



THE EYE

The long and short of lit

I don't recall anyone telling Poe, Kafka, Paley, or Carver to write longer. So why are we insisting that all of today's short-story writers become novelists?

BY PAMELA FEINSILBER

ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN GRABER

I've just finished reading Ethan Canin's new novel—his first in seven years—and I must say, I can't help sighing for all the short stories he could have written in that time. Canin is one of the best and most successful literary writers the Bay Area has produced in the last few decades. Back in the '80s, while he was in medical school, he began publishing excellent stories in *Esquire*, *Redbook*, and the *Boston Globe Magazine*, as well as in literary publications such as *Ploughshares*. In 1988, nine of these stories were collected in *Emperor of the Air*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller. Three years later, Canin came out with a novel, *Blue River*, which received nowhere near the acclaim his stories had. He seemed to get back on track with *The Palace Thief* (1994), four impressive novellas that received fine reviews. But since then, he has published only novels: *For Kings and Planets* (1998), *Carry Me Across the Water* (2001), and now *America America*. ▶

Canin is not a bad novelist, but he is a great short-fiction writer. Yet everything in publishing today conspires to turn story writers into novelists. A few weeks ago, Amy Rennert, a literary agent based in Tiburon (and a former editor of this magazine), told me about her client Peter Gordon: Even though he's published several stories in the *New Yorker*, it took her more than a year to sell his collection, *Man Receives Letter* (due out next year). At least three publishers said, "I'd be interested in taking this if he also had a novel, and we'd publish the novel first."

David Poindexter, who runs MacAdam/Cage, a small, serious literary press in San Francisco, told me the same thing: "The publisher wants to hear the agent say, 'He's working on a novel.'"

Another Rennert client, Jodi Angel, came out with a story collection, *The History of Vegas*, in 2005. I'd never heard of it, even though Angel teaches at UC Davis and the publisher was Chronicle Books. She's still writing stories, but, according to Rennert, she's wondering whether she needs to come up with a novel to break through, rather than doing what she does best.

You may have wondered, as I have, what happened to ZZ Packer, one of the Bay Area's best short-story writers (*Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, 2003). "Let me introduce you to someone at the start of what's bound to be an impressive career," I wrote about her then. Well, she's been working on a novel for the past six and a half years. In fact, all the new local story writers I've enjoyed lately have been diverted in this way. Julie Orringer (*How to Breathe Underwater*, 2003) has a novel due out next year. Daniel Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* came out a couple of years after his stellar story collection, *War by Candlelight* (2005). Elizabeth McKenzie followed her linked stories (*Stop That Girl*, 2005) with the engaging but less memorable novel *MacGregor Tells the World* (2007). Since the success of his collection (*Music Through the Floor*, 2005), Eric Puchner has been writing a novel that we'll probably see in 2009, after which, he says, "I hope to get back to stories." At least our local master of the form, Tobias Wolff, is still writing short fiction, most recently for this year's valuable collection *Our Story Begins*.

Of course, most lit professors at least imply that the novel is the highest form of fiction, and publishers say that novels sell better than stories do—a self-fulfilling prophesy, if the publishing houses don't buy many collections or do much to publicize the ones they do. In the past, mainstream magazines from the *Saturday Evening Post* to the *Saturday Review* (formerly *Saturday Review of Literature*) to *Playboy* made it possible for writers like Ray Bradbury and John Cheever to become nationally famous—and make a buck—by selling stories to them. Canin published three of his stories in the *Atlantic*, which now offers fiction only once a year, for "summer reading." At the moment, the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, and *Harper's* are the only mainstream magazines that publish fiction.

Not only can we not find short fiction in most general-interest magazines, but we can't even track down the lit-

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erary magazines. There are dozens—*Zoetrope: All-Story*, *ZYZZYVA*, and the *Threepenny Review* (all published in the Bay Area), *Tin House*, *Glimmer Train*, several others with *Review* in their names—but just try to find them. When Stephen King was editing *The Best American Short Stories 2007*, he wanted to consider more stories than the series editor had sent him. So he went to his favorite Florida megabookstore, he tells us in the book's introduction, where he found *Harper's* and the *New Yorker* easily enough. For the rest, he had to drop to the floor "like a school janitor trying to scrape a particularly stubborn wad of gum off the gym floor.... I hope the young woman browsing *Modern Bride* won't think I'm trying to look up her skirt. I hope the young man trying to decide between *Starlog* and *Fangoria* won't step on me."

No wonder would-be fiction writers concentrate more on what publishers want to buy than on honing their craft. No wonder readers don't always seek out the story collections that do make it into the bookstore. Practically the entire culture is saying short fiction isn't worth our time. Yet when writers have a gift for creating short stories, we should honor it; we certainly shouldn't discourage them from developing their biggest talent. I don't recall anyone saying of Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Kafka, Katherine Mansfield, Grace Paley, or Raymond Carver, "Damn it, where is his (or her) *novel* already?" And think of Jhumpa Lahiri, whose second story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, is a bestseller right now. Someone took a chance on her first book, a story collection called *Interpreter of Maladies* (published in paperback in 1999), which became a bestseller and won a Pulitzer Prize. Then she published a novel.

So it's disappointing, if understandable, that Canin continues to write ordinary novels rather than unforgettable stories. The best short stories never relax their grip: Every word, every action by every character, builds toward the effect the author seeks, often indirectly or by implication. (Consider Tobias Wolff's six-page "Bullet in the Brain," in which a sour, unpleasant man is shot in the head by a bank robber. During the millisecond of synaptic confusion before the bullet does its damage, the man feels elation, not pain, remembering a summer baseball game when he delighted in the grass, the sun, something someone said.) A story can be subtle; it can leave you thinking about what it meant. In some ways, a masterful story seems more difficult to write than a novel, a form that allows for some digression and a little relaxation in the narrative. The short story calls for a tighter, more intricate focus, and Canin mastered its necessities early on.

In Canin's novels, however, the storyteller's artful exposition often gives way to pedantic explanation. In his new book, *Corey Sifter*, the hardworking son of a working-class father, is taken in hand by the local gentry, the Metareys. They send Corey to prep school and college, and in return he works for them during weekends and vacations—not least in their efforts to elect their friend, the progressive senator Henry Bonwiller, as president. We soon learn that the tale includes the

death of a young woman, a cover-up, and a serious loss of innocence, so no real mystery drives the plot. And since Canin describes, rather than animates, most of his characters, we're left unmoved by the tragic end of perhaps the most admirable one, because he never came to life.

The most compelling figure is the young woman, JoEllen, who appears for only a few pages. But what pages. When Canin steps away from Corey's often uninspired recapping of events to delve into the mind of Bonwiller's mistress, he creates something close to a gripping short story. During her brief affair with the senator, JoEllen feels a tightening in her gut, which she recognizes as resentment at her lover's concentration

Storied evenings

Who says reading has to be a solitary event? Not in this town, where you could fill your calendar with reading series and lit magazine issue-release parties, and never once walk into a bookstore.

Babylon Salon Each event from this newish group shines a light on one literary journal and its stars. On September 13, the featured publication is *Watchword*, which prints some works in translation, from San Francisco's Watchword Press. Guests will include managing editor Liz Lisle and one writer from its pages. CANTINA, 580 SUTTER ST., S.F., BABYLONLONSALON.COM

Canteen Issue three of this S.F.- and N.Y.-based fine-art magazine of fiction, poetry, essays, art, and photography will feature Benjamin Kunkel (*Indecision; n+1*) and Porochista Khakpour (*Sons and Other Flammable Objects*). Watch for the release party this summer. CANTEENMAG.COM

InsideStoryTime This monthly series puts the bar back in *bard*, as listeners sit back with a beer while authors take the dimly lit stage. The topic on July 17 is "punk," and readers will include Frank Portman (*King Dork*) and Stephanie Kuehnert (*I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone*). EDINBURGH CASTLE, 950 GEARY ST., S.F., INSIDESTORYTIME.COM

Literary Death Match Four authors read from their work for 10 minutes each at this almost monthly event; then it's down to two, battling for the evening's championship before a panel of astute judges invited by host *Opium Magazine*. Warning: Drinks have been thrown—once, anyway. JULY VENUE TBD; LITERARYDEATHMATCH.COM

Narrative Magazine The next Narrative Night in San Francisco, with authors Jennifer Egan and Robert Stone, is scheduled for March 12, 2009. Until then, join 40,000 online readers for the magazine's new poetry, fiction, nonfiction, work in progress, and short stories. NARRATIVE MAGAZINE.COM

Porchlight Hostesses Beth Lisick (*Helping Me Help Myself*) and Arline Klatter (former *Moscow Times* lifestyles editor) invited their favorite storytellers from the past year to perform on July 11 for the sixth anniversary of their monthly evenings of tales told by writers and nonwriters, with no notes or memorization. This time, seven performers will consider the seven deadly sins for up to 10 minutes each, instead of the usual 6. SWEDISH AMERICAN HALL, 2174 MARKET ST., S.F., PORCHLIGHTSFCOM

Progressive Reading Series Host Stephen Elliott (*Happy Baby; Sex for America*) will call Neal Pollack (*Alternadad*), former Stegner Fellow Doug Dorst, Grotto founders Ethan Canin and Po Bronson, and Sister Spit's Tara Jepsen to the stage on July 19. The series is held every month during election years, and proceeds go to progressive political candidates and causes. MAKE-OUT ROOM, 3225 22ND ST., S.F., MAKEOUTROOM.COM

Writers with Drinks For this monthly meet-up, the well-connected Charlie Anders (*Choir Boy*) gathers performers for what she calls a "spoken-word variety show" of essay reading, stand-up comedy, poetry, and plenty of "other." The next show is July 12. MAKE-OUT ROOM, 3225 22ND ST., S.F., WRITERSWITHDRINKS.COM

Zoetrope: All-Story Release parties for Francis Ford Coppola's quarterly, which publishes short stories and one-act plays by well-known and emerging writers, are held in San Francisco, Palo Alto, Geyserville, and Rutherford. The next parties will be in September. ALL-STORY.COM

■ ASHLEY NELSON

on helping those in need. She can't understand her feelings until she overhears someone complaining that the senator is "'in everybody's pocket at once.... The niggers and the unions. And the oil companies...why's nobody trying to help *me*?' 'That's *it*,' she thinks.... Why is nobody trying to help *her*?"

Canin, who teaches at the esteemed Iowa Writers' Workshop, is working on another novel, I hear, as well as on more stories. Bet I know which we'll see first. I think we need to reconsider the push for novels over short stories, though, and even reverse the situation. Just as the short story was the perfect literary form for the new media of the early 19th century—newspapers and magazines—and quickly became popular worldwide, it seems made to order for our busy, fragmented, 21st-century lives. We're in front of our computers so much already, wouldn't it make perfect sense to create a demand for short stories online?

Actually, you can find a surprising amount of short fiction there now—vetted by editors and ready to read in an hour or so you might otherwise spend surfing the web or sending email. (If you still prefer your couch to an ergonomic chair, your printer's right there, and using it is faster and less expensive than buying a book or magazine.) Let me recommend three good online magazines based in the Bay Area: the quirky, entertaining *Opium Magazine* (copublished in New York and also in print), which thoughtfully provides the estimated reading time for each story; the more traditional *Narrative Magazine*, published in San Francisco (also in print) by former *Esquire* fiction editor Tom Jenks and his wife, Carol Edgarian, who offer work by both emerging and established authors, such as Joyce Carol Oates and Jane Smiley, and charge a reading fee for submissions; and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, from Dave Eggers and the McSweeney's crew, probably the only publication in which you'll find such helpful tales as "A Serial Killer Explains the Distinctions Between Literary Terms."

Eventually, even the hidebound publishing companies will join in, when they realize how much cheaper and easier it is to create and deliver books electronically. Maybe then they'll take more chances on as-yet-unpublished story writers, as Canin and Lahiri once were. As Tom Jenks says, "It's a slow revolution, and we're only about 10 years into it." Perhaps we can hasten the shift along—reminding ourselves of the deep pleasure of reading a piece of fiction in one sitting, encouraging print publishers by buying the collections they bring out, seeking out new and established short-story writers online, and letting the print world know we'd like to see more of them.

Technology does not have to signify the death of reading, you know. Far from it.

Back to your computers, folks. ■

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