

# **The Best British Short Stories of 1922**

by

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editors

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## Introduction

When Edward J. O'Brien asked me to cooperate with him in choosing each year's best English short stories, to be published as a companion volume to his annual selection of the best American short stories, I had not realized that at the end of my arduous task, which has involved the reading of many hundreds of stories in the English magazines of an entire year, I should find myself asking the simple question: What is a short story?

I do not suppose that a hundred years ago such a question could have occurred to any one. Then all that a story was and could be was implied in the simple phrase: "Tell me a story...." We all know what that means. How many stories published today would stand this simple if final test of being told by word of mouth? I doubt whether fifty per cent would. Surely the universality of the printing press and the linotype machine have done something to alter the character of literature, just as the train and the telephone have done not a little to abolish polite correspondence. Most stories of today are to be read, not told. Hence great importance must be attached to the manner of writing; in some instances, the whole effect of a modern tale is dependent on the manner of presentation. Henry James is, possibly, an extreme example. Has any one ever attempted to tell a tale in the Henry James manner by word of mouth, even when the manner pretends to be conversational? I, for one, have yet to experience this pleasure, though I have listened to a good many able and experienced tale-tellers in my time.

Now, there is a great connection between the manner or method of a writer and the matter upon which he works his manner or method. Henry James was not an accident. Life, as he found it, was full of trivialities and polite surfaces; and a great deal of manner--style, if you like--is needful to give life and meaning to trivial things.

And James was, by no means, an isolated phenomenon. In Russia Chekhov was creating an artistic significance out of the uneventful lives of the petty bourgeoisie, whose hitherto small numbers had vastly increased with the advent of machinery and the industrialization of the country; as the villages became towns, the last vestiges of the "romantic" and "heroic" elements seemed to have departed from contemporary Russian literature. As widely divergent as the two writers were in their choice of materials and methods of expression, they yet met on common ground in their devotion to form, their painstaking perfecting of their expressions; and this tense effort alone was often enough the very life and soul of their adventure. They were like magicians creating marvels with the flimsiest of materials; they did not complain of the poverty of life, but as often as not created bricks without straw. Not for them Herman Melville's dictum, to be found in *Moby Dick*: "To produce a mighty book you must choose a mighty theme."

Roughly, then, there are two schools of creative literature, and round them there have grown up two schools of criticism. The one maintains that form is everything, that not only is perfect form essential, and interesting material non-essential, but that actually interesting material is a deterrent to perfect expression, inasmuch as material from life,

inherently imaginative, fantastic or romantic, is likely to make an author lazy and negligent and cause him to throw his whole dependence on objective facts rather than on his ingenuity in creating an individual atmosphere and vibrant patterns of his own making. The other school maintains with equal emphasis that form is not enough, that it wants a real and exciting story, that where a man's materials are rich and "big" the necessity for perfection is obviated; indeed, "rough edges" are a virtue. As one English novelist tersely put it to me: "I don't care for the carving of orange pips. All I ask of a writer is that his stuff should be big." Undoubtedly, some people prefer a cultivated garden, others nature in all her wildness. Nature, it is true, may exercise no selection; unfortunately it is too often forgotten that she is all art in the wealth and minuteness of her detail.

It seems to me that both theories are equally fallacious. I do not see how either can be wholly satisfying. There is no reason at all why a story should not contain both form and matter, a form, I should say, suited to the matter. Among the painters Vermeer is admittedly perfect; has then Rembrandt no art? Among the writers Turgenev is perfect. George Moore has compared his perfection to that of the Greeks; is it then justifiable to call Dostoevsky journalese, as some have called him? Indeed, it takes a great artist to write about great things, though, it is true, a great artist is often pardoned for lapses in style, where a minor artist can afford no such lapses. It was in such a light, with the true honesty and humility of a fine artist, that Flaubert, than whom none sought greater perfection, regarded himself before the towering Shakespeare.

This preamble is no digression, but is quite pertinent to any consideration of the contemporary short story, for I must admit that however fallacious is either of the prevalent theories which I have outlined, in practice both work out with an appalling accuracy. Of the hundreds of stories which I have had to read the number possessing a sense of form is relatively small, and of these only a few are rich in content; strictly speaking, most of them stick to the facts of everyday life, to the intimate realities of urban and suburban existence. Other stories, and these are more numerous, possibly as a reaction and in response to the human craving for the fairy tale, are concerned with the most impossible adventure and fantastic unreality, Romance with the capital R. They are often attractive in plot, able in construction, happy in invention, and their general tendency may be to fall within the definition of "life's little ironies"; yet, in spite of these admirable qualifications, the majority of these stories are unconvincing, lacking in balance, in plausibility, in that virtue which may be defined as "the writer's imagination," whose lack is something more than careless writing. How often one puts down a story with the feeling that it would take little to make it a "rattling good tale," but alas, that little is everything. A story-teller's craft depends not only on a sense of style, that is, form and good writing, but also on the creation of an atmosphere, shall we say hypnotic in effect, and capable of persuading the reader that he is a temporary inhabitant of the world the writer is describing, however remote in time or space that world may be from the world of the reader's own experience. And the more enlightened and culturally emotional the reader, the greater the power of seduction is a writer called upon to exercise. For it is obvious that all these hundreds of crude Arabian Nights tales and jungle tales and all

sorts of tales of impossible adventure appearing in the pages of our periodicals would not be written if they were not in demand by the large public.

The question arises: Why is it that authors who deal with the intimate realities of our dull, everyday life are, on the whole, so much better as writers than those who attempt to portray the more glamorous existence of the East, of the jungle, of, so to speak, other worlds? I have a theory of my own to offer in explanation, and it is this:

*A*, let us say, is a writer who has stayed at home. Let us suppose that his experience has been largely limited to London, or still more precisely, to the East End of London. He has either lived or spent a great deal of time here, and without having actively participated in the lives of the natives and denizens of the district has observed them to good purpose and saturated himself with their atmosphere. He has, in an intimate sense, secured not only his scene, but also, either actually or potentially, his characters. English--of a sort--is the language of his community; and the temper of this community, except in petty externals, is, after all, but little different from his own. He has lost no time in either travelling or in learning another's language, he has had a great deal of time for developing his technique. He has, indeed, spent the greater part of his time in working out his form. He is, as you may guess, anything but a superlative genius; certainly, we may venture to assume that he is, at all events, a fine talent, a careful observer, a painstaking worker, possessed of inventive powers within limitations. He knows his genre and his milieu, and he knows his job. He observes his people with an artistic sympathy. He is an etcher, loving his line, rather than a photographer. Vast mural decorations are beyond him.

Then there is *B*. *B* is a traveller, something of an adventurer too. His *wanderlust*, or possibly his occupation as a minor government official, journalist, or representative for some commercial firm, has taken him East. He has spent some time in Shanghai or Hong Kong, in Calcutta or Rangoon, in Tokyo or Nagasaki. He has lived chiefly in the foreign quarter and occasionally sallied out to seek adventure in the native habitat. He has secured a smattering of the native tongue, and has even taken unto himself a temporary native wife. A bold man, he has, in his way, lived dangerously and intensely. He has besides heard men of his own race living in the quarter tell weird tales of romantic nature, perhaps of a white girl who came out East, or of a native girl who had won the heart of an Englishman to his undoing. At last *B* has had enough of it, and has come home to the old country, his England, and sits down to his new job, the exploitation of his knowledge and experience of the East. Possibly a few friends who had listened to his tales urged him to set them down on paper, and *B*, who had not thought of it before, thinks it is not such a bad idea, and getting a supply of paper and a typewriter launches forth on a career as a writer. He is intent on turning out a good tale, and does remarkably well for a novice, but his inexperience as a writer, his lack of form and technique and deliberateness will hinder his progress, though now and then he will turn out a tolerable tale by sheer accident. The really great man will, of course, break through the double barrier, and then you have a Conrad: that is to say, you have a man who has lived abundantly and has been able to apply an abundance of art to his abundance of material. But that is, indeed, rare nowadays, and the whole moral of the little parable of *A* and *B* is that in our own time it is given but to few men to do both. The one has specialized in writing, the other in living.

And the comparison may be applied, of course, to the two writers who have stayed at home, even in the same district. *A* hasn't much to say, but what he says he says well, because writing means to him something as a thing in itself; he finds compensation in the quality of his writings for his lack of rich material; the whole content of his art is in his form, and that, if not wholly satisfying, is surely no mean achievement. *B*, on the other hand, may have a great deal to say, and says it badly. He thinks his material will carry him through. He does not understand that the function of art is to crystallize; synthesize the materials at hand, to distil the essences of life, to formalize natural shapes. There should be no confusing of nature and art. A mountain is nature, a pyramid is art. We have no man in the short story today who has synthesized his age, who has thrown a light on the peculiar many-sided adventure of modernity, who has achieved a sense of universality. Maupassant came near to it in his own time. Never before have men had such opportunities for knowing the world, never before has it been so easy to cover space, our means of communication have never been so rapid; yet there is an almost maddening contradiction in the fact that every man who writes is content in describing but a single facet of the great adventure of life. Our age is an age of specialization, and many a man spends a life in trying to visualize for us a fragment of existence in multitudinous variations. An Empire may be said to stand for a universalizing tendency, yet the extraordinary fact about the mass of English stories today is that, far from being expressive of any tendency to unity, they are mostly concerned with presenting the specialized atmospheres of so many individual localities and vocations. We have writers who do not go beyond Dartmoor, or Park Lane, or the East End of London; we have writers of sea stories, jungle stories, detective stories, lost jewel stories, slum stories, and we have writers who seldom stray from the cricket field or the prize ring, or Freudian complexes.

Yet, in putting on record these individual tendencies of the short story, I should be overdrawing the picture if I did not call attention to what general tendencies are in the ascendent. The supernatural element is prominent among these. Stories of ghosts, spiritualism and reincarnation are becoming increasingly popular with authors, especially with the type I have described as *A*. This is interesting, since it evinces a healthy desire to get away from the banal facts of one's standardized atmosphere, the atmosphere of suburbia. It may be both a reaction and an escape, and may express a desire for a more spiritual life than is vouchsafed us. The love of adventure and the love of love will, of course, remain with us as long as men live and love a tale, and nine tenths of the stories still deal with the favored hero and the inevitable girl.

This book is to be an annual venture and its object is the same as that of Mr. O'Brien's annual selection of American stories. It is to gather and save from obscurity every year those tales by English authors which are published in English and American periodicals and are worth preserving in permanent form. It is well known that short-story writers in Anglo-Saxon countries have not the same chance of publishing their wares in book form as their more fortunate colleagues, the novelists. This prejudice against the publication of short stories in book form is not to be justified, and it does not exist on the Continent. Most of the fine fiction, for example, published in Russia since Chekhov made the form popular, took precisely the form of the short story. It is a good form and should be

encouraged. It is also the object of this volume to call attention to new writers who show promise and to help to create a demand for their work by publishing their efforts side by side with those already accepted and established.

It has been the custom to dedicate Mr. O'Brien's annual selection of American stories to some author who has distinguished himself in the particular year by his valuable contribution to the art of the short story. We propose to adopt it with regard to our English selections. We are glad of the opportunity to associate this year's collection with the name of Stacy Aumonier. As for the stories selected for this volume, that is to some degree a matter of personal judgement; it is quite possible that other editors would, in some instances, have made a different choice.

JOHN CURNOS.

An additional word may be added on the principles which have governed our choice. We have set ourselves the task of disengaging the essential human qualities in our contemporary fiction which, when chronicled conscientiously by our literary artists, may fairly be called a criticism of life. We are not at all interested in formulae, and organised criticism at its best would be nothing more than dead criticism, as all dogmatic interpretation of life is always dead. What has interested us, to the exclusion of other things, is the fresh living current which flows through the best British and Irish work, and the psychological and imaginative reality which writers have conferred upon it.

No substance is of importance in fiction, unless it is organic substance, that is to say, substance in which the pulse of life is beating. Inorganic fiction has been our curse in the past, and bids fair to remain so, unless we exercise much greater artistic discrimination than we display at present.

The present record covers the period from July, 1921, to June, 1922, inclusive. During this period we have sought to select from the stories published in British and American periodicals those stories by British and Irish authors which have rendered life imaginatively in organic substance and artistic form. Substance is something achieved by the artist in every act of creation, rather than something already present, and accordingly a fact or a group of facts in a story only attain substantial embodiment when the artist's power of compelling imaginative persuasion transforms them into a living truth. The first test of a short story, therefore, in any qualitative analysis is to report upon how vitally compelling the writer makes his selected facts or incidents. This test may be conveniently called the test of substance.

But a second test is necessary if the story is to take rank above other stories. The true artist will seek to shape this living substance into the most beautiful and satisfying form, by skillful selection and arrangement of his materials, and by the most direct and appealing presentation of it in portrayal and characterization.

The short stories which we have examined in this study have fallen naturally into three groups. The first consists of those stories which fail, in our opinion, to survive both the test of substance and the test of form. These we have not chronicled.

The second group includes such narratives as may lay convincing claim to further consideration, because each of them has survived in a measure both tests, the test of substance and the test of form. Stories included in this group are chronicled in the list which immediately follows the "Roll of Honour."

Finally we have recorded the names of a smaller group of stories which possess, we believe, the distinction of uniting genuine substance and artistic form in a closely woven pattern with such sincerity that they are worthy of being reprinted. If all of these stories were republished, they would not occupy more space than six or seven novels of average length. Our selection of them does not imply the critical belief that they are great stories. A year which produced one great story would be an exceptional one. It is simply to be taken as meaning that we have found the equivalent of six or seven volumes worthy of republication among all the stories published during the period under consideration. These stories are listed in the special "Roll of Honour." In compiling these lists we have permitted no personal preference or prejudice to consciously influence our judgement. The general and particular results of our study will be found explained and carefully detailed in the supplementary part of the volume. Mr. Cournot has read the English periodicals, and I have read the American periodicals. We have then compared our judgements.

EDWARD J. O'BRIEN.



# Where Was Wych Street?

By **STACY AUMONIER**

(From *The Strand Magazine* and *The Saturday Evening Post*)

1921, 1922

In the public bar of the Wagtail, in Wapping, four men and a woman were drinking beer and discussing diseases. It was not a pretty subject, and the company was certainly not a handsome one. It was a dark November evening, and the dingy lighting of the bar seemed but to emphasize the bleak exterior. Drifts of fog and damp from without mingled with the smoke of shag. The sanded floor was kicked into a muddy morass not unlike the surface of the pavement. An old lady down the street had died from pneumonia the previous evening, and the event supplied a fruitful topic of conversation. The things that one could get! Everywhere were germs eager to destroy one. At any minute the symptoms might break out. And so--one foregathered in a cheerful spot amidst friends, and drank forgetfulness.

Prominent in this little group was Baldwin Meadows, a sallow-faced villain with battered features and prominent cheek-bones, his face cut and scarred by a hundred fights. Ex-seaman, ex-boxer, ex-fish-porter --indeed, to every one's knowledge, ex-everything. No one knew how he lived. By his side lurched an enormous coloured man who went by the name of Harry Jones. Grinning above a tankard sat a pimply-faced young man who was known as The Agent. Silver rings adorned his fingers. He had no other name, and most emphatically no address, but he "arranged things" for people, and appeared to thrive upon it in a scrambling, fugitive manner. The other two people were Mr. and Mrs. Dawes. Mr. Dawes was an entirely negative person, but Mrs. Dawes shone by virtue of a high, whining, insistent voice, keyed to within half a note of hysteria.

Then, at one point, the conversation suddenly took a peculiar turn. It came about through Mrs. Dawes mentioning that her aunt, who died from eating tinned lobster, used to work in a corset shop in Wych Street. When she said that, The Agent, whose right eye appeared to survey the ceiling, whilst his left eye looked over the other side of his tankard, remarked:

"Where was Wych Street, ma?"

"Lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Dawes. "Don't you know, dearie? You must be a young 'un, you must. Why, when I was a gal every one knew Wych Street. It was just down there where they built the Kingsway, like."

Baldwin Meadows cleared his throat, and said:

"Wych Street used to be a turnin' runnin' from Long Acre into Wellington Street."

"Oh, no, old boy," chipped in Mr. Dawes, who always treated the ex-man with great deference. "If you'll excuse me, Wych Street was a narrow lane at the back of the old Globe Theatre, that used to pass by the church."

"I know what I'm talkin' about," growled Meadows. Mrs. Dawes's high nasal whine broke in:

"Hi, Mr. Booth, you used ter know yer wye abaht. Where was Wych Street?"

Mr. Booth, the proprietor, was polishing a tap. He looked up.

"Wych Street? Yus, of course I knoo Wych Street. Used to go there with some of the boys--when I was Covent Garden way. It was at right angles to the Strand, just east of Wellington Street."

"No, it warn't. It were alongside the Strand, before yer come to Wellington Street."

The coloured man took no part in the discussion, one street and one city being alike to him, provided he could obtain the material comforts dear to his heart; but the others carried it on with a certain amount of acerbity.

Before any agreement had been arrived at three other men entered the bar. The quick eye of Meadows recognized them at once as three of what was known at that time as "The Gallows Ring." Every member of "The Gallows Ring" had done time, but they still carried on a lucrative industry devoted to blackmail, intimidation, shoplifting, and some of the clumsier recreations. Their leader, Ben Orming, had served seven years for bashing a Chinaman down at Rotherhithe.

"The Gallows Ring" was not popular in Wapping, for the reason that many of their depredations had been inflicted upon their own class. When Meadows and Harry Jones took it into their heads to do a little wild prancing they took the trouble to go up into the West-end. They considered "The Gallows Ring" an ungentlemanly set; nevertheless, they always treated them with a certain external deference--an unpleasant crowd to quarrel with.

Ben Orming ordered beer for the three of them, and they leant against the bar and whispered in sullen accents. Something had evidently miscarried with the Ring. Mrs. Dawes continued to whine above the general drone of the bar. Suddenly she said:

"Ben, you're a hot old devil, you are. We was just 'aving a discussion like. Where was Wych Street?"

Ben scowled at her, and she continued:

"Some sez it was one place, some sez it was another. I *know* where it was, 'cors my aunt what died from blood p'ison, after eatin' tinned lobster, used to work at a corset shop----"

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