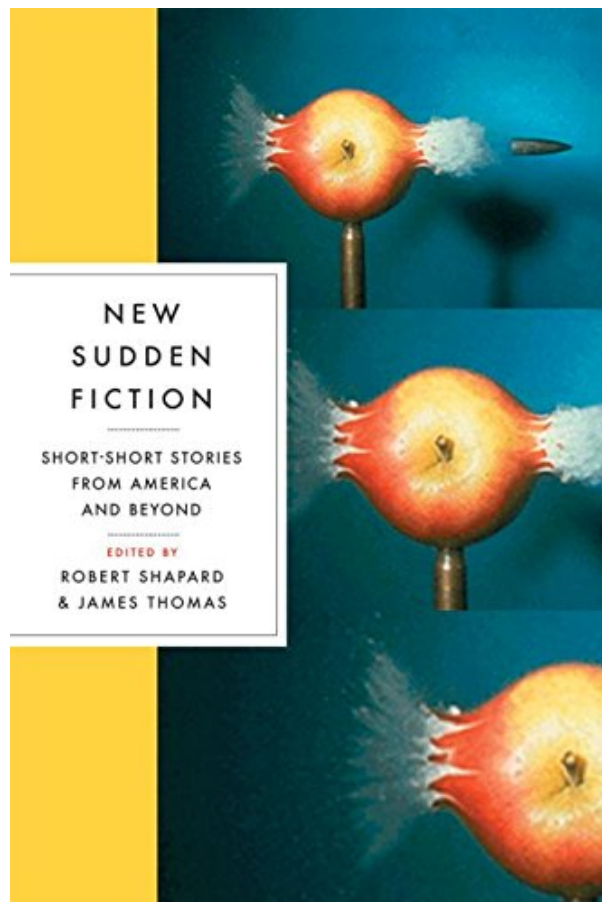
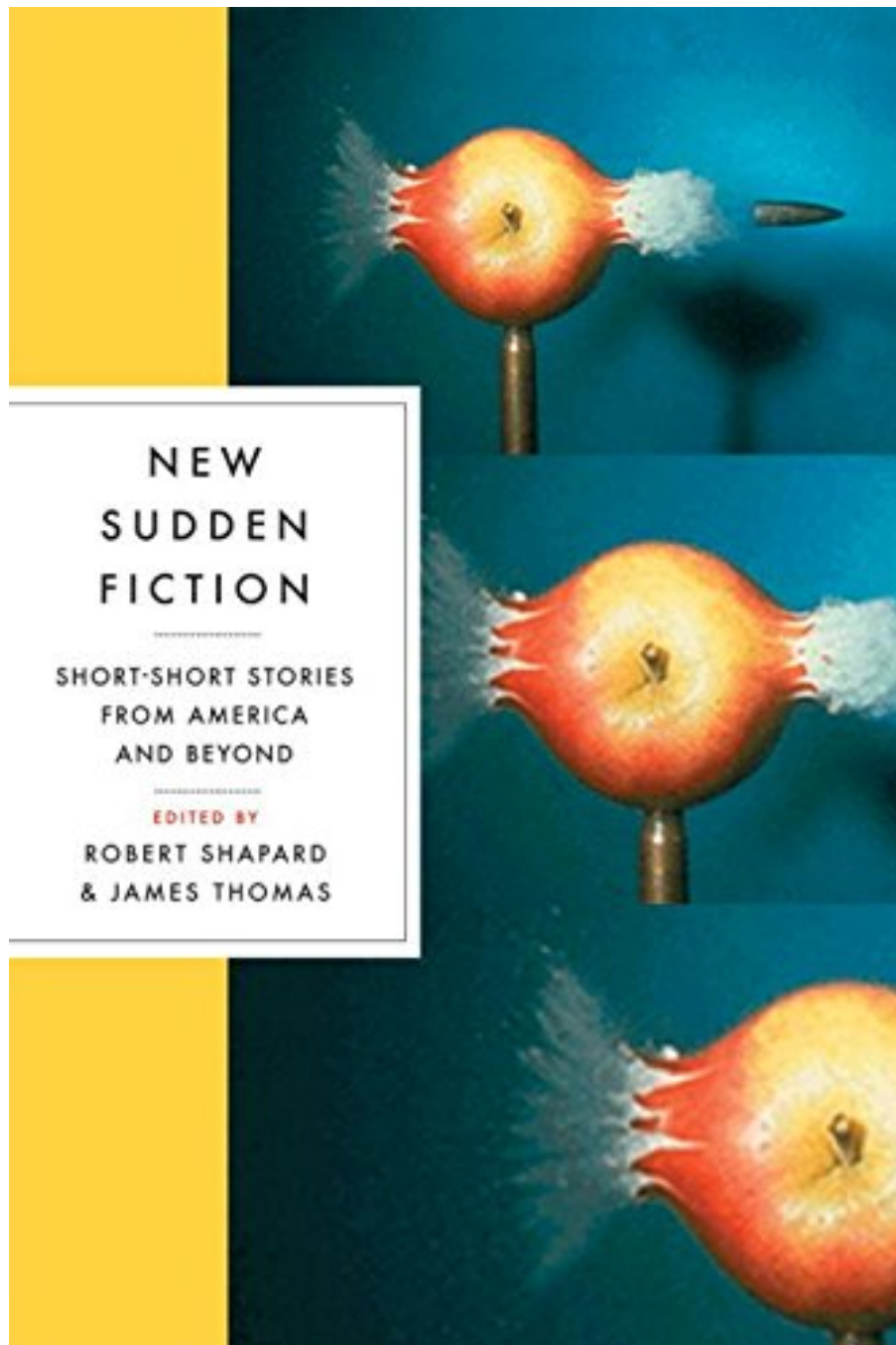


NEW SUDDEN FICTION: SHORT-SHORT STORIES FROM AMERICA AND BEYOND FROM W. W. NORTON & COMPANY



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Review

“It’s a test of the reader’s ability to fly.” (Charles Baxter)

“It can do in a page what a novel does in two hundred.” (Mark Strand)

About the Author

Robert Shapard directed the University of Hawaii MFA program and now lives in Austin, Texas.

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An all-new volume?students and lovers of literature take note: this is serious writing that's fun to read.

Responding to America's love affair with the short-short, editors Robert Shapard and James Thomas searched thousands of books and magazines to select these sixty stories?each under 2,000 words, each with its own element of surprise, whether traditional, experimental, humorous, moving, or magical. In the process they discovered both new talents and a wealth of celebrated writers, such as Jorge Luis Arzola, Aimee Bender, Teolinda Gersao, Romulus Linney, Yann Martel, Sam Shepard, and Tobias Wolff. Zdravka Evitnova conjures blood drops that cure any disease. Ian Frazier writes public relations for crows. Juan José Milás leads an amnesiac husband to an affair in the candlelit darkness of a cathedral with his wife. These tales told quickly offer pleasures long past their telling.

- Sales Rank: #50571 in Books
- Published on: 2007-01-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x 1.00" w x 5.60" l, .71 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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hit and miss

By Mr. Richard K. Weems

The original Sudden Fiction anthology was something of a literary groundbreaker as well as the start of a franchise--Robert Shapard and James Thomas could be credited with giving sudden (aka flash, aka micro, aka short short) fiction a formal stage so that the genre could (and did) become acceptable in all kinds of venues where it had not been considered legitimate before. Obviously, Raymond Carver's seminal collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (the one edited by Gordon Lish, who of course wanted to

take full credit for the form in the first Sudden Fiction anthology) may have been among the first collections to qualify the boundaries of short fiction into the realm of a page or two, but Shapard & Thomas' first Sudden Fiction anthology was possibly the first popular proof that this short form was just as competent as the longer short story form and could be tackled by writers just as competent as Carver.

From there, Shapard & Thomas sparked the Sudden Fiction anthology series and even did spots of the Flash Fiction anthology series, together or separately. This volume is the most recent installment, and it follows the method of the others--stories that tend to fall in the range of 2,000 words or lower, and familiar names (Tobias Wolff, Sam Shephard, Joyce Carol Oates, etc.) standing next to names that are not as familiar, due either to neglect in the whorls of the literary administration or to the general low quality of their work.

Of course, any anthology is going to have its hits and misses, and this one is no exception. Aimee Bender is a nice turn in the road, since all the stories before hers seem to have a definite realist tendency, and hers is the first to explore the realm of the surreal, and does so quite powerfully. Ha Jin's piece about humor and those political machines that have none is about as powerful as any Mo Yan novel, and Chuck Palahniuk is as verbose as ever, though the shorter form lets his piece resonate nicely without being swept away by its language. Sherrie Flick's "How I Left Ned" is wonderfully creepy and gothic, a story that could only be sustained in an abbreviated form, and Geoffrey Forsyth's "Mud" is an incredible musing on grief. Stacey Richter's "The Minimalist" is a spin through the world of an artistic and personal meltdown. These works show the power of the sudden fiction format--the emotions are intense, bombastic and ride prominently on the sleeve. They aren't poetic, and so don't seem appropriate to call prose poems, but instead have that kind of grounded punch that good fiction has, with events that might not be familiar but are certainly sympathetic.

Some of the misses, though, really dragged down this collection, as they showed the weaknesses this genre can exude. Toure's "I Shot the Sherriff" is a pretty redundant piece that takes a lot of obvious moves and shows a pretty weak writing hand (despite the author's arrogant bio at the back of the book). Robert Olen Butler's "Seven Pieces of Severance" is just a poor smattering of pieces from his collection Severance--cryptic monologues from decapitated heads. Elizabeth Berg's "The Party" is a rather typical musing on the differences between men and women--rather one-sided and cliché by the end. These are the pieces that serve as reminders that the term Sudden Fiction can sometimes be used to try to legitimize failed short stories--many of these pieces provide little of the kind of interest that sustains good short fiction, no matter how long: a vivid glimpse into genuine human character.

The failings of this collection are a little less forgivable than they would be in previous anthologies only because Shapard & Thomas have helped define and justify this genre, so it would seem that their positions would entail an effort to further define the genre's boundaries and possibilities. While there are quite a few pieces here that show a maturation of the sudden fiction genre, it is clear that the term is also being used to try to give credence to short-minded, poorly imaginative work. Perhaps that is just the nature of the literary game, but I would have rather finished this collection with a twitter of excitement and possibility rather than a pang of some missed opportunity.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Yes, I'm Biased: I agree with the editors about how fantastic "Sudden Fiction" is.

By C. W. Smith

I've enjoyed flash fiction for a long while now, but it has been more than awhile since I've visited the form.

This was an excellent collection to dive back in with, as most every story hit me in some way.

The preface discusses how this length and form just seems to "work," as many shorter stories can feel too

incomplete or ambiguous, and longer works can start to get bogged down. However, this length of story packs a hell of a punch, and many of these stories are perfect examples of that punch.

What I liked best, though, is the range of when these were written. I had originally assumed that all were recent stories. However, upon checking out the contributor's notes, I saw how many had copyright dates decades ago. I never would have guessed. These writer's have all done what we should strive to: they touch on something that resonates throughout the years and contexts.

That, to me, makes this more than worth the read, and--even more--makes this collection one to study, if you want to learn the short form.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Broad in Scope, a Bit Uneven in Quality

By C. Woodward

This compilation is a great effort at both defining "sudden fiction" by example and at displaying the broad scope of the work that's out there, including pieces from all over the globe. The work, according to the editors, was collected over a set period in the early 00's from what has been getting published in journals and magazines around the world. In that regard, this collection truly succeeds in capturing what the current flavor/definition is for the short-short story (not to be confused with "flash fiction," which is even shorter) (and collected in a different companion book by the same publisher) (I also admittedly plan to read it eventually) and ensures that there won't be (m)any repeats in here from other anthologies you may have read.

What is slightly disappointing about this collection is that the quality (for this reviewer) is a bit uneven. While all the stories are of rather similar lengths (3 to 5 pages for the most part), some simply go nowhere, reflecting on a moment or character in detail and arriving at very little in the way of stimulating conclusions. Others, such as Tobias Wolfe's or Sam Shepard's (two of the best in the bunch), nicely portray real conflicts, draw very real characters, and maintain forceful narratives throughout, with endings that satisfy.

If you enjoy short fiction, this is certainly worth reading, then perhaps selling back if you find only a little that you like (I'll probably keep my copy, as I think I like the parts I like enough to want to read them again later on). If you're trying to get into what's going on in contemporary short(-short) fiction, there is no better place to start. Author bios in the back will give you other book titles and such as launching points for further reading as well.

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