

## Book Reviews

---

an excerpt from

Kathleen Snodgrass

### *Time After Time*\*

In September 2007 the *New York Times Book Review* ran a condensed version of Stephen King's introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 2007* entitled "What Ails the Short Story." With high-energy certitude and no hard data about declining readership or declining fortunes of literary magazines, King baldly states that the short story is in trouble and then proceeds to tell us what (or, more to the point, who) is responsible.

He begins by reporting that in preparation for his guest editor role he visited his local mega-bookstore searching for literary magazines. He found them, alas, on the bottom shelf of the magazine section "where neatness alone suggests few ever go." Bottom shelfism is clearly a sign of ill health, and King knows why. Having already assumed we accept his belief that there are fewer and fewer readers of the short story, King reduces that readership to desperate types. In the first camp there are writers trawling to determine what constitutes a publishable story. This, of course, is not "real reading. . . . It's more like copping-a-feel reading. There's something yucky about it." And then there are writers who manage to publish by tailoring their work to a select audience. Consequently, their stories are "airless, somehow, and self-referring. . . . show-offy rather than entertaining, self-important rather than interesting, guarded and self-conscious rather than gloriously open, and worst of all, written for editors and teachers rather than readers."

In King's piece, the word *literary* appears just once; other words that might prefix the word *story*, such as *serious*, *nuanced*, or *multilayered*, never do appear. At base, King's "discussion" is a thinly disguised antiliterary screed setting forth a series of false

---

\*An essay-review of

OUR FORMER LIVES IN ART. By Jennifer S. Davis. New York: Random House, 2007. 194 pp. \$13.95, paper.

THE GATEWAY: STORIES. By T. M. McNally. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2007. 211 pp. \$22.50.

TELL BORGES IF YOU SEE HIM: TALES OF CONTEMPORARY SOMNAMBULISM. By Peter LaSalle. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 256 pp. \$24.95.

dichotomies that come down to a story being either good or literary. Fortunately, King is wonderfully adept at hoisting himself by his own petard, as when he attempts to convey the impact of a good story via incongruous similes: "What I want . . . is something that comes at me full-bore, like a big, hot meteor screaming down from the Kansas sky. I want the ancient pleasure that probably goes back to the cave: to be blown clean out of myself for a while, as violently as a fighter pilot who pushes the eject button in his F-111." Acknowledging, in passing, an intellectual component to the act of reading, King bizarrely melds the critical and the olfactory: "Do I want something that appeals to my critical nose? Maybe later (and, I admit it, maybe never)."

I find it especially curious that eight of the twenty stories King chose for inclusion in the anthology are by such literary lights as Alice Munro, Louis Auchincloss, Ann Beattie, John Barth, Mary Gordon, Richard Russo, Joseph Epstein, and T. C. Boyle—all of whose stories first appeared in the very magazines King had to crawl about on the floor to find. In closing, as if to muddy or downright nullify everything that has come before, King proposes a necessary first step in revivifying a supposedly moribund genre: read the stories he has chosen to appear in the anthology.

Turning to the books under review here, I'm happy to report that they lack the meteoric punch and caveman pizzazz King craves. With nary an out-of-the-body experience or frontal attack to be found, they might well set King's "critical nose" into an extenuated sneezing fit. And yet, despite the fact that these writers' stories are unabashedly literary, there's not an "airless" or "show-offy" or "self-important" one in the lot. (King bandies these derogatory terms—and others.) Jennifer S. Davis, T. M. McNally, and Peter LaSalle are all quietly daring in their own distinctive ways, taking chances and liberties with the conventions and expectations attendant to realistic fiction. Rather than propel us at a cartoonish warp speed, these stories play seriously with time—slowing it down, revving it up, dragging the past into the present or melding past, present, and future. As a result, they remind us, yet again, of the elasticity and expansiveness of a genre that is in demonstrably robust health.