

Lifelong Learning Collaborative: Winter 2017

The Best American Short Stories 2016: Discussion Guide

Coordinators: *Ira Schaeffer, Stephanie Sullivan*

Our text: *The Best American Short Stories 2016*, Junot Diaz and Heidi Pitlor (Editors)

Days: Tuesday afternoons 1:00 – 3:00

Location: Temple Beth-El

Length of class: 8 weeks

Start/end date: Jan. 11 - Feb. 25

Introduction: We are delighted you decided to join us as we delve into this collection of thought-provoking new fiction. The Best American series is the premier annual showcase for some of the country's finest short fiction. Each volume's series editor selects notable works from hundreds of magazines, journals and websites. Junot Díaz, this year's guest editor, is a critically acclaimed writer, especially known for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

You may be familiar with classic short stories by O. Henry, Poe, Twain, London or Fitzgerald. They most often derive their structure from actions or a plot involving conflict. The plot unfolds, usually sequentially, involving the reader in the complications and suspense. In the end, the conflict is resolved.

In contrast, many contemporary short stories are not necessarily plot-driven; they are often more of a "slice of life." Some seem fragmentary, with a character sketch or a conflict that shows possibilities, but often has no clear resolution. This type of story makes for engaging discussions and leaves plenty of room for the reader to insert his/her own conjectures and reactions. Our discussions in this class will be framed around what makes each story engaging and instructive.

Class Format: First, please read all the stories in the collection. Choose one or two that appeal to you, and sign up to serve as the discussion leader, by yourself or with a classmate. We will ask you to develop some questions about the story to email out to the class. You will find our discussion guide below helpful. No formal presentations are required, just your active participation in the class. Mainly, let's have fun as we warm up the winter afternoons with some lively, often heated discussions.

Discussion/Study Guide

Here is a discussion/study guide that we've used in our previous short story courses to help class members read deeply and develop engaging discussion questions. Some like to use it as a work sheet to make notes of effective phrases, images, and "aha moments". We recommend you read each story at least twice – there is invariably more happening than you initially think.

One way to critique a story is to consider the responses it evokes. Does it involve you? Repulse you?

Does it open your eyes to the circumstances of another time, place and person? Do you care about the characters and their lives?

➤ **What are the entertaining and instructive elements in the content of the story:**

- Change that happens to the main characters? (plot)
- Kind of people who inhabit the story? (characters)
- Recurring ideas in the story? (thematic elements)
- Importance of time and place in the story? (setting)

➤ **What are the powerful elements in the form of the story:**

- Who is telling the story? Whose point of view are we getting?
- Language, vocabulary and/or style of the author?
- Use of imagery and/or metaphors?
- Use of verbal irony and/or humor?
- Author's point of view and where or if it comes through?

➤ **What are the effective elements in the design of the story:**

- Title? Opening line or scene? Closing scene?
- Repetition of images, actions, and/or parallel circumstances?
- Arrangement of the scenes in the ordering of the story? (juxtaposition)

Impact: What did you learn? And were you engaged and entertained?

Author:

- Background and other writings?
- Reflections of author's interests, concerns, etc. in the story?

Favorite section to read to the class...

Other observations: