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# Hunter, Adrian. The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English

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Adrian Hunter's book is a very welcome addition to the "Cambridge Introductions to Literature," a series of comprehensive guides written in accessible style which are primarily designed for students and teachers, though they also cater for general readers keen on broadening their knowledge of key topics in the area. This new volume complements Martin Scofield's *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (2006) by focusing on literature from Britain and other English-language countries except the United States. Since a whole chapter of the former volume had been devoted to Henry James, no equivalent is to be found in this one. Nevertheless, the omission is mitigated by the fact that James's critical and theoretical commentaries on this literary form are often cited by Adrian Hunter, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Studies at the University of Stirling whose main research interests are in 19th- and 20th-century British and American literature. In addition, frequent references to Guy de Maupassant and the formidable presence of Anton Chekhov's short fiction attest to Hunter's acknowledgement of the French and Russian influences on Anglophone practitioners of this challenging genre. His clear and succinct analysis is unmistakably grounded on his extensive teaching experience and the sound scholarship he has presented through a number of erudite contributions to academic journals.<sup>1</sup>

Always highlighting the relationship between texts and contexts, Hunter's chronological overview first maps the emergence of the short story in England over two centuries and then traces its development in other nations of the English-speaking world. The perception of the 'shortness' of the short story as a positive quality – rather than a privation, a hindrance, an obstacle, or a mere matter of 'non-extension' – insistently runs through all these pages as their central argument. The exploration of a choice of condensed narratives gives opportunities to encounter many examples of ellipsis, compression, implication, ambiguity, allusion, interrogation and *plotlessness*, so that in the end readers have a good grasp of how various authors have exploited the

manifold aesthetic possibilities of short fiction, a genre which became increasingly governed by its own principles instead of being dependent on those of the novel.

Starting with some prefatory remarks about “the art of saying less but meaning more” (2) and a concise summary of the book’s contents, the volume is divided into four parts, each of them consisting of three or four chapters. Every part is preceded by a (perhaps unnecessary) introduction which at times seems somewhat repetitive after one reads what follows. The introduction to “Part I: The nineteenth century” charts the ‘rise’ of the short story in England, as illustrated first by Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, followed by Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad. The contributions that these four celebrities made to “the art of writing short” are analyzed in the first two chapters of this section, whereas the third chapter (entitled “The *Yellow Book* circle and the 1890s avant-garde”) assesses several once famous but nowadays much less familiar writers, such as Hubert Crackanthorpe, Ella D’Arcy, George Egerton, and Arthur Morrison, all of them associated with the late-Victorian magazine which – Hunter contends – in the period 1894-97 played an extremely important role in the progression of the British short story, not only by raising its status and increasing its visibility, but also by associating it with the avant-garde. At this point, curious readers seeking additional information about Crackanthorpe’s stories discussed on pages 34-36, for instance, will be frustrated when they discover that the editions included on page 190 of this guide are virtually unavailable, because they date back to the 1890s. As a result, one might question the inclusion criteria, doubting that a writer so little known at present should have taken so much space in this kind of survey.

Hunter emphatically claims for Kipling a place in the mainstream modernist canon, and asserts that the Indian-born author was excluded from it by successive generations of critics because of “his fondness for the extraordinary, the magical and the exotic” together with “his reputation as an apologist for imperialism,” in spite of the fact that he “wrote and published in the same period as James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf”, producing pieces “as restless and innovative as the stories in *Dubliners*” (24). However, by locating Kipling in the middle chapter of Part I, the scholar’s contention loses most of its strength, and one may wonder whether, for the sake of consistency, these comments should not have been better moved to the following section, “Part II: The modernist short story,” where we find the names that anyone would have expected. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and Samuel Beckett have received the special attention they rightly deserve in four separate chapters, in which Hunter is at his best. In the face of massive critical writing on this area, he avoids entangling details and writes insightfully about the adequacy of the short story to meet the representational demands of the modern world. It is no surprise that this period was marked by the flourishing of an enigmatic genre whose defining qualities coincided with the key values of experimental modernism, including difficulty and obscurity, and the tendency to imply rather than state, to raise unanswered and even unanswerable questions, to favor highly compressed forms of characterization, to take economy of expression to its limits, and to connect brevity with plurality or multiplicity.

“Part III: Post-modernist stories” provides a good account of the issues involved in the decades from around 1930 until approximately 1980, a period which witnessed the enduring persistence of modernist theories and practices together with a passionate reaction against them. The nationalist concerns evoked by Sean O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor in their short stories are set in sharp contrast with Joyce’s internationalism.

Chapter 8 examines in detail how the two Cork authors' fictional representations of Ireland departed from the abstruseness of their predecessor's later works and re-established connections with popular oral culture and the regional writing of their native country. The following chapter shows to what extent Elizabeth Bowen and V.S. Pritchett both incorporated the modernist legacy they had inherited and moreover transformed it by turning against its subjectivization and by seeking to restore the social function that storytelling had lost after years of intense experimentation. Hunter specifically complains that Pritchett has not been properly recognized by the academy and partly ascribes such neglect to the melodramatic quality of his short fiction. The closing chapter of this third section offers a detailed discussion of Angela Carter's rewritings of classical fairy tales, and reviews a selection of Ian McEwan deeply distressing stories, peopled by inscrutable characters whose motivations remain puzzlingly unresolved.

"Part IV: Post-colonial and other stories" brings together five Anglophone authors from countries that are geographically far apart, but share the experience of (post)colonialism. Chapter 11 links the New Zealander Frank Sargeson and the Australian Marjorie Barnard, two writers whose politically committed stories address fundamental issues of gender and national identity. While Hunter points out the significant differences between their social and historical backgrounds, he joins James Kelman and Chinua Achebe in Chapter 12 by virtue of their common belief in the importance of cultural self-determination and their rejection of absolutism, whether in Scotland or in Nigeria.

The last chapter of the book deals exclusively with Alice Munro's multi-layered fictional structures, which Hunter praises for their enacting of a complex poetics of deliberate contradiction and uncertainty. These final pages successfully transmit a genuine admiration for Munro's indirect and elliptical prose, and should further understanding of how her technical skill operates in a selection of individual stories, starting with "Heirs of the Living Body" (1971), moving on to "The Stone in the Field" (1982) and ending with "Friend of My Youth" (1990). Nevertheless, Munro's work would have been covered in more depth if her contributions of the 1990s and the present century had been also considered. Furthermore, if the newly published criticism on her stories had been taken into account, Hunter would have realized that the "marked reluctance to deal with them as short stories" no longer "persists," as he affirms on page 165, but has long been relegated to the past. Another flaw in this chapter pertains to the bad academic habit of silencing or referring to "one commentator" (page 166) when the perceptive intuitions of one's colleagues are drawn upon, but otherwise citing the full name of the same person when expressing one's disagreement or dismissal. In this case, the scholar who has been unfairly treated is Coral Ann Howells, whose reading of "Friend of My Youth" Adrian Hunter deems unproblematic (page 175). This contention seems particularly improper within the context of a guide addressed to a wide readership that is not likely to be acquainted with *Alice Munro* (1998) and the other publications with which Howells has enhanced the reputation of whom she calls "Canada's greatest short-story writer in English."<sup>2</sup>

The major deficiency of the book probably lies in its "Guide to Further Reading" on pages 188-96, which is *obviously not* meant to be exhaustive, but is not as useful as it could be. Since the anthologies on the list of bibliographic references on page 188 date from the years 1956 to 1998, those wishing to find some new titles are bound to be disappointed. On the other hand, the omission of volumes of short stories that have

been discussed in various chapters of the book is really perplexing.<sup>3</sup> Conceding that no consensus can ever be achieved when evaluating a selection of critical works on individual writers, perhaps the author will consider compiling a revised version of the one presented on pages 189-95 so that it becomes not all-inclusive, but sufficient to cover all relevant source material. As to the list of “General critical works on the short story” (pages 195-96), its entries range from 1941 to 1994. No objection is to be made to the inclusion of titles that are still far from being out of fashion because they remain landmark works in criticism of the short story. Yet again, as in the case of the anthologies, one suspects that at least several worthy publications of this kind must have appeared since 1994.

Despite these reservations, the advantages of *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* far outweigh the few areas that could benefit from closer attention. One of the greatest achievements of the author of this thought-provoking book lies in his ability to stimulate a well-informed response to a fictional genre which, in spite of its popularity, is still too often misunderstood and plagued by misconceptions. Thus, we owe thanks to Adrian Hunter for sharing with us his knowledge and his love of the short story.

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## NOTES

1. See, for instance, his essays “Beckett and the Joycean Short Story.” *Essays in Criticism* 51. 2 (April 2001): 230-44; “Constance Garnett’s Chekhov and the Modernist Short Story.” *Translation and Literature* 12 (March 2003): 69-87; and “The ‘Custom’ of Fiction: Virginia Woolf, the Hogarth Press and the Modernist Short Story.” *English* 56. 215 (Summer 2007): 147-169.
  2. Coral Ann Howells, “Alice Munro’s Heritage Narratives,” *Where Are the Voices Coming From? Canadian Culture and the Legacies of History* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 5.
  3. In the case of Alice Munro (page 193), the following collections are missing: *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978, published in the United States and in the United Kingdom as *The Beggar Maid*), and *The View from Castle Rock: Stories* (2006).
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## ABSTRACTS

### Book Reviews