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British Short Fiction Reconsidered: Two Tributes to the Short Story

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In a field that is as habitually (and justly) declared under-researched as the history and theory of British the short story, it is heartening to see the publication of two new books dedicated to the short story genre in Britain: one a history and survey of the short story in Britain, published as part of the 'Outlining Literature' series at Palgrave Macmillan, the other a more specialised anthology of First World War short fiction. Both publications fill a gap in the available critical literature, and deserve the attention of students, teachers and researchers specialising in the short story form.

Liggins', Maunder's and Robbins's The British Short Story offers a concise and yet in many ways innovative introduction to the specifically British (as opposed to English language) short story. While American masters of the genre such as Poe are acknowledged in terms of their influence on both writerly practice and critical theory, the aim of this volume is to scrutinise the particular conditions under which the genre flourished in Britain as opposed to the United States, with particular reference to the different publishing backdrop and marketplace for short stories on this side of the Atlantic. As a consequence, The British Short Story offers chapters on varieties of the short story beyond the established circle of well-known short story writers. Although prolific and critically acclaimed authors like Rudyard Kipling, Henry James, Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce and Elizabeth Bowen receive their dues, Liggins, Maunder and Robbins also explore in greater depth the often neglected Victorian and Edwardian short story scene, drawing attention to the variety and ingenuity of such subgenres as the supernatural tale, New Woman stories and colonial short fiction. The twentieth

century is not, as in many comparable volumes, represented primarily by modernist writers, but places the likes of Mansfield, Joyce and Woolf firmly in the context of popular fiction, and devotes an entire chapter on the neglected but influential short fiction of the First World War.

In its approach to the subject from the two perspectives of genre theory and publishing history, The British Short Story is an excellent contribution to the field, and will help students in particular to become aware of the pragmatic as well as aesthetic dimensions of the British short story and the ways in which its environment influences its reception. Self-declaredly influenced in its choice of stories for discussion by practical as well as aesthetic considerations, this volume combines critical analysis of well-known stories with some lesser-known material, and affords particular insights into short-story writers' engagement with a plethora of generic conventions and a changing publishing environment.

The only substantial oversight the volume might be accused of is not having engaged with the only other recent critical study of the British short story, Barbara Korte's The Short Story in Britain: A Historical Sketch and Anthology (2003), published in Germany but written in English and available in the UK. This, however, is probably less a fault of the authors than a symptom of a deplorable overall condition: there is still an unfortunate lack of mutual engagement in the field of literary studies across Europe and outside the English-speaking world. While national academic communities flourish, they tend to remain insular, and literary scholars in Britain, Germany, France, Italy and elsewhere are still mostly content to focus on work published in their own country. It is to be hoped that the increasing international mobility of postgraduate students and scholars in English Studies from all over the world will contribute to remedying this state of affairs.

The other recent volume dedicated exclusively to British short fiction, Andrew Maunder's British Literature of World War I: The Short Story and the Novella, addresses a particularly neglected corpus of stories. Whereas most

publications on twentieth-century short fiction concentrate on the modernist short story, Maunder sets out to redress this imbalance and dedicates his anthology exclusively to popular and 'middlebrow' fiction about the First World War. His aim is to make available to modern readers texts which, due to the ephemeral nature of the magazines and newspapers in which they were originally published, are no longer accessible except to those who are prepared to venture into copyright libraries and newspaper archives. The result is an astonishing and often eye-opening selection of short fiction that challenges many assumptions about the compliance of popular writers with propagandist demands, and demonstrates a level of complexity in popular fiction of the period that most of us have been taught not to expect.

Maunder's anthology, which forms part of a larger project of recovering marginalised literature of World War I, benefits from detailed notes and a comprehensive introduction that places the stories included in their literary and publishing context. It may still come as shock to many readers of his anthology that the popular stories included in the volume enjoyed greater prevalence, and are in fact far more representative of both civilian and soldiers' reading tastes at the time, than the poetry and the later disillusioned war narratives by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Richard Aldington that we have come to associate with the First World War. Maunder makes an excellent case for the study of these 'other' war texts as literary and cultural testimonies of the war's experience, doubly marginalised as they are due to the neglect suffered by their genre as well as their popular nature.

The only disadvantage of Maunder's volume is the fact that it forms part of a costly five-volume series and cannot be purchased individually. At the current price, it seems unlikely that many libraries will purchase this specialised collection (although it would certainly be desirable). One has to hope that the anthology will nevertheless be widely enough available to students and academics working in the field of early-twentieth-century fiction and that the purpose of recovering inaccessible texts will not be defeated by the cost of the book.

Works Cited

Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder, and Ruth Robbins, *The British Short Story*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. ISBN 9780230551718 (pbk.). £16.99.

Andrew Maunder, ed., *British Literature of World War I. Vol. I: The Short Story and the Novella*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011. Part of a 5 Volume Set. ISBN 9781848930421 (hbk.). £450.00.