

Bite-sized: 50 great short stories, chosen by Hilary Mantel, George Saunders and more

[George Saunders](#) Last modified on Mon 4 Feb 2019 12.20 GMT

"The Tribute" by Jane Gardam (1980)

John McGahern and Annie Proulx are among my favourite authors, but to dispel gloom I choose this story from Jane Gardam's 1980 collection *The Sidmouth Letters*. Reading this gleeful story in my expatriate days, I recognised the cast of "diplomatic wives", trailing inebriate husbands through the ruins of empire. Mostly dialogue, it is a deft, witty tale in which a small kindness – though not by a diplomatic wife – pays off 40 years later. I must have read it a dozen times, to see how its note is sustained and the surprise is sprung; every time it makes me smile with delight. **Hilary Mantel**

"The Stone Boy" by Gina Berriault (1957)

This great and underrated masterpiece is a meditation on good and evil and especially about the way that people's expectations and assumptions about us may wear us down and eventually force us into compliance with their view. But it is a much deeper and more biblical story than that and, like any great work of art, resists reduction. Berriault, who died in 1999, is known as a San Francisco writer. A wonderful sampling of her stories is available in *Women in Their Beds: New & Selected Stories*. **George Saunders**

"The Love of a Good Woman" by Alice Munro (1998)

Among the handful of short stories closest to my heart, I've chosen "The Love of a Good Woman" by Canadian writer Munro, from her 1998 collection of that name. It's about a murder – probably it's a murder, because nothing is certain – and a love match that depends on keeping that murder secret. Like so many of Munro's stories, this one has the scope of a novel yet never feels hurried or crowded. The sociology of a small town in rural Ontario is caught on the wing in the loose weave of her narration; the story takes in whole lifetimes, and yet its pace is also exquisitely slow, carrying us deep inside particular moments. A woman moves among the willows beside a river at night, making up her mind. **Tessa Hadley**



Alice Munro carries us deep inside particular moments. Photograph: Alice Munro./Alamy

"The Siren" by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1961)

Born in Palermo in 1896, [Lampedusa](#) was a learned prince who died before his work was published. In addition to his celebrated novel *The Leopard*, he left behind some short stories, including "The Siren", a mysterious masterpiece that jolts and haunts me every time I read it. It contains two narrative planes, two central protagonists, two settings, two tonal registers

and two points of view. There are even two titles; though published as “La Sirena”, it was originally called “Lighea”, the name of the siren, portrayed as a 16-year-old girl. Lampedusa’s description renders this fatefully seductive creature specific, vulnerable and real. **Jhumpa Lahiri**

The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories, edited by Jhumpa Lahiri, will be published on 7 March.

“A Simple Heart” by Gustave Flaubert (1877)

Flaubert wrote this story for his old friend and “fellow troubadour” George Sand. It’s the story of Félicité, an old servant-woman, and the diminishing loves in her life, the final one being a (live – at first) parrot. It has a sombre novelistic density, and is touching and tender, comic and grotesque. Control of tone is central to its effect. It also exemplifies the Flaubertian principle that irony and sympathy are not incompatible. Sand died before she was able to read it. “So it is with all our dreams,” noted Flaubert. **Julian Barnes**

“Friends” by Grace Paley (1985)

This story tracks three friends as they visit a fourth who is dying. The women then go home on the train. It ends with a brief conversation between the narrator, Faith, and her 18-year-old son. The piece has warm intimacy as well as cold spaces within it. It captures the all-encompassing intrusion of the world and its conditioning of our day-to-day emotions, our children’s colonisation of our hearts and our powerlessness ultimately to protect them. Its understated tone is perfectly pitched: the narrative moves gently, then soars, into either sadness, or joyful contentment – again and again. I am in this story, and so is the world. **Ahdaf Soueif**

“My Life” by Anton Chekhov (1896)

This is Chekhov's longest short story and one of the very few he wrote in the first-person singular. It's the autobiography of a young man in provincial Russia struggling to live up to his lofty ideals and being brought down by life's random contingencies. I actually adapted "My Life" for a play and know it intimately. If you could only read a single Chekhov story then this is the one: all his gifts and genius – the wry, dark comedy of his voice, his unique angle on the human condition, his refusal to judge – are contained in it. **William Boyd**

"In the Night" by Jamaica Kincaid (1978)

Part poetic incantation, part eccentric kaleidoscopic vision, this is a story which contorts each time you read it. Born in Antigua, Kincaid invents aesthetics which are wholly unique, transfiguring human form and surroundings, in particular, the Caribbean landscapes. Here, she conveys the multiple textures of smaller islands, creating a literary geography which remains experimental, new and indefinable. **Irenosen Okojie**

"Music at Annahullion" by Eugene McCabe (2004)

McCabe's story is set on the border between Monaghan and Fermanagh sometime in the 1950s or 60s. Two brothers and a sister are uneasily sharing a smallholding. The landscape itself and the states of sour feeling are described with sharpness and precision. When the sister announces that she would like a piano that is advertised for sale locally, one of the brothers buys it for her. But it won't fit into the house and is left to rot outside. The failure to get the piano into the house has an extraordinary power and pathos. Its purchase has stood for all hope, and now there is no hope. The hard-won sense of despair and darkness in the final pages of this small masterpiece is memorable and chilling. **Colm Tóibín**



Densely textured reportage ... Jo Ann Beard

"Werner" by Jo Ann Beard (2007)

Only afterwards did I discover that this was in fact a piece of densely textured reportage, but it taught me so much about how to write a short story that I will always see it as one. A young man, Werner Hoeflich, trapped by a fire, escapes by leaping from the window of his New York apartment, across the intervening gap and in through the window of the adjacent building. It has the richness of a novel, the raw and dirty grip of life and was, for me, a revelation. Fine language and a deftly conjured mood are all well and good, but fiction – of whatever length – should thrill. **Mark Haddon**

"The Window Theatre" by Ilse Aichinger (1953)

Miscommunication, antic disposition, voyeurism, glee – this translation of one of Aichinger's most famous stories provides windows upon windows upon windows. Simply expressed and made to linger long in the mind, it was my first experience of the prizewinning Austrian writer and her dark, precise prose styling, and the start of an ongoing pursuit on my part to read more of her work. **Eley Williams**

"The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe (1843)

Poe's obsessive theme was the terror of losing sanity – never more dramatically evoked than in this masterpiece. In "The Tell-Tale Heart", one of Poe's shortest "tales of the grotesque and arabesque", and the one that seems most contemporary in the hallucinatory intensity of its narration, an unnamed individual commits a brutal, seemingly unprovoked murder of an old man with whom he lives, disposes of the body by dismembering and burying it beneath the floorboards of the residence they share, and succumbs to madness and self-destruction in the aftermath of guilt. Throughout, the narrator insists on his sanity: "True – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them." That the murder is entirely irrational is acknowledged by the murderer: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it."

Poe is a master of the "unreliable narrator" – a voice that speaks with devastating spontaneity and is utterly convincing – that has come to be a staple of much suspense and horror fiction in the 20th and 21st centuries. Unhampered by the literary pretensions of certain of Poe's other, longer stories, totally committed to its unrepentant pathology, and its visceral celebration of this pathology, "The Tell-Tale Heart" is the very essence of Poe, as Poe is himself the very essence of the American gothic tradition.

Joyce Carol Oates

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" by Ambrose Bierce (1890)

Many readers might come to this from the short film, made rather confusingly in French. But it's a tale set during the American civil war. Peyton Farquhar is being hanged by Union soldiers on a small bridge in Alabama. To say more might ruin the experience of reading it. When I happened on the story a few years ago, I thought I might be one of only a few intrepid readers. Of course, it is considered to be one of the best stories in American literature. **Sebastian Barry**

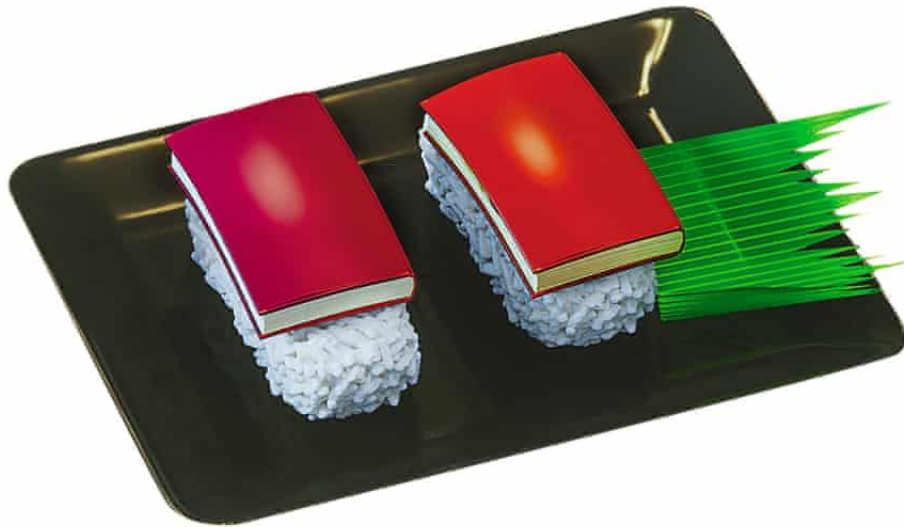


Illustration: Peter Crowther/The Guardian

"After Rain" by William Trevor (1996)

[William Trevor](#) has influenced me more than any other writer, and it's impossible for me to name one story by him that is an absolute favourite. I can, however, name 20 to 30 stories that I return to often. One of these is "After Rain". A woman travels alone to recover from a love that has ended too abruptly, but the wish that solitude could exorcise loneliness is as faulty as the wish that love could exorcise disappointment brought by love. The story to me is like an eye drop for the mind. It doesn't offer a resolution to life's muddiness, but it offers a moment of clarity. **Yiyun Li**

"In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" by William H Gass (1968)

The thing that is most striking about this story, aside from its restrained, grave beauty, is that it should manage to be so moving. On one level it is a dryly detailed and topographically exact portrait of a small town in the American midwest, but on another it is a devastating threnody for lost love. Gass was one of the great prose stylists, and the writing here is typically smooth and pellucid, conjuring its effects by stealth and unflinching control. Simply, and by simple means, a masterpiece. **John Banville**

"American Express" by James Salter (1988)

The temporal shifts in James Salter's short fiction are its distinguishing glory. Decades unfold inside the beat of a sentence; a single moment might linger unspoken for many pages. Time seems to concertina, expanding and contracting to open out pockets of aromatic description. In "American Express", a pair of venal New York lawyers make a shabby killing and embark with their riches on a playboy jaunt through Italy, where one of them takes up with a schoolgirl. The story deals in oxymorons – bitter desire, weak power – and jolts to a conclusion that is harsh, cool, indelible. **Kevin Barry**

"Paradise" by Edna O'Brien (2014)

Key to a great short story is the tension and torsion created within each sentence. "Paradise" combines remarkable disquiet, poetry and narrative drive. O'Brien is a phenomenal architect of landscape, both physical and human, imbuing her setting with exact detail, lush discomfort, intrigue and counterintuitive fate. The main character, a nurse, has been taken to the overseas villa of her rich lover. Not only must she learn to swim and

entertain his companions, she's interviewing – without any real prospect – for the position of wife. The story is lit with sexual chemistry, but travels a horribly misaligned path. Its true test lies in finding an exit from the female dream. **Sarah Hall**

"Hands" by Sherwood Anderson (1916)

This is a strange, dark little story. Its charm comes from the eccentricities of its subject, former schoolteacher Wing Biddlebaum, since "the story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands". Anderson evokes the Ohio town of Winesburg by focusing on the hands of its inhabitants. Wing's hands are "slender, and forever trying to conceal themselves" and he notices how the hands of those around him are "quieter, inexpressive". And it's the wandering hands of Wing Biddlebaum, who has changed his name from Adolph Myers, that leads to the story's disturbing conclusion. **Guy Gunaratne**

"Let It Snow" by David Sedaris (2003)

Sedaris is in the fifth grade when heavy snow closes the schools. After a few days, his mother breaks down: "Get the hell out of my house," she says, "and stay out!". The little Sedarises go off sledding and return to find the door locked against them. They peer through the window to see their mother watching TV and glugging wine. 'Open the door,' they yell, 'it's us!'. She closes the drapes on them. "That bitch!" shouts a Sedaris sister. Fun turns to fear, mild sibling savagery follows and then, suddenly, it's OK again.

A story – more memoir than fiction – that starts with the recognition that the very sight of you drives your mother to drink is attractive to me. But when it ends with that mother wading barelegged through five inches of snow to reach you, it's everything a story should be. It's *The Sound of Music/Lord of*

the Flies/Owl Babies in a few short pages. He is a genius. **Nina Stibbe**. *Reasons to Be Cheerful* by Nina Stibbe will be published by Viking on 28 March.

"The Distance of the Moon" by Italo Calvino (1963)

This is a gloriously sensual story, narrated by a man who wants another's wife – but the true star of the show is the moon. Calvino imagines it so close it risks dipping its scales in the sea. Fishermen gather lunar milk as the protagonist writhes in unrequited love. It is a great example of magic realism – full of texture and motion and mischief and longing. **Leone Ross** *Come Let Us Sing Anyway*, by Leone Ross, is published by Peepal Tree.

Contemporary and classic tales picked by Chris Power

"Civil Peace" by Chinua Achebe (1971)

Achebe didn't write many short stories (in the preface to his 1972 collection, *Girls at War*, he notes that "a dozen pieces in twenty years must be accounted a pretty lean harvest by any reckoning"), but his best are deeply memorable. "Civil Peace" takes place in the immediate aftermath of the Biafran war, and gives vivid life to the luck and misfortune experienced by Jonathan Iwegbu – an incorrigible optimist in a devastated society – and the surviving members of his family.

"In a Bamboo Grove" by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1921)

Akutagawa's ingenious riddle of a story takes the form of seven testimonies given to a magistrate in the course of a murder investigation. A samurai has

been found dead in a bamboo grove, but the narrative doesn't end with the confession of the notorious bandit Tajōmaru. Instead, two subsequent testimonies, that of the samurai's wife and of the samurai himself, via a spirit medium, contradict each other and the bandit's story, and ask the reader to turn investigator and puzzle out the truth.



Thought-provoking ... Margaret Atwood. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

"Happy Endings" by Margaret Atwood (1983)

Alice Munro once said: "I want the story to exist somewhere so that in a way it's still happening ... I don't want it to be shut up in the book and put away – oh well, that's what happened." Atwood articulates the same position in this fun, thought-provoking story that begins with a man meeting a woman, then offers variants of what happens next. Any ending that isn't death, she concludes, is false, and the interesting part of stories isn't what happens, but how and why.

"Going to Meet the Man" by James Baldwin (1965)

A southern white deputy sheriff tries and fails to have sex with his wife. As she goes to sleep he talks about the vicious beating he gave a black

protestor earlier that day, and returns to a deeper and even darker memory from his childhood: the ritual killing of a black man. After the killing, there was a picnic. Baldwin doesn't deny his character humanity, but as the story's shocking climax shows, neither does he forgive him.

"The Garden of Forking Paths" by Jorge Luis Borges (1941)

When described in summary, there is a danger of reducing Borges to a collection of tropes: labyrinths, mirrors, invented books (he avoided "the madness of composing vast books" by pretending they exist and writing commentaries on them). But with these elements he explored some of the most thrilling ideas in fiction. Labyrinths and strange books are both present here, as is a theory of existence that anticipates the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. Extraordinarily, all these elements are enfolded within an account of a wartime espionage mission.

"This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" by Tadeusz Borowski (1946)

From spring 1943 to summer 1944 the young Polish poet Borowski was a political prisoner in Auschwitz. His stories are some of the darkest documents in world literature. This one describes the narrator's first shift as a kapo unloading trains packed with Jewish men, women and children. Borowski's prose alternates between a blunt numbness and image making of extraordinary power.

"The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter (1979)

In [The Bloody Chamber](#) Angela Carter rewrote some of the best known fairytales – "Beauty and the Beast", "Snow White", "Bluebeard" –

challenging their assumptions about gender, sexual cruelty and morality. In "The Company of Wolves" Red Riding Hood is no longer the meek victim of the wolf, but a woman of agency and courage who uses her sexuality to tame him.

"Why Don't You Dance?" by Raymond Carver (1981)

The best Carver stories don't require the conventional techniques of exposition or backstory but create an extraordinary immediacy. Here we witness a man who has taken his furnishings and arranged them on his lawn: bed, couch, desk, turntable, lamp. It's all for sale, and as the man gets drunk with a young couple looking to furnish their apartment, we can guess how he has got here. But a hangnail of the unknowable remains, and stays long in the memory.

"The Country Husband" by John Cheever (1954)

Cheever is known as a chronicler of the suburbs, but in this story the leafy neighbourhood of Shady Hill, a recurring location in his fiction, blends the domestic with something much stranger, almost magical. The story is comic (its title mirrors William Wycherley's 1675 comedy of manners *The Country-Wife*), but darker currents work beneath its surface and it builds to a stunning finale that is one of the most rapturous passages Cheever ever wrote.

"An Outpost of Progress" by Joseph Conrad (1897)

Kayerts and Carlier, agents for the Great Trading Company, are "two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals" left in charge of a remote

trading station. Conrad mines a deep vein of irony as he describes their work "serving the cause of progress". As the story unfolds, and the men are shown to be idiotic cogs in the engine of colonialism, Conrad exposes the gap between the high-flown language of such projects ("progress", "civilisation", "virtue") and their brutal reality.

"Twilight of the Superheroes" by Deborah Eisenberg (2006)

Eisenberg's story is high on the list of great literature about 9/11. Since the 1990s she has examined the effects of American power on the world and asked the question one of her characters asks here: "How far away does something have to be before you have the right to not really know about it?" The attack on New York, that "terrible day", although it seemed to come from nowhere, "had been prepared for a long, long time, though it had been prepared behind a curtain".



Mavis Gallant shows a profound grasp of the psychology of love affairs. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe/The Guardian

"In the Tunnel" by Mavis Gallant (1971)

Sarah's father sends her from Canada to Grenoble as a way of ending her relationship with a married professor, but she ends up on the French Riviera. There she meets Roy, an ex-prison inspector, and rashly moves in with him. The story's charge arises from a combination of wit, the awfulness of the relationship's collapse, and Gallant's profound grasp of the psychology of love affairs. She talks about her characters in a way that makes you feel your own perceptiveness is being worked like a muscle.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892)

During her lifetime Gilman was best known for her nonfiction, and she was forgotten after her suicide. Her fiction, in particular "The Yellow Wallpaper", was rediscovered in the 1970s by feminist academics. This chilling story takes the "madwoman" figure of gothic fiction, memorably used by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, and describes her experience from the inside looking out. Having been told to avoid mental stimulation by her doctor following an episode of depression, Gilman wrote the story to "convince him of the error of his ways".

"The Overcoat" by Nikolai Gogol (1842)

It is uncertain whether it was Turgenev or Dostoevsky who said, "We all came out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'", but his influence on those writers – as well as on Tolstoy, Kafka, Nabokov, Borges and many more – is profound. The main character of this bleakly hilarious story, the downtrodden government clerk Akaky Akakievich, is arguably the first antihero in modern literature, and his doomed pursuit of a new overcoat one of the most memorably absurd quests in fiction.

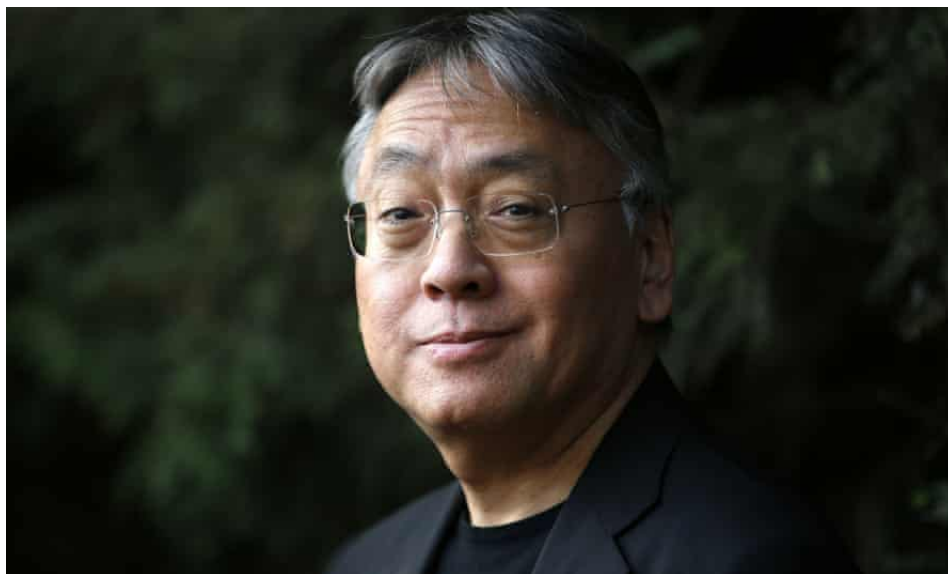
"Six Feet of the Country" by Nadine Gordimer

(1953)

The reality of apartheid, and later the effects of its aftermath, dominates Gordimer's fiction. Here her narrator, who has escaped the tension of Johannesburg to play at farming in a rural suburb, becomes enraged when, following the death and autopsy of one of his workers' brothers, the authorities return the wrong body for burial. Despite his efforts to achieve justice, the story's final, bitterly ironic lines reveal that he is blind to his own racism.

"Big Two-Hearted River" by Ernest Hemingway (1925)

Hemingway's distinctive style – which [John Updike](#) described as "gleaming economy and aggressive minimalism" – is stunningly showcased here. Nick Adams's journey into the Michigan backwoods is also a journey into his own war-damaged psyche, and his unwillingness to fish the deep water of the swamp a resonant evocation of trauma.



Visions of an alternative Britain ... Kazuo Ishiguro. Photograph: Alastair Grant/AP

"A Village After Dark" by Kazuo Ishiguro (2001)

The tension in this uncanny piece is stoked by Ishiguro's refusal to provide more than tantalising fragments of backstory. At nightfall an old man, Fletcher, arrives at a village where he once held great influence, but is now resented ("I was mistaken about a lot of things," he admits). This might be an alternative Britain, or a future one. The dilapidated buildings and Fletcher's tramp-like appearance give the story a Beckettian feel, while its allegorical quality carries over to Ishiguro's novel *The Buried Giant*.

"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson (1948)

Asked to describe her writing, Jackson once noted its fascination with "the uncontrolled, unobserved wickedness of human behaviour". "The Lottery", in which a crowd gathers for a ceremony in the main square of a New England village on a sunny June morning, ends with one of the nastiest surprises in fiction. When the *New Yorker* printed the story it became the "[Cat Person](#)" of its era as letters flooded in expressing admiration, disgust, and – unbelievably – concern that the gruesome story was true.

"Emergency" by Denis Johnson (1991)

Johnson's story begins in a hospital emergency room. It's the night shift, and Fuckhead (his nickname is the only name for him we get) and Georgie are taking care of hospital business while swallowing every pharmaceutical they can get their hands on. When their shift finishes, they drive into the countryside and reality unravels completely. Johnson rides a line between the sacred and the profane, between hilarity and sadness., and writes prose that will take your breath away

"Araby" by James Joyce (1914)

The stories in *Dubliners* divide into the four stages of life, and "Araby" encapsulates the turbulence and humiliation of adolescence in a boy's lonely night-time journey across Dublin to buy a gift for the girl he loves.



James Joyce explores the turbulence and humiliation of adolescence. Photograph: Lipnitzki/Roger Viollet/Getty Images

"A Bright Green Field" by Anna Kavan (1958)

If you love JG Ballard, you should read Anna Kavan. Few novelists, Ballard said, "could match the intensity of her vision", and that same intensity fuels her stories. The narrator of "A Bright Green Field" claims to encounter the same, unnaturally vivid field of grass wherever she goes. It's an unlikely candidate for a *bete noire*, but Kavan's descriptions of a mountain town in the gathering gloom, loomed over by "the sheer emerald wall that was the meadow", create an atmosphere of powerful unease.

"Extra" by Yiyun Li (2003)

Granny Lin is 51, and doesn't know when everyone started calling her granny. Working as a maid at a boarding school in the Beijing suburbs she develops feelings for six-year-old Kang, a rich man's illegitimate son, an

unwanted "extra" who "has to be got rid of". Granny Lin's love is complicated; is it maternal, or is it perhaps the great romance she missed out on in her youth? Li has a Chekhovian ability to disappear from the text, allowing a remarkable intensity to develop between reader and story.

"The Husband Stitch" by Carmen Maria Machado (2014)

Machado takes a grisly campfire tale ("The Green Ribbon"), combines it with the purported medical practice of suturing a woman's perineum with an extra stitch or two after childbirth to increase her husband's pleasure, and creates a powerful modern fable about misogyny and motherhood. Before her wedding day, as Machado expertly builds the atmosphere of foreboding, the narrator notes that, "Brides never fare well in stories. Stories can sense happiness and snuff it out like a candle".

"Madame Tellier's House" by Guy de Maupassant (1881)

Maupassant, probably the only short-story writer as influential as Chekhov, wrote in two modes: short, impressively constructed but one-dimensional stories with trick endings ("The Necklace" is the most famous of these), and longer, more interesting work. He wrote "Madame Tellier's House" after a friend reported passing a brothel in Rouen with a sign on its door saying, "Closed because of First Communion". His expansion on this irresistible detail resulted in one of his greatest stories.

"A Horse and Two Goats" by RK Narayan (1970)

Narayan, who wrote more than 200 short stories, called them "concentrated miniatures of human experience in all its opulence". The

opulence of the clay horse at the centre of this story has faded beneath the Indian sun, but the conversation it triggers between an American tourist who speaks no Tamil and Muni, a poor peasant who speaks no English, is not only very funny, but also telling about the degree to which misunderstanding is an unavoidable part of human interaction.

“Minutes of Glory” by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1976)

This story by Kenya’s most prominent writer follows the struggles of barmaid Beatrice as she works in a succession of increasingly seedy establishments. Men prey on her, buying her body as if it were “a bag of potatoes or a sack of cabbages”, and her hopes of living the high life in Nairobi become more unlikely by the day. “She fought life with dreams,” Ngũgĩ writes, and through a reckless action Beatrice’s fantasies briefly become reality before the story reaches its sorrowful conclusion.

“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor (1953)

This story is a vicious and darkly funny account of a family’s encounter with a criminal gang led by the psychotic Misfit. Its closing lines, and the apparent act of grace they describe, are as memorable as they are ambiguous.



Emotional impact ... Akhil Sharma. Photograph: Ulf Andersen/Getty Images

“We Didn’t Like Him” by Akhil Sharma (2013)

Two boys grow up together on a lane in Delhi. One, the narrator, becomes a lawyer. The other, Manshu, becomes pandit of the local temple. The narrator’s burgeoning dislike for Manshu, the way the events of life bring them back into contact with one another, the Hindu burial process and the mechanics of “putting someone in the Ganges”: these elements are so absorbingly animated that the story’s emotional impact, when it arrives, feels like an ambush.

“Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology” by Nafissa Thompson-Spires (2015)

Police shoot two black men outside a comic-book convention in LA, while halfway across the country an artist buys his daughter a cupcake at a vegan bakery. Thompson-Spires’s self-reflexive story is “angry, like a big black fist”, but it’s also breathtaking in the way it loops back and forth in time and constantly second-guesses the reader’s assumptions.

"Smote (or When I Find I Cannot Kiss You in Front of a Print by Bridget Riley)" by Eley Williams (2015)

"To kiss you," [this story](#) begins, "should not involve such fear of precision." Williams's story is less a stream of consciousness than a barrelling wave, as a woman debates whether or not to kiss her girlfriend in an art gallery, and all the doubt, thrill, uncertainty, hilarity and panic of love is compressed into a few seconds of indecision.

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