

Best of Our Stories



Volume One

Masthead

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Editor's Note

Before there was *Our Stories*, there was *Slush Stories*— a dot com that was more of a business than an actual literary journal. My idea was simple: there are more people being rejected from literary journals than accepted, so let's find a way to give them feedback on short story and make it a business—if we really like their work we'll publish it and pay them. We were going to charge \$20 for 1 story and \$50 for three stories, or something like that, I forget now (or at least I've been trying to forget). I envisioned *Slush Stories* as a sort of first step in the evolution of sending your short story out—and—if we liked your story we'd publish it in this other arm of the journal, something that was more of an afterthought called *Our Stories*. *Our Stories* and *Slush Stories*. The journal where there are no *Slush Stories* and, when we really, really like your story, it becomes one of (drum roll please) *Our Stories*. Needless to say, this was all a horrible disaster. We dropped the entire idea of paying for reviews and I told my staff we'd have to start reviewing stories for free for the first year at least, and see what happened. I started seeing biographies of some of our writers appearing in other places online (Brian Heston and JE Ogle come to mind) where they listed: “fiction has appeared in *Slush Stories*.” I about vomited, and just knew that something had to change. Within 3 months the entire *Slush Stories* concept was canned, but *Our Stories* remained; being published in *Our Stories* sounded cool, very cool.

The first issue of *Our Stories* includes the kind souls who let us associate their stories with this peculiar venture. Richard Bausch had just left George Mason, and since his departure had left me in the wings of my MFA without a steward. Some of the

highlights from his interview include his thoughts on writing and the craft. As for the stories, I first read McLean's story while I was an undergrad at Hobart College, and I had always dreamed of getting it in print somewhere. Heston and Di Placidi were doing their MFAs with me at Mason and threw me their work on a whim, and Ogle was an acquaintance from Zoetrope All-Story online workshops and sent me his story. I stand by all these first stories, feel proud to give them a home and thankful that they trusted me enough to let them be associated with us.

Despite our initial failures and after completely redoing the website design, submissions started to come in. We interviewed my good friend Paul Cody—who is as charming and warm as they come—and published the first string of stories that came from our submission system. Some thoughts on this second volume of stories are as follows: Rosenstock's piece was one of the first pieces that I personally edited with an author and when reading it you can feel the power of each scene by what is not told rather than what is. LeJeune's story was the longest piece we have ever published and probably ever *will*; it's very unique, and I still think about it, as it could very well be a novel but just has something amazing going on. Vela's piece horrified and amazed us, and remains one of the finest pieces of flash I've ever read. Stuber's story I found to be truly beautiful and was fun for us, and Hamity's story is one of those perfect New York City stories that eventually finds its way into print.

Volume three was a turning point in the journal's history. Josh Campbell had gone to a George Saunders reading and recorded this amazing reading; somehow Saunders, who'd just won the MacArthur prize and was appearing all over the world on TV, said we could publish his reading and Q&A session.

The stories in this volume are varied and strong. Hicklin's story was tragic, and hits you in the gut; funnily enough, we'd received another story from another writer that had the exact same concept—sometimes that happens when running a journal, and I don't believe we've ever gotten another story with the same concept. I worked with Smith on his story, and believe we went through at least four drafts of the story and felt truly committed

to getting it into our pages. Hill's story just knocked MM De Voe over and we had to publish it. A funny fact about Smith-Jackson's story: it is in fact the very first story *ever* received by *Our Stories*. It was originally twice as long, but I loved the voice and was happy to go through a few drafts with her. Reimer's story went through a few drafts but has always been both beautiful and graceful. Finally Lisenbee's story was included as a last minute addition. I was going to hold it over—thought maybe it was too long, got close to rejecting it, but then decided to publish it.

In the fourth issue of this first year at *Our Stories*, we published some of our best work. De Voe suggested interviewing Matthew Sharpe, with whom she'd worked at Columbia while doing her MFA. Cook's story was imaginative, funny, and beautiful. Chuck Campbell's story seemed too bold, angry, and powerful to do anything but accept it, and Swanson's story was too sad, depressing, and touching to do anything but the same. In the issue where my essay "Unkie Editor" was published, where I say that we're not just waiting for a story to arrive, I was, in fact, waiting for Vogel's story. I'd just gone through a divorce and was rebuilding my life, and his story moved me to tears. Hoffman's story was the final gem in this bunch. She was a friend of mine from Ithaca, NY; I'd read her short story collection, and asked her if she'd published any of her stories in journals—when she said no, I was surprised, and asked her if we could take it. It was later included in the Dzanc Best of the Web anthology.

All of the stories here in volume one are powerhouses, from the journal that reads everything, fights with every story, and only publishes the best work around. Enjoy them yourself—we will.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Best of Our Stories Volume One

Issue One

Interview with Richard Bausch	8
The Girl on the Bus, by Brian Patrick Heston	14
Airplane, by Christian McLean	22
Swimming Pool, by J. E. Ogle	30
Just an Old-Fashioned Love Song, by Jenni Di Placidi	44
All There Was to Say, by Peter Syverson	50
Editor's Corner	56

Issue Two

Interview with Paul Cody	60
Sanctuary, by Matthew Hamity	66
Bone Flutes, by Lyn LeJeune	80
Dizzy Spells, by David Rosenstock	98
Souvenir: Stockholm, by Amy Stuber	108
Sister's Back, by Veronica Vela	122
Editor's Corner	128

Issue Three

Interview with George Saunders	132
Crossing the River Jordan, by William Hicklin	142
Moth-Man, by Sandy Olson Hill	150
The Cardinal Rule of Divers, by Thomas Lisenbee	154
On Earth As It Is In Heaven, by Jennifer Reimer	170
What Do We Want? When Do We Want It? by Jeremy Adam Smith	182
Shoot the Swans, by Patti Smith-Jackson	198
Editor's Corner	210

Issue Four

Interview with Matthew Sharpe	214
Virgin Walks When Prometheus Rises by Chuckie Campbell	220
Floating Dereck, by Nicholas Cook	234
Waking, by Cara Hoffman	244
What's In This For Dave, by Thea Swanson	250
Cat in a Cage, by Mark Vogel	264
Editor's Corner	278

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Volume One
Issue One

Interview with a Master

Richard Bausch



Introduction to the Interview

By Alexis E. Santi
Editor in Chief

Besides all of the literary accolades, awards and accomplishments that could encompass three or four lifetimes, Richard Bausch was a long time professor in the Creative Writing program at George Mason University, who along with Susan Shreve, built what is now a top-ranked MFA program. He currently teaches at The University of Memphis where he holds the Moss Chair of Excellence. He was at GMU (and always will be wherever he teaches) a tireless advocate of his students. Known for spending countless hours in the classroom and never shy of taking them all to the local bar to get to know each other better. Over a baked trout and a glass of wine, he would encourage and counsel scores of students in the MFA program. He never seemed to mind what genre someone worked under, or whether they had taken a class with him. He is committed to getting his students to know, to believe that their voices need to be heard and that the craft called them to a seat at his table. The interview took place between Alexis E. Santi and Richard Bausch corresponding over email.

So how is life treating you? How is Memphis?

Memphis is a great town—lots to do, lots to see, southerly winds, pretty blossoms early, best music anywhere on the planet, good restaurants, galleries, gardens, playhouses, cafes; and the people are friendly.

And have you found a bar to replace Brion's Grille as your hang out?

Yep. It's called RP Tracks. Four minute walk from Patterson Hall. They don't have trout, though, or any fish on the menu. Good wine, though.

So I hear you finished another novel, this is number ten,

correct?

Ten, yes. Started another, too. Or went back to the one I was working on when I started THANKSGIVING NIGHT.

Could you tell us a little bit about Thanksgiving Night?

I started it as a contemporary novel in 1999, but it took so damn long to finish, it's a historical novel now. :-) It's about several people in a Virginia town, who keep getting it wrong until they begin to get it right. I'm calling it a love comedy with sorrows.

You've now completed 10 novels, another in progress and have six short story collections. Do you have trouble juggling the two; the novel and the short story form?

I'm usually always writing stories anyway—though I've gone a good two years now without writing one, which feels strange. I'm just now working on a couple, and beginning to feel my way into them again. HELLO TO THE CANNIBALS was such a long work, such an undertaking, that it ate up a lot of my impulse to do stories. And then this latest novel was composed during quite a bit of personal upheaval, and the time to work the shorter form just wasn't there. It's getting better now, and I'm hopeful about the coming months.

What piece has given you the most trouble over the years, that you revised the most?

Well, over these years it was THANKSGIVING NIGHT, which took a lot of re-writing and re-casting. But all of it is hard to do. Wouldn't be worth doing if it was easy.

Ourstories.us is a website that allows committed writers to grow from the review process. Our staff, the readers, who are doing their MFAs, advise and counsel writers when their work doesn't make it into print. Keeping this revision process in mind, I was wondering if you could say something about your own revision process and how it has developed over the years?

Oh, I just keep reading it and writing it and reading it and writing it, over and over. It's just educating myself about it, getting smarter

and smarter as to what it is, where its real heart is, where it matters most, and then trying to make it as clear and as unobtrusively involving as I can.

You did your MFA at Iowa, did you grow close to the other writers in the program at the time? No, that's not what I want to ask. Was there a sense of camaraderie and commitment to each other's work? No, that's not it either. I guess what I'm trying to ask is, did you have say, TC Boyle in your corner, going "I damn well liked his story!" arguing tooth and nail with Alan Gurganus, and then get coffee and argue with Jane Smiley over the finer points of so-and-so's short story?

Not really. We did meet a couple of times in wildcat workshops, and we would occasionally show each other work. But mostly it was just being involved in each other's lives. I didn't really know Tom Boyle then—though he was still in Iowa at the time. He'd finished the workshop when I arrived. I was in classes with Allan Gurganus, though, and Jane Smiley—her name was Jane Whiston then. We had fun.

Did you ever, at the time, look around the room and say, "Damn, this is the future of American letters?"

Not really. We were all just hell-bent on writing something good, and on reading everything that had ever been written that WAS good.

You're noted by your students as a tireless supporter, encourager and believer in their work. Where does your steadfast support come from?

I think that whatever effectiveness I have as a teacher comes mostly from remembering well how it felt—and what misconceptions I was subject to—when I was a student.

What comes to mind when I say the word: "doubt"?

Misconceptions about the task. It's hard. It's hard for a reason. Nobody ever did it with much ease who was any good at it.

You've been published everywhere: in Atlantic Monthly, Harpers, GQ, The New Yorker and plenty of others. Could you say a little bit about the first? What was the first one for you, where that short story got into print and let you know that you weren't just railing all night alone? The first that cracked the door open and you could see the light?

First story in a magazine that paid real money was in The Atlantic Monthly, back in the spring of 1983. The April issue, a story called "All The Way in Flagstaff, Arizona." It was actually a late chapter of a failing novel—what I had to write to get that story. I left it out of THE STORIES OF... because I had grown a little tired of it over the years. Fact is, there were seven or eight stories I left out of that book.

What's next on your desk that you're working on?

Couple stories—one called "One Afternoon in the History of Love" that I think might end up being a novella. I love the form, though it's nearly impossible to publish them except in a book.

I'd like to close with something I love hearing you talk about, something we've often discussed, could you describe your perfect writing night?

You don't know the night has passed. You are so gone in the work that you do not hear a thunder storm come and go, and when the light comes you see the rain on the leaves out the window, and you have that feeling of using your talent well and virtuously. And then maybe you have one small shot glass of whiskey so you can sleep. Or you take a friend's book to bed and read slow, until the drift starts—that psychic snow shutting you down. I think I like working at night better than at any other time, though I am lucky in that I can write at any hour, if there's something to write. So far, there has always been something to write.

Richard Bausch is the author of ten novels and six short story collections. He is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards,

including the O Henry, Pushcart, PEN Malamud & Best of. He is the editor of the 2005 Norton Anthology of short fiction. His most recent novel is entitled Thanksgiving Night and will be released by Harper Collins this October. He is currently at the University of Memphis Creative Writing program and holds the Lillian and Morrie A. Moss Chair of Excellence.

Publications by Richard Bausch

Peace

Thanksgiving Night

Hello to the Cannibals

The Stories of Richard Bausch

Wives & Lovers

The Fireman's Wife and Other Stories

Someone to Watch Over Me

In the Night Season

Good Evening Mr. & Mrs. America and All the Ships at Sea

The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, edited by Richard Bausch

Rebel Powers

Violence

Mr. Field's Daughter

