Review Essay

Best of Times, Worst of Times: Contemporary American Short Stories from the New Gilded Age

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Wendy Martin and Cecilia Tichi, eds., *Best of Times, Worst of Times: Contemporary American Short Stories from the New Gilded Age*, New York University Press, 2011.

I've never put together an anthology or collection but I imagine it's incredibly difficult—not only selecting what to include and making painful decisions about what to leave out, but particularly deciding on the glue that holds all your selections together and writing the material that makes those connections clear. I imagine this part is incredibly hard primarily because, despite using anthologies and collections almost every semester since I started teaching, the apparatus of an anthology so rarely adds to my appreciation or understanding of the contents that I have assigned that material to my students maybe twice. But I forgive this weakness time and time again when anthologies have done their primary job: collecting and arranging compelling material that I can't wait to discuss.

This primary task is exactly what Wendy Martin and Cecelia Tichi, editors of *Best of Times, Worst of Times: Contemporary American Short Stories from the New Gilded Age* have done beautifully, and it's exactly why I forgive their somewhat superfluous and often meandering introduction. The central organizing trope of the book is a historicizing move that compares recent decades of American history to the Gilded Age—a move previously made by many a news organization and by Cecelia Tichi in her recent work, most notably *Exposés and Excesses* in 2004 and *Civic Passions* in 2009. In a broad sense, this comparison absolutely works: the chasm between the haves and the have nots in the United States has never been wider, and the artistic output of our times registers this disparity sometimes consciously, sometimes uneasily, sometimes polemically, and sometimes only glancingly. However, in trying to connect every story of the collection to this theme, Martin and Tichi sometimes swerve awkwardly to construct a meta-narrative, such as when they connect Susan Straight's "Mines" and Walter Mosley's "Equal Opportunity" to Junot Díaz's "How to Date a Brown Girl" and

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Tobias Wolff's "Smorgasbord" by saying the booming American prison system depicted in the former stories is "closely related" to "the imprisonment of undocumented immigrants," and then that "[i]mmigration issues overlap with stereotypes of race, ethnicity, and class" that can be seen in the latter stories (7). In trying to demonstrate the ways the collection's stories exemplify, emerge out of, and comment upon the New Gilded Age, Martin and Tichi also get bogged down in specific incidents that occurred after most or all of these stories were actually written (Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill) rather than staying focused on how these incidents, like the collection's stories, are representative of larger cultural, political, and economic trends of the last thirty years. The result is an introduction that lays out the unifying thread of the book and says a little about each story but reads awkwardly and, as I previously suggested, could be skipped when teaching this book.

Despite these minor faults, I would recommend this book unreservedly. As I said earlier, I always forgive the glue if what it's holding together is good. And this collection is very good. I have focused in my treatment of this book on its pedagogical potential, and it is clear that the editors did as well: the short author bios at the start of each story and the editors' thank yous to their seminar students in the acknowledgements show the thoughtful consideration that went into this collection's usefulness in the classroom. At first I wished there were some explanation given for the groupings of stories into sections such as "All in the Family" and "Workdays and Nightshifts," especially since "Across Divides," "Locations and Dislocations," and "Shifting Identities" all seem thematically similar and blurry, but as I read the stories, I came to appreciate the editorial silence on these categorizations. Many of the stories included could appear in multiple categories, and by the end of the book the sections feel like loose suggestions rather than boundaries—a permeability that seems completely appropriate to these stories and the time period they represent. In fact, were I to teach a course on postmodern and contemporary American literature and use this collection, I would probably create my own groupings of stories, as I'm sure other teachers and students could. Reaching across sections within the collection, there are stories that raise questions of ethics and reader sympathy (Mosley, Franklin, Updike, Hempel); stories of indeterminacy or uncertainty (Wallace, Wolff, Saunders); stories of war (Thompson, Percy); stories challenging easy boundaries or notions of sexuality, race, and ethnicity (July, Packer, Lethem, Bender, Díaz); stories that situate America within a global context (Lahiri, Jen, Bissell, Fountain, Silver), etc. The possibilities go on and on, as do the joys of this collection.

The stories included represent a vast cross-section of authors, genres, styles and subject matter and together paint a rich and varied picture of American lives

and literature from the 1980s to the (almost) present. Included are authors I had read before and who I was expecting in such a collection (Díaz, Lethem, Packer, Updike, Wallace), authors I had been meaning to read forever (July, Saunders, Jen, Hempel), and authors I'd never heard of before but found myself loving (Bender, Fountain, Silver). Despite the introduction's disproportionate focus on "the worst of times" and scant page describing what also makes this historical moment "the best of times," (an imbalance almost inevitable given the comparisons to the abuses and extravagances of the Gilded Age), these stories also span a wide range of emotional registers from the inertial despair of Charles Bukowski's "A Day" and Susan Straight's "Mines" to the airy humor of Dave Eggers's "You Mother and I" and George Saunders's "COMMCOMM"; from the unsettling irresolution of Marisa Silver's "The Passenger" and Tom Bissell's "Expensive Trips Nowhere" to the poignant glimmers of beauty in Jean Thompson's "Pie of the Month" and Jhumpa Lahiri's "Gogol." This New Gilded Age is one of biting sarcasm and renewed sincerity, fragmentation and unity, traditional narrative structures and experimentation—or as Martin and Tichi say, "adaptation, resistance, resilience, and survival" (8). And, as I said earlier, I can't wait to teach it.