

**O. Henry Memorial Award Prize
Stories of 1919**

by

Various

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O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1919

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Introduction

On April 18, 1918, the Society of Arts and Sciences of New York City paid tribute to the memory of William Sydney Porter at a dinner in honour of his genius. In the ball-room of the Hotel McAlpin there gathered, at the speakers' table, a score of writers, editors and publishers who had been associated with O. Henry during the time he lived in Manhattan; in the audience, many others who had known him, and hundreds yet who loved his short stories.

Enthusiasm, both immediate and lasting, indicated to the Managing Director of the Society, Mr. John F. Tucker, that he might progress hopefully toward an ideal he had, for some time, envisioned. The goal lay in the establishing of a memorial to the author who had transmuted realistic New York into romantic Bagdad-by-the-Subway.

When, therefore, in December, 1918, Mr. Tucker called a committee for the purpose of considering such a memorial, he met a glad response. The first question, "What form shall the monument assume?" drew tentative suggestions of a needle in Gramercy Square, or a tablet affixed to the corner of O. Henry's home in West Twenty-sixth Street. But things of iron and stone, cold and dead, would incongruously commemorate the dynamic power that moved the hearts of living men and women, "the master pharmacist of joy and pain," who dispensed "sadness tintured with a smile and laughter that dissolves in tears."

In short, then, it was decided to offer a minimum prize of \$250 for the best short story published in 1919, and the following Committee of Award was appointed:

BLANCHE COLTON WILLIAMS, Ph.D.
EDWARD J. WHEELER, Litt.D.
ETHEL WATTS MUMFORD
ROBERT WILSON NEAL, M.A.
MERLE ST. CROIX WRIGHT, D.D.

It is significant that this committee had no sooner begun its round table conferences than the Society promised, through the Director, funds for two prizes. The first was fixed at \$500, the second at \$250.

At a meeting in January, 1919, the Committee of Award agreed upon the further conditions that the story must be the work of an American author, and must first appear in 1919 in an American publication. At the same time an Honorary Committee was established, composed of writers and editors, whose pleasure it might be to offer advice and propose stories for consideration. The Honorary Committee consisted of

GERTRUDE ATHERTON
EDWARD J. O'BRIEN
FANNIE HURST

JOHN MACY
BURGES JOHNSON
MRS. EDWIN MARKHAM
ROBERT MORSS LOVETT
JOHN S. PHILLIPS
WILLIAM MARION REEDY
VIRGINIA RODERICK
WALTER ROBERTS
CHARLES G. NORRIS
EDWARD E. HALE
MAX EASTMAN
CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE
MARGARET SHERWOOD
HAMLIN GARLAND
JAMES BRANCH CABELL
STUART P. SHERMAN
WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE
STEPHEN LEACOCK
MAJOR RUPERT HUGHES
EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES

The Committee of Award read throughout the year, month by month, scores of stories, rejecting many, debating over others, and passing up a comparative few for final judgment. In January, out of the hundred or more remaining, they salvaged the following:

1. The Kitchen Gods, by Guglielma Alsop (*Century*, September).
2. Facing It, by Edwina Stanton Babcock (*Pictorial Review*, June).
3. The Fairest Sex, by Mary Hastings Bradley (*Metropolitan*, March).
4. Bargain Price, by Donn Byrne (*Cosmopolitan*, March).
5. Porcelain Cups, by James Branch Cabell (*Century*, November).
6. Gum Shoes, 4-B, by Forrest Crissey (*Harper's*, December).
7. The Trial in Tom Belcher's Store, by Samuel A. Derieux (*American*, June).
8. April Twenty-fifth As Usual, by Edna Ferber (*Ladies Home Journal*, July).
9. The Mottled Slayer, by George Gilbert (*Sunset*, August).
10. Dog Eat Dog, by Ben Hecht (*The Little Review*, April).
11. Blue Ice, by Joseph Hergesheimer (*Saturday Evening Post*, December 13).

12. Innocence, by Rupert Hughes (*Cosmopolitan*, September).
13. Humoresque, by Fannie Hurst (*Cosmopolitan*, March).
14. The Yellow Streak, by Ellen La Motte (*Century*, March).
15. The Elephant Remembers, by Edison Marshall (*Everybody's*, October).
16. England to America, by Margaret Prescott Montague (*Atlantic*, September).
17. Five Thousand Dollars Reward, by Melville D. Post (*Saturday Evening Post*, February 15).
18. The Lubbeny Kiss, by Louise Rice (*Ainslee's*, October).
19. The High Cost of Conscience, by Beatrice Ravenel (*Harper's*, January).
20. The Red Mark, by John Russell (*Collier's*, April 15).
21. The Trap, by Myra Sawhill (*American*, May).
22. Evening Primroses, by Anne D. Sedgwick (*Atlantic*, July).
23. Autumn Crocuses, by Anne D. Sedgwick (*Atlantic*, August).
24. The Blood of the Dragon, by Thomas Grant Springer (*Live Stories*, May).
25. Contact, by Wilbur Daniel Steele (*Harper's*, March).
26. For They Know not What They Do, by Wilbur Daniel Steele (*Pictorial Review*, July).
27. La Guiablesse, by Wilbur Daniel Steele (*Harpers*, September).
28. On Strike, by Albert Payson Terhune (*The Popular Magazine*, October).
29. The Other Room, by Mary Heaton Vorse (*McCall's*, April).
30. They Grind Exceeding Small, by Ben Ames Williams (*Saturday Evening Post*, September 13).
31. On the Field of Honour, by Ben Ames Williams (*American*, March).
32. Turkey Red, by Frances Gilchrist Wood (*Pictorial Review*, November).

Although the exiguity of the vessel forbids inclusion of all these stories, yet the Committee wish to record them as worthy of preservation under covers. Publishing by title, therefore, carries all the honour attached to publishing the complete story.

Awarding the prizes proved difficult. No title stood first on all the lists: rated best by one judge, any story lost rank through lower rating by another. But the following held from first place to fifth place on the separate final lists: "La Guiablesse," "England to America," "For They Know not What They Do," "Evening Primroses," "Autumn Crocuses," "Humoresque," "The Red Mark," "They Grind Exceeding Small," "On Strike," "The Elephant Remembers," "Contact," and "Five Thousand Dollars Reward." It will be observed that three of Wilbur Daniel Steele's narratives appear. If the prize had been announced as going to the author of more stories rated first, he would have received it. But by the predetermined conditions, it must fall to the author of the best story, and according to a recognized system of counts,[A] the best is "England to America"; the second best, "For They Know not What They Do." The first award, therefore, goes to Miss Margaret Prescott Montague; the second to Mr. Wilbur Daniel Steele.

[Footnote A:

Since there were five judges, the system used was the following:

A story of place 1 was given 5 points

" " " " 2 " " 4 "

" " " " 3 " " 3 "

" " " " 4 " " 2 "

" " " " 5 " " 1 point.]

The Committee were remarkably unanimous in answering the question, "What is a short-story?"; but they differed, rather violently, over the fulfilment of requirements by the various illustrations. Without doubt, the most provocative of these was Mr. Steele's "Contact." Three of the Committee think it a short-story; two declare it an article; all agree that no finer instance of literature in brief form was published in 1919.

Their diverging views, however, challenged curiosity: what did the publishers think about it? The editor of *Harper's* wrote:

"Contact" was written by Mr. Steele after a personal visit to the North Sea fleet. It is a faithful portrayal of the work done by our destroyers and therefore falls under the category of "articles."

And the Author:

I am not quite sure what to say. The piece, "Contact," of which you speak, was in a sense drawn from life, that is to say it is made up of a number of impressions gained while I was at sea with the U.S. destroyers off the coast of France. The characters are elaborations of real characters, and the "contact" told of was such a one as I actually witnessed. Otherwise, the chronology of events, conversations, etc., were gathered from various sources and woven to the best of my ability so as to give a picture of the day's work of our convoying forces in the War.

These data reconcile, in part, the conflicting points of view, or at least show the tenability of each.

In addition to the first requisite of *struggle*, "the story's the thing," the judges sought originality, excellence in organization of plot incidents, skill in characterization, power in moving emotions--and, again, they differed over their findings. One member would have awarded the prize to "La Guiabliesse" on its original motif--a ship is jealous of a woman--on its masterful employment of suggestion, unique presentation of events, and on all the other counts. Another, while recognizing the essential bigness of the tale, regards it as somewhat crudely constructed and as extending the use of suggestion into the mist of obscurity.

Or, take characterization. Mary Hastings Bradley's "The Fairest Sex" represents, in the climax, a reporter's fiancee betraying the whereabouts of a young woman who is, technically, a criminal. One of the Committee held that, under the circumstances, the psychology is false: others "believed" that particular girl did that particular thing.

Best narrative always compels belief: the longer the period of belief the greater the story. This business of convincing the reader requires more labour than the average writer seems to care about performing. Any reader is willing to be held--for a time. But how many stories compel recollection of plot and characters as indubitably a part of all that one has met?

Too frequently the writer neglects the value of atmosphere, forgetful of its weight in producing conviction. The tale predominantly of atmosphere (illustrated in the classic "Fall of the House of Usher"), revealing wherever found the ability of the author to hold a dominant mood in which as in a calcium light characters and arts are coloured, this tale occurs so rarely as to challenge admiration when it does occur. "For They Know not What They Do" lures the reader into its exotic air and holds him until he, too, is suffused, convinced.

... The Committee were not insensible to style. But expert phrasing, glowing appreciation of words and exquisite sense of values, the texture of the story fabric--all dropped into the abyss of the unimportant after the material they incorporated had been judged. No man brings home beefsteak in silk or sells figs as thistles.

The Committee accepted style as the fit medium for conveying the matter....

Since the Committee confess to catholicity of taste, the chosen stories reveal predilection for no one type. They like detective stories, and particularly those of Melville Davisson Post. A follower of the founder of this school of fiction, he has none the less advanced beyond his master and has discovered other ways than those of the Rue Morgue. "Five Thousand Dollars Reward" in its brisk action, strong suspense, and humorous denouement carries on the technique so neatly achieved in "The Doomsdorf Mystery" and other tales about Uncle Abner.

The Committee value, also, the story about animals: universal interest in puzzles, in the science of ratiocination, is not more pronounced than the interest in rationalizing the brute. "The Mottled Slayer" and "The Elephant Remembers" offer sympathetic studies of struggles in the animal world. Mr. Marshall's white elephant will linger as a memory, even as his ghost remains, longer than the sagacious play-fellow of Mr. Gilbert's little Indian; but nobody can forget the battle the latter fought with the python.

For stories about the home the Committee have a weakness: Miss Ferber's "April Twenty-fifth As Usual," cheerfully proclaiming the inevitableness of spring cleaning, might be published with the sub-title, An Epic of the Housekeeper.

They were alert for reflections of life--in America and elsewhere. The politics of "Gum Shoes, 4-B"; the local court of law in "Tom Belcher's Store"; the frozen west of "Turkey Red" seemed to them to meet the demand that art must hold the mirror up to nature.

In particular, the Committee hoped to find good stories of the war. Now that fiction containing anything of the Great Struggle is anathema to editors, and must wait for that indefinite time of its revival, it was like getting a last bargain to read "Facing It," "Humoresque," "Contact," "Autumn Crocuses," and "England to America." In these small masterpieces is celebrated either manhood which keeps a rendezvous with death.

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* * * * *

In the estimation of the Committee the year 1919 was not one of pre-eminent short stories. Why? There are several half-satisfactory explanations. Some of the acknowledged leaders, seasoned authors, have not been publishing their average annual number of tales. Alice Brown, Donn Byrne, Irvin Cobb, Edna Ferber, Katharine Gerould, Fannie Hurst and Mary W. Freeman are represented by spare sheaves. Again, a number of new and promising writers have not quite attained sureness of touch; although that they are acquiring it is manifest in the work of Ben Ames Williams, Edison Marshall, Frances Wood, Samuel Derieux, John Russell, Beatrice Ravenel and Myra Sawhill. Too frequently, there is "no story": a series of episodes however charmingly strung out is not a story; a sketch, however clever or humorous, is not a story; an essay, however wisely expounding a truth, is not a story. So patent are these facts, they are threadbare from repetition; yet of them succeeding aspirants seem to be as ignorant as were their predecessors--who at length found knowledge. For obvious reasons, names of authors who succeed in a certain literary form, but who produce no story are omitted.

Again, some stories just miss the highest mark. A certain one, praised by a magazine editor as the best of the year, suffers in the opinion of the Committee, or part of the Committee, from an introduction too long and top-heavy. It not only mars the symmetry of the whole, this introduction, but starts the reader in the wrong direction. One thing the brief story must not do is to begin out of tone, to promise what it does not fulfil, or to lead out a subordinate character as though he were chief.... Another story suffers from plethora of phrasing, and even of mere diction. Stevenson believed few of his words too precious to be cut; contemporary writers hold their utterances in greater esteem.... A third story shows by its obvious happy ending that the author has catered to magazine needs or

what he conceives to be editorial policies. Such an author requires a near "Smart Set" sparkle or a pseudo-Atlantic Monthly sobriety; he develops facility, but at the expense, ultimately, of conventionality, dullness and boredom.

According to the terms which omit foreign authors from possible participation in the prize, the work of Achmed Abdullah, Britten Austin, Elinor Mordaunt and others was in effect non-existent for the Committee. "Reprisal," by Mr. Austin, ranks high as a specimen of real short-story art, strong in structure, rich in suggestion. "The Honourable Gentleman," by the mage from Afghanistan, in reflecting Oriental life in the Occident, will take its place in literary history. Elinor Mordaunt's modernized biblical stories--"The Strong Man," for instance--in showing that the cycles repeat themselves and that today is as one of five thousand years ago exemplify the universality of certain motifs, fables, characters.

But, having made allowance for the truths just recounted, the Committee believe that the average of stories here bound together is high. They respond to the test of form and of life. "The Kitchen Gods" grows from five years of service to the women of China--service by the author, who is a doctor of medicine. "Porcelain Cups" testifies to the interest a genealogist finds in the Elizabethan Age and, more definitely, in the life of Christopher Marlowe. The hardships of David, in the story by Mr. Derieux, are those of a boy in a particular Southern neighbourhood the author knows. Miss Louise Rice, who boasts a strain of Romany blood, spends part of her year with the gypsies. Mr. Terhune is familiar, from the life, with his prototypes of "On Strike." "Turkey Red" relates a real experience, suited to fiction or to poetry--if Wordsworth was right--for it is an instance of emotion remembered in tranquility. In these and all the others, the story's the thing.

Some of them, perhaps, were produced *because* their creators were consciously concerned about the art of creation. "Blue Ice," by Joseph Hergesheimer, proclaims itself a study in technique, a thing of careful workmanship. "Innocence," by Rupert Hughes, with "Read It Again" and "The Story I Can't Write" boldly announce his desire to get the most out of the material. "For They Know not What They Do," an aspiration of spirit, is fashioned as firmly as the Woolworth Tower.

Just here it may be observed that the Committee noticed a tendency of the present day story which only the future can reveal as significant or insignificant. It is this: in spite of the American liking for the brief tale, as Poe termed it--the conte, as the French know it--in spite of an occasional call from magazines for stories of fewer than 5,000 words, yet the number of these narratives approaching perfection is considerably less than that of the longer story. Whether the long short-story gives greater entertainment to the greater number may be questioned. To state that it is farthest from the practice of O. Henry invites a logical and inevitable conclusion. He wrote two hundred stories averaging about fifteen pages each. Whether it may be greater literature is another matter; if it escapes tediousness it may impress by its weight. If the Committee had selected for publication all the longest stories in the list of thirty-two, this volume would contain the same number of words, but only half the titles.

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