevance of the stories as well as the author. Within the same story, the author references the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump and the legalization of gay marriage. This reaffirms the author's commitment to accurately depicting the reality of American culture.

Curtis Sittenfeld lives in St. Louis and is the author of five novels that have appeared on the New York Times bestseller's list. Her work has been translated into thirty different languages and has appeared in publications such as New Yorker, The Atlantic, and Esquire. She has also been featured on broadcast radio in The American Life, She also had a brief career as a model! Some of her most recent work includes Eligible, American Wife, and Sisterland.

Considering most of the stories are written entirely in conversation, how is interpersonal connection influenced by modern communication methods like social media?

Zombies by Chuck Palahniuk

Palahniuk, Chuck. “Zombies.” Make Something Up: Stories You Can't Unread. United States, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015.

This story isn't really about zombies who consume the flesh, but nothing's ever straightforward with this author. Instead, the premise of this narrative surrounds the inception of a morbid teenage fad in which students at a high school begin using defibrillators to zap brains. “It's basically a peel and stick lobotomy,” (pg. 27) describes our narrator, Trevor, an average student in high school. Through a first-person perspective, we begin to watch Trevor's classmates go from valedictorians and popular cheerleaders to drooling shells as they attach a defibrillator (AEDs) to their temples and shock themselves into idiocy. It's kind of a painless, but irreversible lobotomy. That way they don't have to deal with the pressures of modern life, they end up with terrible jobs and are completes

morons and simpletons but they're happy. Rather than zombies traditionally hunting for brains and searching for brains to eat, these kids are running away from brains, running from the pressures of everyday life, and from the tragedies in the world and having to make decisions and take on responsibility and deal with things. As more kids catch onto the trend, Trevor begins to feel the peer pressure. His uncle tries to send him away to an all boys school where he won't be around the AEDs. "If your friends jump off a bridge, would you?" (pg. 35) his uncle asks, and that's exactly what Trevor tries to do in the middle of an airport as his uncle and strangers grab onto him with the idea that if he hurts himself he will hurt them too.

Escapism- As the kids are approaching graduation they are experiencing anxieties of what will come and the struggles that come along with becoming an adult and end up using the defibrillators as a way to escape their anxieties. Instead of dealing with modern life, they turn themselves into simpletons who are unable to care or think for themselves, but they are happy and carefree.

Peer-pressure- If your friends jumped off a bridge, would you? Once one kid shocks himself others soon follow. The AEDs are labeled as a new "trend" among the media and as the rod starts to spread, more kids feel like they need to escape as well.

Adulthood- Things such as relationships, college life, self-identity, new responsibilities are all something these students are trying to escape from. Not wanting to grow up or figure out what comes next is a growing fear.

This story could be set in any American high school. Everyone has that anxiety of the unknown into adulthood and are always looking for a way to escape or have wishful thinking of staying youthful forever. The defibrillator zap fad into the fabric of youth culture; the phenomenon is like a drug fad. Our narrator, Trevor, represents everyone who tries their best to not become part of the statistic. Just like in the past, kids have gotten high off of choking themselves, drinking hand sanitizer, and the media coverage of it only made it more inviting to the idea that "everyone is doing it." At one point during the story, the government tried to make it illegal and harder to get the AEDs through mental health screening and getting a license, but just like guns and drugs; the kids are always able to find a way to hurt themselves.

This short story is written in a first-person with a stream of conscious like style. We only see, hear, and experience what Trevor can. Although it is the perspective of a high school boy he goes into great detail about the world around him from what is being seen on tv to the smell of the post-shocked kids. He delves deep into his thoughts of the spiraling pressure of becoming one of the zombie kids.

Realism: This short story draws from realism with its use of basing its events of real-life situations. The AEDs the kids use to cause them to go brain dead are representative of different ways people use to get high and escape from everyday life. Albeit extreme, the AEDs are parallels real versions of escapism like choking, alcohol, social media, and drugs.

Horror: An element of horror includes suspense. All throughout the story, our narrator leaves us wondering whether or not he is going to end up shocking himself. As his classmates and friends begin to join in on the trend, we start to feel the anxieties up to the point of the scene in the airport where he is asked the question "if your friends jump off a bridge, would you jump too?" (pg. 35) as his finger is on the ready button and the machine is fully charged, we feel the suspense as the narrator questions on whether or not he should metaphorically pull the trigger.

Labeled as "literature's favorite transgressive author" Palahniuk has written twenty (and counting) novels, written graphic novels, and even has a few coloring books.

Also available as a short film: *Zombie – A Chuck Palahniuk Short Story* -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCaHHalmj9I>



Does this story accurately represent the anxieties of coming of age? Does American culture struggle with dangerous fads and keeping them under control?