

## Confessions of an unrepentant short story writer

Nothing teaches you to live with failure better than a 'career' (and I use the term loosely) spent writing short stories. First there are the days you can't get the story started, or figure out how it ends; or the days when you find the ending, but don't know what to start the next morning. There are the days when you *finish* the damn thing, but can't find an editor to publish it; or when you *get* the damn thing published, and nobody reads it. Then there are the days you *don't* sell to the *New Yorker* (there are lots of days like this, by the way), or you don't sell an option to the movies, or you're overlooked by the latest crowd of 'year's best' anthologies that continually assemble on local bookstore shelves like jeering bullies on a playground.

But if you're lucky, and you live long enough, you progress into wider and more prosperous regions of failure. You *sell* that story to the *New Yorker*, say, or you win a prestigious (i.e. doesn't pay much) award. You publish your stories in a collection, and get well reviewed – OK, maybe not on the *front* page of the *New York Times* – but hey, you actually get a collection reviewed in the *New York Times*! You're invited to an A-List party in Manhattan; you give a reading, or speak at a college. And then the big day comes, the day that every writer can only dream about while toiling at the difficult, and often deliriously happy job of writing short stories. Which is when the big editor or film producer calls. And they've got a question.

'Great stories, guy. So when are you going to write a novel?'

For a short story writer – this means you've arrived.

You've failed about as well as you can.

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'Where's the novel?' is probably the highest form of acclaim most short story writers ever enjoy. Certainly even the best of them, from Carver to Cheever, sometimes seemed ashamed – or even apologetic – that their most well-regarded books weren't novels.

Mainly, it comes down to economics. Publishers don't publish short stories because they don't sell, or get selected by the Oprah-, or Richard and Judy-type book parades. And when publishers do publish collections, they're either appeasing an already established writer, or

hooking onto some good-looking, MFA-approved youngster who has probably sold them a novel on the back end. In the publishing biz, short stories are a means to an end. And the end they have in mind is definitely *not* another collection of short stories.

Meanwhile, in academia (which is really just a lazy, poorly-read adjunct of the commercial publishing industry, if you want my opinion), short stories aren't treated much better. For example, you will often find Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* being taught in twentieth-century American literature courses – but never *Tales of the Jazz Age*, which, these days, looks like a very smart, hip and contemporary multi-genre-grab-bag, or the even lovelier and more consistent, *Taps at Reveille*. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (which features far too many 'good' meals, in my opinion) is almost always preferred over the leaner, cleaner collection *In Our Time*; and while Faulkner's stories are outrageously good – and, taken together, far more historically rich and technically inventive than his better-regarded novels – you will almost never find his *Collected Stories* on a Required Reading list. Instead, you'll often come up against *Absalom! Absalom!*, which has developed a big reputation simply because it is too long, too confusing, and yes, too big.

Closer to home, things grow more dispiriting. For while it is possible to argue that the best American fiction of the past fifty years has been published in single-author collections by the likes of Carver, Disch, O'Connor, Capote, Wolff, Saunders, Evenson, Oates, Saroyan, and so forth – this rich deep vein is rarely mined by critics or teachers. And when such writers are taught, it's usually just by lumping one of their best-known (and not necessarily most successful) stories into one of the dense, exorbitantly priced, doorstep-worthy, and genuinely ugly college textbooks that are used in 'Introduction to Literature' courses, as if preliminary matches with such 'minor' works will prepare you to wrestle with 'major' works later on. Often these books bear horrible, uninviting titles, such as *The American Story: Text and Context, Seventeenth Edition*, and they appear to be edited by the combined faculties of Rutgers, USC and MIT. And they don't appear to select stories for how well they read, but as subjects for discussion on a limited range of uninteresting topics, such as how their 'thematic issues' shed light on the 'American dream' or 'dysfunctional families'. Students aren't taught to *enjoy* short stories – but only how to *use* them in school essays. And by the time you've completed an undergraduate-education's worth of such essays, you may well have learned to keep away from stories ever more.

Because as any good, selfish reader can tell you – nothing takes the pleasure out of reading short stories more than taking them seriously.

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Earlier this afternoon I popped round to my local Waterstone's to see where they keep the short stories – for while single-author collections are often seeded amongst the thousands of big, bloated novels that cover most of the ground floor, you usually find a smaller, subtler section devoted to stories hidden away in the attic or basement. This shelf is about as tall and wide as an average-size man with arms pinned to his sides; and at least half of the books here aren't about reading stories, but about writing them. They have titles like *How to Sell Short Stories* or *The Short Story Writer's Craft* – and charge suckers twenty bucks a pop to confirm their misperceptions that writing short stories can be both 'fun' and 'profitable'. Along with these 'how-to' books are the various 'theme' anthologies – probably the chief means of delivering short stories to today's readers outside of university – and they seem to work according to the assumption that individual stories don't possess gravity or substance on their own; so, in order to help them compete with big novels like *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Infinite Jest*, you need to stuff about fifty or sixty of them into a thematic rucksack.

These 'theme' anthologies can roughly be divided into three categories:

- (1) **The Shakers and Movers** One of these comes out every few months or so to promote young, up-and-coming writers, often with a specious, hastily conceived 'manifesto' attached: about how the new generation is radicalising the short story and making it relevant to today's youth, that sort of thing. *McSweeney's* seems to do a few of these every year, but there are others: 'special interest groups' such as New Puritans, New Gothicists, Gay Surfictionists, Under-20 Cyberpunks, American Interstitialists, and so forth. These anthologies tend to recirculate the same promotional copy, emphasising words such as 'new', 'daring', 'flash', 'slipstream', 'postmodern', 'shocking', 'bold', 'boundary-breaking', 'revolutionary', and so forth. But in general, the stories they contain are so deliberately shocking and predictably 'boundary-breaking' that, when reading them one after another, they blur away to a low drone, like punk-music that's been playing all day in the flat next door. Needless to say, almost nobody reads these books – except maybe the people who want to be in them.
- (2) **Gift Books** These are aimed at people who don't know what to buy for their friends and family on birthdays and major holidays; for example 'Great Short Stories about Golf' (for the golfer) or 'Fly-Fishing Tales of Adventure' (for the fly-fisherman), or even 'Great Post-War Italian-American Humor Tales' (for that Italian-American

girl you've been trying to date at the local coffee shop). These gift books usually lie around the houses of their recipients for a few years, and are eventually dragged out to a yard sale before the next move. Nobody reads them – but then, the stories aren't apparently selected for quality. They're more like affection-tokens.

- (3) **Serious Tomes** Big, bulky, pricey, and not quite as ugly as university textbooks – these are designed to shed light on great issues of the day, such as gender, politics, ethnicity, and so forth. They have titles like *Secret Lives: Masterpieces in the Development of Female Identity*, or *Blown Away: New Stories Written to Benefit the Victims of Katrina*. These books are the most puzzling of all, since nothing is more anti-political, or joyously irresponsible, or contrary to the development of a firm ethnic or gender identity, than the short story. These books are impossible to read from cover to cover; they feel too much like homework.

In other words, most short story anthologies are designed for people who don't really like to read short stories. And if they do like reading short stories, a couple of these books will quickly teach them not to.

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When I was a child, we received regular visits from my great uncle Ralph, who descended from his dry central-mountain town of Volcano every few months to get away from his wife. Great Uncle Ralph was a large, balding, fair-skinned man who wore short-sleeve shirts and plaid sports jackets, and who was regularly referred to, by my mother's side of the family, as 'The Man Who Came to Dinner'. Apparently this was because he had shown up at my grandmother's San Francisco apartment just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, and didn't leave until well after VE Day. Great Uncle Ralph never drank alcohol before dark (which is, of course, almost always a bad sign), didn't have children, and while he collected a pension, nobody could remember him keeping a job. But despite this slender list of achievements, Great Uncle Ralph had accomplished one thing in his life of which he was extremely proud – he had read every single issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* since the late twenties, and he kept the entire pristine collection stored away in meticulous chronological order in the dusty closets of his Volcano home.

'If you want to be a writer,' Great Uncle Ralph often told me, following me downstairs to my adolescent hermitage in the basement, where I had parked my bed, desk and bookshelves between the washer-dryer and my mother's large ticking gold Ford Galaxy 500, 'then you have to read the *Saturday Evening Post*. Usually there are

three or four stories in every issue, but sometimes they publish serials, which are almost as good. I've been reading the *Post* since I was a boy, and I can promise you that they have never published a bad story, or two stories that were even remotely similar. I still remember this one story, where this scientist went to this island looking for giant snails, and he wasn't afraid of them because they were snails, right? Who can't outrun a giant snail? But then he goes exploring, right, and gets his foot stuck in this giant snail slick, because it's like glue, right? And there he is, Mr Genius Scientist, stuck in this glue and watching this Giant Snail coming straight at him really slow – which is how the story ends, because you know this guy's going to get eaten by a giant snail. Or there was this other story, where these kids have this television you can walk inside, and their parents go looking for them, but the kids turn out to be evil and the parents come to a very bad end. I won't tell you what happened; I don't want to spoil the surprise. Or even better, this realistic story about a kid who goes hunting with his family in the south, and there's this ancient bear that nobody can kill, so this old Indian teaches the kid how to hunt, and the kid develops this special kinship with the bear. But then, after several years, the kid gets his chance to finally kill the bear, and he can't pull the trigger, right? And the old Indian says, "You didn't shoot him! He was standing right there and you didn't shoot him!" And suddenly the boy doesn't feel ashamed any more and he shouts, "But neither did you! Neither did you!" What a great ending, don't you think? It just made perfect sense. See, those are the sorts of stories you should write, not all these depressing stories about the world ending, and people dying of radiation poisoning. You need to write stories that get your readers *involved* until they reach the perfect ending. Which is when they'll run out and buy the next issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*.'

There were many times when my great uncle Ralph would follow me around the house recalling these stories he had read, usually late in the afternoon, when it was too early to disappear upstairs with my mom and start drinking. But while I dreaded these lectures at the time, I now look back, forty years later, and recognise the signs of a genuine lover of short stories – the sort of person, in fact, I hardly meet any more. Somebody so enraptured by the formal beauties of short stories that they can't communicate that love except by *recounting* them.

Like many passions, a love for short stories can make you boring.

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Needless to say, I never did write a story that was good enough for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Nor did I take my great uncle Ralph's advice and read through old issues of the magazine. But then, as I recall, he did

refuse to let me borrow any of his copies. They were in mint condition, after all.

But somehow these stories I hadn't read stayed with me; and eventually, as if I were suffering a sort of readerly *déjà-vu*, I started coming across them as I grew older. Sometimes they appeared in single-author collections, or in fading paperback 'best of the year' anthologies, or even in those university-approved textbooks I mentioned earlier. And whenever I came across them, they always felt like long-delayed epiphanies about Great Uncle Ralph: stories like Ray Bradbury's 'The Veldt', which originally appeared as 'The World the Children Made', or Faulkner's earliest (and, to my mind, best) version of 'The Bear'. Or Saroyan's 'An Ornery Kind of Kid', or Gerald Kersh's 'The Forbidding Doorway'. And while I never did find that giant snail story (which could only disappoint me after all these years of happily living with it) I did catch up with many of the *Post's* regulars, such as Kay Boyle, Jack Finney, J. D. Salinger, Zora Neale Hurston, Rex Stout, lots more Bradbury and Faulkner, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr – writers who were about as culturally and stylistically and thematically divergent as they could get, but who were always uniformly capable of delivering stories that caught you up and put you down again in a place that you had never been, writers who flourished not only in the *Post*, but in *Colliers*, the *American Mercury*, *Redbook*, *Harper's*, even the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. These periodicals were totally unlike today's theme anthologies and literary journals, and never tried to limit a story's possibilities to any commercial genre or style or movement, but continually surprised you, and enlivened you, one story after another. As Truman Capote, one of the best and most inventive post-war American story writers, once said: 'The test of whether or not a writer has divined the natural shape of his story is just this: after reading it, can you imagine it differently, or does it silence your imagination and seem to you absolute and final. As an orange is final. As an orange is something nature has made just right.'<sup>1</sup>

You can't really analyse an orange, or write an essay about it. You can only eat it. Or hand it to somebody else to eat.

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But even without enjoying unmediated access to the *Saturday Evening Post*, I was lucky enough to grow up with a variety of great short stories to choose from. Many were mystery stories, like those featuring Sherlock Holmes, or Jacques Futrelle's Thinking Machine, or the boy

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<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Cowley (ed.), *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 287–8.

detective Encyclopedia Brown; and, despite their contrivances, these provided an almost perfect introduction to the form – the quick set-up and development (locked rooms, dark figures in doorways, mysterious disappearances) based around an intriguing central relationship (Holmes and Watson, or Encyclopedia Brown and his schoolfriends), and then paying off with a resolution which not only surprised, but seemed inevitable. These stories provided, with almost clinical exactitude, everything a short story was supposed to provide – from Chekhov to Bradbury.

But even when I wasn't reading short stories, I was watching them on television – because, back in the fifties and sixties, short stories still dominated the nightly schedule. Today, with our media infested by gruesomely complicated melodramas featuring countless interweaving characters – from the time-refracted multiplicities of the *Lost* survivors, to the endlessly spinning-off atrocity-investigators on *CSI* – it's easy to forget the very contrary appeal of the old anthology shows, such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, or *The Twilight Zone*; or even of the recurring series programmes, such as *Peter Gunn*, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, or, my personal favourite, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. In those days, each episode was fully formed, intact, and essentially independent from all the others that had gone before. You didn't need to know about where Rob and Laura had met in order to enjoy an isolated episode about Rob's dream of alien invasion, or his interview with a tax auditor about the rock in his basement; just as, each week, when Tod and Buz concluded their latest adventure, they weren't necessarily any closer to their final destination along *Route 66*. It was the individual instalment that counted – not the unreeling and vastly interconnected map of America.

It's hard to find similar shows today – oh, maybe *The Simpsons*, which has developed hundreds of almost perfect little stories over the past twenty years or so, or the cruder *South Park*. But for the most part, television, like movies and books, is no longer interested in wasting good development capital composing individual stories which come to permanent, unextendable conclusions – instead preferring to develop complex narrative lines that can be spun off into lucrative sequels, spin-offs, and cross-marketing. Which is, perhaps, one of the biggest reasons why the short story is dying out in our collective unconscious: it's not a sensible imaginative investment. Once you've read it (as any good short story writer can tell you) you've got to start all over again.

From scratch.

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Whatever the cause, I certainly don't meet many Great Uncle Ralphs any more. And while I am lucky enough to have friends who can

appreciate the latest collection of William Trevor stories, and a son who recently enjoyed Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* as much as I did forty years ago, it is fair to say that the short story is fading away – both as something readers have time to enjoy, and as something writers can afford to produce, at the highest levels of their ability, on a regular basis. And while some of us may stubbornly continue trying to write them, it often feels like exercising a vestigial limb blindly inherited from the gene pool. When I tell people that I write short stories, a faint greyish glaze usually slides across their eyes, as if a dirigible were passing overhead. They might smile politely, and pretend to think 'that's interesting', but more often than not they will admit, quite openly, that they don't really read short stories, and much 'prefer novels'. After all, novels are a lot easier to read in a culture which doesn't give us time to concentrate.

You can easily put down the latest puffy John Grisham or Stephen King novel and leave it on the side table for weeks; and when you find time to pick it up again, you'll clearly remember where you left off. The hired assassins will still be tracking the responsible protagonist to New Orleans, or the demonic dog will still be trying to break into the helpless woman's stalled car out in the remote countryside. The good people will be striving for good things, and the bad people (and creatures) will still be striving against them. Even the familiar moral ambiguities will be easy to replace in their appropriate pigeonholes.

Stories, on the other hand, require a quality of attention that doesn't allow for blinking. If you put a story down, it's not so easy to pick up again. This is because the best stories fold you up completely and don't let go until they are done with you; and unless you surrender your flight controls willingly for as long as the story deems necessary, you can't take the ride. Or you may find yourself waking up on the wrong plane going nowhere.

Stories are short, odd, inconsistent, formally inventive, and rarely taken seriously by the critics, teachers and experts who try so often to ruin books for good readers – and this is probably the greatest boon that we short story writers depend on. Since stories are short, they can't be overburdened with critical liabilities – such as 'embodying American experience', 'deconstructing ethnicity', or 'enabling the victims of child-abuse'. As a result, short stories enjoy a lot more freedom than novels. They don't *need* to perform. They are less required to *mean*.

If a story doesn't work, the reader will put it down. But if a 'serious' novel doesn't work – such as those unreadable things produced by the likes of Anne Enright or Norman Mailer – then readers might well be convinced to try harder, or made to feel like they aren't paying attention. 'This is *serious* stuff, man!' the worst writers and critics keep

reiterating. 'Get *with* the programme!' On the other hand, short stories rarely seem bigger than those who read them. They don't command respect or enjoyment; they elicit it.

You can't like short stories for all the wrong reasons – as you can often do with novels that are bigger, broodier and more ponderous than mere mortals. Like Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, say – which is, I'm pretty sure, incredibly boring if you haven't learned to accept its importance before opening to the first page. Short stories are protean, anarchic, intense, and unrepeatable; and they resist being taken more seriously than what they present on the page. They prove or disprove themselves with each reading, and with each rereading. You can't explain a good story; you can only *experience* it.

Nowhere else in literature can you enjoy a finer blend of both formal control and human eccentricity; and unlike the novel, which often swallows up and regurgitates many different formal devices – letter-writing, diaries, autobiography, history, philosophy and social criticism – the best stories don't adopt a device unless they intend to exhaust its possibilities within the context of *this* particular situation, or *this* character, or *this world*. Every good short story is an experiment – in character, emotion, narrative pace, plot, whatever. But an experiment which does not yield material for an endlessly self-replicating brood of sequels, or television programmes, or spin-offs. Each experiment yields only the fruits of itself.

A short story is a diversion from the world's intensity that will allow for no other diversions. I'm not sure if Great Uncle Ralph would agree, but perhaps he might agree with this:

A short story is something you read until you're done with it, or it's done with you.

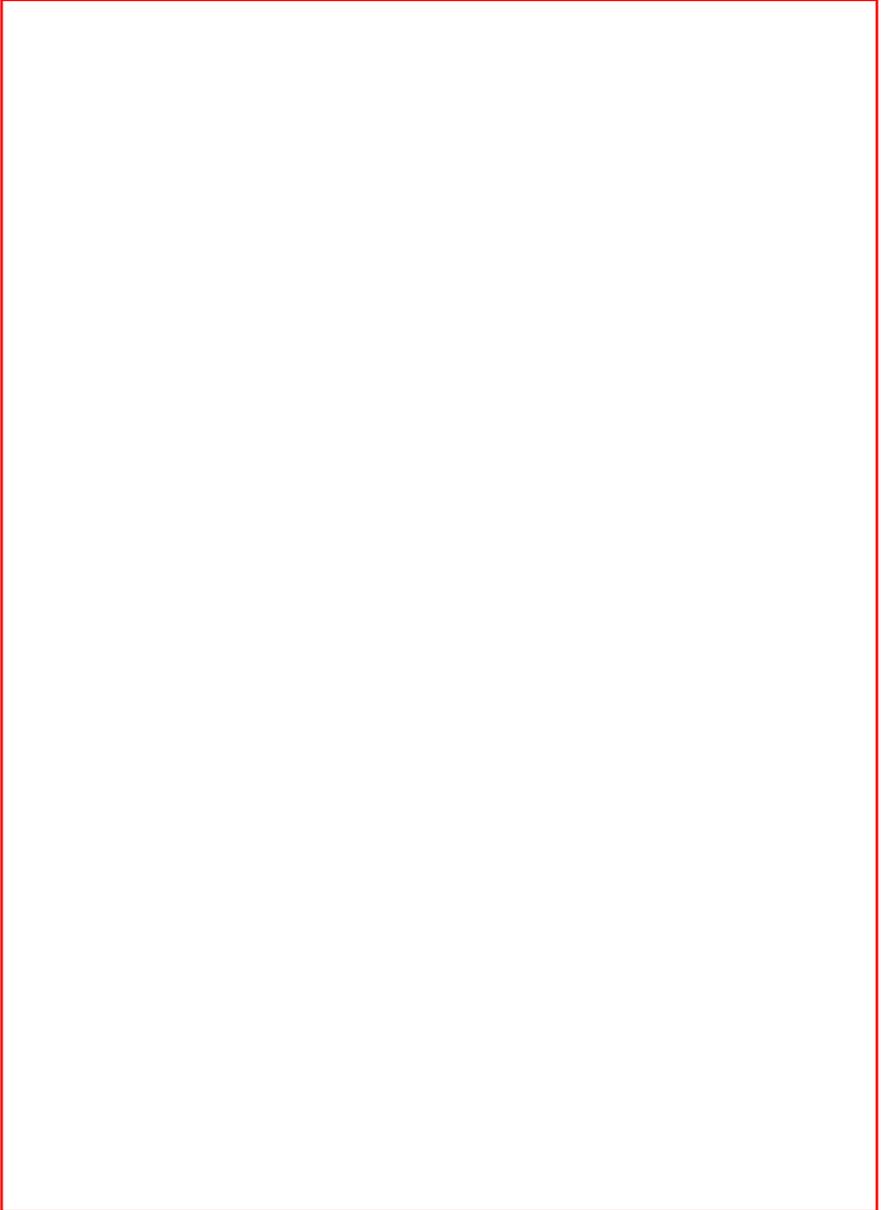
Which is when it's time to go out and buy another issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

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With the demise of the widely circulated story-hungry periodicals, it is almost impossible to enjoy the story in its native habitat: those unfenced continental vistas of words and conjecture where Bradbury can cavort in eco-harmony with Faulkner and Fitzgerald, or Rex Stout can share in the all-benevolent biodiversity of Flannery O'Connor, Hemingway, Alice Munro and Brian Evenson. Which leaves us only the single-author collection as a dependable source of nutrition.

Idiosyncratic, unfair, and based on my increasingly imperfect memory, here's my off-the-cuff list of the most memorable post-World War II single-author collections. They fit only two criteria: each volume is as absorbing as the best novel, from first page to last; and each was

written and assembled by authors as they lived and worked, and not as a 'collected' retrospective marking the end of a career. I've tried to include a memorable first line from each author, but that part was easy. The thing about great story-writers is that they have a trunk-load of killer first lines.



GenX Women in Higher Ed, Writing from Across the Globe. Title. Confessions of an Unrepentant Procrastinator. Not getting it done, and then getting it done. By. Janine Utell. May 7, 2015. A couple of years ago, my dad told me a story. I don't remember what prompted the story, but it was about me getting into a gifted and talented program in elementary school. I didn't know this at the time -- I was just glad to get into the program and be allowed to leave my boring fourth grade classroom and horrible teacher once a week to go to another school to write poetry and play with snakes -- but my parents didn't want me to go. My dad said they thought I was already so high-strung about school and grades that doing something like a gifted and talented program would freak me out. The best short story writers think that writing short-fiction is a completely separate art form than writing a novel, but some would argue that writing short stories is great practice for writing a full length work of fiction. Because of the constraints of page length, great short story writers have to use language that is descriptive and quickly sets the scene or develops their characters. Hemingway is notoriously good at short, pithy stories. Like Hemingway, the best short story authors can paint a picture with their words in a short amount of time. If you like books but don't have time to read novels, reading short stories could be a great option for you. Many of the best novelists of all time have also written good short stories. Word Counter. Home » Short Stories » Confession Of A Writer. Confession of a Writer. A lot of you know the real story about my pen name or some of them don't hmmm|okay for all those who doesn't know what's behind may name when I write ahmmm|here's a little summary behind it. Way back 2005 I met a girl thru chat tv and her name is Beverly, at first we were destined to be together, same month, same year and same age. The unrepentant junkie had been a beloved figure for a long time, an unleashed alternative to the good little sober boy. William Burroughs's 1953 cult classic, Junkie, was subtitled Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict. It offered an appealing antidote to the bow-tied conversion narrative. During the same decade, just as federal legislation against "narcotic addicts" was growing more draconian mandating minimum sentences and constructing the addict as villain "people created another vision of the addict in stark opposition to these moralizing measures: someone who wasn't apologizing for anything, who was spinning something defiant or even beautiful from the darkness of their compulsion. Quick and easily shared, is the short story the form for our times? Hilary Mantel, Mark Haddon and others pick their favourites. 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.