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The Best British Short Stories 2012

Edited by Nicholas Royle

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The Best British Short Stories 2012

edited by

NICHOLAS ROYLE



LONDON

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To the memory of William Sansom (1912–76)

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Introduction

IT WAS ONLY when I came to write this introduction – always the last task – that it dawned on me: this year’s selection might seem a rather dark one. It wasn’t deliberate; there was no plan. But, still, for every dead body you have to step over, there’s a moment of emotional uplift. Well, maybe not *every* dead body. Let’s face it, death casts a long shadow. But it’s precisely because of our knowledge of our mortality that we feel compelled to live our lives to the full. Isn’t it?

The other thing I noticed, and this I noticed while I was still choosing the stories, is that there is no crossover with last year’s volume. None of the writers included in the 2011 anthology is featured in this one. This, again, was not deliberate. I was tempted by new stories I came across by David Rose, Kirsty Logan and Philip Langeskov, as well as by a great many stories by other writers that were good enough to be considered among the best published last year, but competition is fierce.

I am aware also, looking at the contents page, that there are thirteen stories by men writers and only seven by women. I say ‘men writers’ to point up the absurdity and offensiveness of a term in wide general use – ‘women writers’. Again, not deliberate; maybe I should be bothered by the imbalance, but in all honesty I’m not. Maybe next year’s volume will go the other way, maybe it won’t. I’m suspicious of quotas. I read as widely as I could during the

year and these twenty stories are, in my opinion, the best I saw, irrespective of gender, race, region – yes, region; I couldn't care less about religion – or any other variable.

The 2011 anthology contained three stories from the *Warwick Review*, an excellent magazine that faced a funding crisis towards the end of last year. As I write, it has just had funding approved, but only until the summer. I very much hope the magazine will survive beyond the end of the university year and go on to publish many more good stories. Had I been allowed to include twenty-one stories in this book instead of twenty, I would have sought to include 'Time Management' by Kathryn Simmonds, which appeared in the March 2011 issue of the *Warwick Review*.

But, I didn't, and I'm very pleased with the choices I have made. I could not be more aware that this is a personal selection and another editor would come up with an entirely different list. Readers will agree with some choices and disagree with others and that's fine. Let's talk about which are the *best* stories being published. It beats talking about whether the form is alive or dead. Let's hope we're beyond that dreary debate. Of course the short story is in good health – in excellent health, in fact. This book is dedicated to the memory of William Sansom, a great, idiosyncratic short story writer and highly individual prose stylist, born a hundred years ago last month. There are writers in this book who can make the hairs stand up on the back of my neck in the same way he could. Not by being scary – although some can do that as well, as indeed Sansom could – but by creating the delicious tension you feel when you know you are reading a good writer, someone totally in control of their material, someone who understands that the most important words are not those

on the page, but those left out, those left for the reader to fill in.

Three of these stories brought on the waterworks. A couple more delivered a well-aimed emotional punch. One or two had me grinning with delight at their sheer cleverness and invention. They all embody the unexpected (without being *Tales of the Unexpected*). One of the darkest stories here is also one of the funniest. Two stories are about libraries and those stories, which open and close the book, are both from the excellent *Paraxis*, an online magazine edited by Claire Massey, Andy Hedgecock and Carys Bray. Their second volume took the library as its theme. Like many children of my generation, I haunted libraries. I discovered things in libraries, I learned to question things in libraries, I fell in love in libraries.

In this country, at the time of writing, four hundred public libraries face the threat of closure.

But things change. The financial situation. Public opinion. Even governments, eventually.

In the meantime, the natural human desire to be told stories will remain as strong as it ever was – and here are twenty of the best.

— NICHOLAS ROYLE
 Manchester
 February 2012

EMMA JANE UNSWORTH

I Arrive First

THAT MEANS IT is my turn to start. I put my cloth bag down on the table and make my way over to the shelves. I walk past Poetry towards General Fiction and move along the rows, tapping a few spines as I go. I finally settle on Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The book is hard-backed, big and heavy. When it comes off the shelf it leaves a wide gap that the surrounding books domino-fall into. I carry it in both hands back across the room. I lost my hairbrush this morning. I turned the bathroom inside out looking for it but it was no good; it's gone for ever. The best I could do was drag my fingers through my hair and scrape it back into a snarly bun. I position the book in the usual place: upside down in the top right corner of the table. It's a tenuous joke but I know he'll get it. We're on the same wavelength.

I pull my netbook and papers out of my bag and stand my bottle of water on my left-hand side, lining it up with the *exact* centre of my netbook. Then I sit back, ready. He won't be long. It's got to the point where I can almost sense him approaching, like a cat that knows when its owner's car will turn into the drive.

Other students arrive. They swing through the doors

and then whisper and scatter throughout the library. Some of them slip into the clinically lit catacombs that radiate from the central hub. I look up to the bright-stained dome in the roof and watch the shafts of light fall and flash over the cells of the curved perimeter wall, making everything gleam with life. A trolley of returned books waits by the lending desk and a librarian pats the handle and then pushes off in the direction of social sciences, wheeling the trolley across the room like it's a buggy with a baby in it. The trolley and the librarian disappear amongst the rows of shelves and I tap my fingers on the mousepad of my netbook and type a few words to pass the time. This is what I write:

The library is due to close for refurbishment in one week.

No sooner have I typed it than a few of the hairs on my right arm rear up off my skin and I know he's coming through the door. I don't know what gives it away to my outer senses – whether it's the way his feet fall or the first scent-flares of his deodorant – but it's like I've got a special kind of radar where he's concerned. He puts his bag on the desk gently, oh so gently, and then he stands there for a moment, still and softly posed in the full quiet of the library. My eyes flick on him and past him, on him and past him; past him when he looks my way and then on him again when he looks up, and I look up with him for a moment, up to the dome that is now splitting rays of sun through its antique glass, filling the air with buttery light. I see that he is wearing a green shirt and is holding a scrap of paper in his hand.

He must have seen it by now.

As he walks to the shelves he pretends to scrutinise the scrap of paper in his hand but I know this is all just

part of today's elaborate faux nonchalance. He's thinking, considering the options, like I was just a few minutes ago. He takes his time – ten minutes almost – and I tap away on my netbook while I watch him.

I don't know where we're all going to go.

I don't, and that's the truth. Me and him. The books. The librarians. The birds that drip from the ledges outside. Should we scatter to different corners of the city; the world? Or should we meet in condensation-lined coffee shops and measure out the days in little wooden sticks?

He has a book. He brings it back. I let it sit. Him sit. I don't look for at least two minutes according to the digital clock in the corner of my screen. Then I glance at the book and away, at the book and away. It's enough. I see it. *The Line of Beauty*. What a charmer. He looks past me then at me then past me again. A wide, grey, ambiguous look. I touch my cheek, my forehead; I slide my fingers along my scraped back hair and needle a ratty bump beneath the surface with my nail.

It's been going on for a month now. The first time, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* just sitting there in front of him, upside down, as he worked. You couldn't miss it. Well, you obviously could miss it, because plenty of people hadn't noticed it at all. From what I could tell no one else in the library was replying. I looked around at the other students working at tables, scanning for another book laid out that way. Nada. It was incredible to me that such a cry for help, for attention, for contact, was being ignored. But that's the way it is with wavelengths and thank god for that, because if everyone was on the same wavelength you wouldn't be able to make out a thing over the din. He looked up from his work and I looked

down to his trainers under the table and saw they were done up so tightly that the eyelets almost met. When I looked up again he smiled at me and I smiled back and nodded to the book and he kept smiling and there was something about the angle of his mouth that was like the angle of the book. And the table opposite was free so I sat down and thought of how best to reply. As I saw it, there was only one option, and it was sure to be on the shelf, under D, a short walk away: *Rebecca*. My name.

I always notice what people are reading. Whenever I'm on a bus or a train and see someone reading I strain to see what it is. Some people don't like it – they cover their (book) protectively with their hands, afraid of what it might reveal. Other people proudly hold their BOOKS out in front of them – these are usually the same books: the latest must-read, or Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. But you can tell so much by what someone has chosen, and I'd be coy about it too, if I didn't mean everything the book in front of me said – on the outside, because that's what counts. The insides of books don't interest me any more.

I still wonder how long he had been laying that book out, waiting for an answer. I think that will be one of my first questions, when we eventually speak. A week, that's all we have left now.

Will we make some kind of plan, or will that ruin everything?

At quarter to five we pack up, as usual. They don't kick out until six but I think we both like to be ahead of the rush.

The next day I panic because someone is sitting at my table. This has happened before, but now that time is of the essence I can't stop myself from panicking and have to go to the Ladies and run cold water over my wrists. He's

there at his table already but I haven't had chance to see what he's put out yet.

When I come out from the toilet the first thing I do is check that the person in my seat hasn't started talking to him instead. I see with relief that she hasn't. There is nothing on the table apart from a magazine. I hope this means that she won't be long. I linger to one side of her table, willing her away. She looks up at me and I stare hard, meaningfully, but it's no good, she doesn't understand. She's not on my wavelength. I step away towards the next table, but before I sit down I look over at his book. *After You'd Gone*, Maggie O'Farrell. Brilliant, just brilliant. I sit down feeling calmer and take out my netbook and type a few words while I'm waiting for the girl to move.

This place will be spooky when it's empty.

The girl folds up her magazine and noisily reverses her chair. I snap my netbook shut and grab my bag and am in her seat two seconds after she has vacated it. She tuts as she walks away but I ignore her. I breathe deeply and feel as though everything is all right now. He hasn't looked up once during the changeover and I wonder whether he will swap the book or whether it is up to me to go and find one. I wait five minutes.

Like a church on a weekday.

Then he gets up and goes towards the shelves, leaving the book where it is. What does this mean? A double message? Will he use two titles to make a sentence? That would be a first.

Things have to progress, I suppose.

He is back quickly. As he emerges from the shelves he almost collides with a moving trolley but swerves in a balletic move to avoid a crash and smiles at the librarian, although I can't see whether the librarian is smiling back. I smile at him but he doesn't look over and he is empty-handed. What does this mean? But as he sits down something beautiful happens: the bulb in the lamp on his table pops and dies. He grimaces and I can tell he is considering moving, he looks up at the dome, at the surrounding lights, and I feel the panic rising in my stomach again but then he shrugs and sits back down. This is a chance now, surely. I leap to my feet and power-walk along the shelves to S. I can't get back to my seat quick enough, can't wait for him to see how good this one is. I would run if it wasn't inappropriate to run across a library. I land in my seat and the book skids into position on the table. *The Dark Room*, Rachel Seiffert. It's almost as good as when the heating hadn't caught up with the season and he put out *Love in a Cold Climate*. I fizzed at his wit while the word **LOVE** blazed off the dustjacket in my direction.

Over the next two days we take things up another notch. He arrives first both mornings. Is he implying I should start arriving earlier too, in order to maximise our time together?

We're running out.

On the third-to-last day he pores over a marked essay. I can't see the exact mark but I presume it's not very good because the book he has chosen is *The Scarlet Letter*. The mark on the essay might be in pencil, but I can read between the lines.

The following afternoon a group of schoolchildren come for a tour and they bang into tables and pull faces and shout, despite their supervisor telling them to shush. I put out *Animal Farm*. He replies with Atwood: *Alias Grace*. He's right of course. We were all there once. I try not to let the kids rile me after that even though I am uncomfortable because I rushed my lunchtime banana.

I sense a growing heaviness inside.

On the penultimate day there is an earthquake, a minor tremor. Everything shakes and for a split-second afterwards there is a hum as the shelves settle and people whisper their surprise. He looks right at me then and we don't need books to say anything more.

~~*The end is nigh.*~~

And then it is here: the last day. I arrive to see him frantically working, surrounded by a flurry of notes. Leaves of A4 fall from the edge of his table and creep across the floor towards me in a pale tide. I stalk the shelves slowly, leadenly, without purpose. My fingers linger over Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*. I can't do it. Later, in the afternoon, when just

three hours remain

he gets up and comes back with *The Salt Road* by Jane Johnson. It's his most cryptic choice yet. I spend the remainder of the day racking my brain and Googling reviews. Was it a reference to tears? Was he saying he was going to be sad without me? It was so hard to decipher. Or was it intentionally meaningless, symbolic of our

imminent separation? I pack up and leave first, miserable and frustrated.

Doomed.

A week later I am buying a coffee in a coffee shop I swore I'd never go in but there is nowhere else to go. As I step back out onto the street I read the sandwich board outside the newsagents next door. ONE MILLION BOOKS TO BE SENT DOWN THE MINES. I buy a paper and juggle my coffee to turn the pages and find the rest of the story. It turns out that the books from the library have a strange, beautiful fate: they're going to be stored in salt mines the size of seven hundred football pitches, deep beneath the Cheshire plains. The perfect environment, experts say. Whoever knew there were so many in there, or so much room under Cheshire. I will have to remember to catalogue this final revelation when I find somewhere to sit.

And then I look up from the paper and see that he is making his way down the street towards the coffee shop I thought neither of us would ever go into. He walks faster outside than he did in the library and I'm surprised but also not surprised to see him and I find I don't move out of the way, I just stand there between the sandwich board and the doorway and when he gets close he has to almost stop still. He smiles a fresh smile in the solid September light. I move to one side and then back, to the other side and then back. It takes me all my courage to say something – to speak to him in words that aren't static and flat on their backs. I hear my voice come out into the air and the sound of it shocks us both.

'How did you know about this?'

I stand there on the pavement, shaking the paper, my coffee hot in my hands, my face cracking with expectancy.