

BEST MODERN AMERICAN STORIES

In this short course we explore all the elements that make modern American short stories succeed, as encapsulating “a world of possibility within a few precious pages.” Each story exploration will include an author overview, short read-alouds by participants, exposition of key elements in plot, characterization and setting; a discussion of language as a tool for effectiveness; and our personal responses. All opinions welcome! No book purchase necessary: internet sources to be provided. Most stories readable in under 30 minutes.

Session 1:

Hills like White Elephants, Ernest Hemingway (1927)

Arguably Hemingway’s best and most accessible short story, this is a masterpiece of subtlety and indirection that focuses on a conversation between lovers.

Session 2:

A Good Man is Hard to Find, Flannery O’Connor (1953)

Referenced in good compilations of the Southern Gothic style, this memorable story represents a heady mixture of satire, humor, and horror.

Session 3:

A&P, by John Updike (1961)

How far would you go to reject consumerism? This comic, very short story about a young man’s moral coming of age will be teamed with another Updike selection.

Session 4:

Cathedral, Raymond Carver (1981)

This very short story, atypical of Carver’s style, is a terse, highly skilled portrait of personalities with a sly twist at the end that is sure to generate conversation.

Session 5:

Speech Sounds, Octavia Butler (1983)

This story won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story. Part of the post-Apocalyptic genre, it nevertheless manages to end on a note of surprising optimism. We’ll also discuss Isaac Asimov’s take on the concept of science fiction and his admiration for Butler.

Session 6:

The Ape Lady in Retirement, T.C. Boyle (1989)

Considerations for Jane Goodall aside, this parody is just plain laugh-out-loud funny and rings strangely true.

Session 7:

Home, George Saunders (2009)

This story, winner of multiple awards, may be one of the few that will move you to tears as well as deeper empathy for the returning war veteran. This story will be paired with another Saunders story.

Session 8:

Where are You Going, Where Have you Been?, Joyce Carol Oates (2010)

Can we recognize the devil when we see him? This highly readable story about an ingenue in trouble of her own doing may raise the hairs on the back of your neck.

LEADER: Susan Matson, MS, Johns Hopkins, has taught classes in short story and essay appreciation for PSRC from 2019-present. She is a retired English teacher and teacher-trainer.

LOCATION: Zoom

THURSDAYS: 10:00 a.m. to noon, 8 weeks beginning March 3 through April 21

MAXIMUM: 16