
'News From Heaven' by Jennifer Haigh

Once upon a time in America, short stories were printed weekly in magazines like the Saturday Evening Post, Scribner's, Look, Collier's, and the New Yorker. Writers like Hemingway published tales like "The Old Man and the Sea" in magazines such as Life, which sold 5.3 million copies of its Sept. 1, 1952, issue, in which that story appeared.

Apart from the New Yorker, which continues to publish short fiction, most of those magazines are defunct, and they seem to have taken the popularity of the genre with them. Book publishers have noticed. "[E]ditors and agents blanch at the prospect of debut story collections," Paul Vidich wrote in the online magazine the Millions. "The popular wisdom — and commercial reality — is that story collections don't sell."

There are notable exceptions, of course. "Interpreter of Maladies" by Jhumpa Lahiri and "Olive Kitteridge" by Elizabeth Strout won Pulitzer Prizes and blockbuster sales. These critical and commercial winners have this in common: Their collections were called "interconnected stories" or "linked stories" or "a novel in stories." This genre-buster is the Prius of fiction. Like a novel, it features a single set of characters, plot lines, and settings appearing and reappearing throughout. Like a short story collection, each chapter is self-contained.

Controversy about this form first erupted in 1919 with the publication of Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio." Now lauded as a premier work of American fiction, the book's unconventional structure caused publishers to reject it and critics, when it was finally published, to rip it to shreds. "What is wanted is a new looseness," Anderson said, defending his choice of structure. "Life is a loose, flowing thing. There are no plot stories in life." Crushed by the book's reviews, Anderson later wrote, "A kind of sickness came over me, a sickness that lasted for months."

In 2011, in the Rumpus, William Giraldi, a novelist and senior editor at Boston University's Agni, took up the argument in "The Mysterious Case of Novel-in-Stories," asserting that the linked story collection is well-suited to the psychology of our times. "V.S. Pritchett wrote in a preface to one of his own story collections that our 'nervous and reckless age' — our Freudian age — has forced us to observe our lives and the lives of others 'in fragments rather than as a solid mass,' and the best short fiction captures those nervous, reckless fragments with an accuracy a novel cannot muster."

"Notes From Heaven," Jennifer Haigh's first short-story collection, is a vibrant, thought-provoking, profoundly readable contribution to the genre. A graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Haigh has published four novels — "Mrs. Kimble," (2003); "Baker Towers," (2005), "The Condition," (2008), and "Faith," (2011) — as well as many short stories, including "Paramour," which was selected for the 2012 edition of Best American Short Stories.

Born in the coal town of Barnesboro, Pa., Haigh writes often about the place and people of her early life. In "Baker Towers" she vividly depicted the decaying fictional coal town of Bakerton, Pa.; in "News From Heaven" she returns us to that depressed and depressing town. Each of these 10 linked stories represents a distinct, shining example of Haigh's remarkable gifts for lyricism, psychological insight, and stealth humor, drawing characters who might seem boringly ordinary in the hand of a lesser talent. Haigh's confident, light touch makes each of them fascinating, multidimensional, compellingly complex.

In "Beast and Bird," a young woman leaves Bakerton to work as a maid for a Jewish family in New York City. Told by Haigh, this classic tale — poor, small-town scullery maid plunked into urban affluence, stunned by her new surroundings — becomes new and poignant and hilarious. As her employer painstakingly recites the complex rules for keeping a strict kosher kitchen, Annie decides that Mrs. Nudelman is simply insane. "She thought of the Klezek boy at home, who heard voices; a neighbor lady who scrubbed her hands until the skin cracked and bled. If Mrs. Nudelman were poor, her madness would be simpler; wealth permitted this elaborate variant."

"Thrift" is told from the view of an older woman who's living in a trailer with a younger man of her dreams, shocked by his choice of her — "She accepts it as she accepts other miracles, the Resurrection and Ascension." Haigh's language lifts the story from its setting's squalor. "The summer unrolled like a satin ribbon," she writes.

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