

# Reviews

BLASINA CANTIZANO, JOSÉ FRANCISCO FERNÁNDEZ, JOSÉ RAMÓN IBÁÑEZ, MARÍA ELENA JAIME DE PABLOS Y MÓNICA RAMÍREZ A (EDS). *Distancias cortas: El relato breve en Gran Bretaña, Irlanda y Estados Unidos (1995-2005)* Septem Universitas.Oviedo, 2010.

## The way towards the 21st century short story writing in English

“Variety”, affirmed Eudora Welty, “is, has been, and no doubt will remain endless in possibilities, because the power and stirring of the mind never rests” (qtd in Shaw 1986: 1). These “endless possibilities”, transformed into tales, have made of the short story “the most widely read of all modern genres” (Reid 1977). In addition, and almost simultaneously, John David Bellamy in the book *Superfiction, or The American Story Transformed: An Anthology* opened his exposition defending a most necessary phase of experimentation of the genre, calling for “a bewildering range of experimentation” (1975:4). Indeed, experimentation means change, transformation, and it brings about movement and expansion in multiple directions.

Welty, first, Reid and Bellamy, later, foresaw the future for the forthcoming short story universe having invested those endless possibilities, that popularity and experimentation into a successful improvement in quality, popularity and “bewildering” innovation into a most meaningful transformation in the last forty years of the genre. *Distancias Cortas, El Relato Breve en Gran Bretaña, Irlanda y Estados Unidos* (1995-2005) shows the evolution of the short story in English and the editors express in their presentation the reasons for that trend: that is, the increase in the number of short stories published, the growth of new story collections and the remarkable progress of critical studies in the same period of time both in Spain and abroad. (2010: 9)

With the noble endeavor of becoming a reference book for future researchers (2010: 9), *Distancias Cortas* was designed both for sorting out the deluge of stories, writers and critical works and for being a deacon to all those predictable researchers of this attractive and fashionable genre. At the same time, the book tries, as the editors point out at the beginning, to cover the blank space that existed on the knowledge and references of the production of the short story written in English in the last years. (2010: 9)

Precisely, in the last twenty years, there have been a number of critical studies on the short story in English. In Spain, there were studies on women writers (Carrera 2005) or on the classic short story (Rodríguez-Strachan 2000), among others, that covered different areas of analysis. However, there had not previously been a book

that covered and not only provided the reader with a valuable “short-history” of the contemporary short story in English but also a large and accurately updated bibliography on the subject. For this reason, one welcomes a project that reflects these aspects, that covers the unexplored path of a reference book for the modern short story written in English and, finally, that faces straightforwardly the state of the question by analyzing its main participants.

Walter Allen’s assertion that the short story of today is both an “international form and a recent one” (1981: 3) establishes the parameters to contextualize *Distancias Cortas* by bringing about two key concepts, place and time. In terms of place, “internationalization” widens the scope of the book to Great Britain, Ireland and the United States; in terms of time, the book spans for writers and stories working for a period of time limited in the title “from 1995-2005”; “a recent” form, as Allen would say.

This recent development proves that here is not a lineal or equal grade of development in the short story countries we are dealing with. In fact, the authors here successfully conclude that irregularity features that progression; that is to say, that emphasis should be made on the fact that the contemporary short story is in a good moment in England (Fernández 2010: 23), while in Ireland the variety has not provoked yet a critical corpus big enough (Jaime de Pablos y Ramírez 2010: 95) and in USA, maturity is the word that defines the current moment of the genre. (Cantizano 2010: 205)

On the other hand, there are two small but remarkable moments in this “temporal excerpt” in the history of the short story—especially, but not exclusively, of the American short story—that, somehow, conditioned the current environment in this field: first, the appearance of the book *The Short Story: the Reality of Artifice* (1995) written by the American short story critic Charles E. May. In my opinion, this book, whose aim was “compress and exemplify my thinking about the form over the last quarter of century” (May 1995: xi), and May struck the key to where the short story, as a genre, was and where it was heading to. In the mid-nineties, and from then on, all his works have been of outstanding importance to understand the complexities of the short stories and he is one of the main referents in the book in question here. And *Distancias Cortas* positively drinks from that source. Later, in 2000, a second big advance is given by the achievement of the Pulitzer Prize that year by the American short story writer of Bengali extract Jhumpa Lahiri with her debut collection, now a classic, *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Beyond its title, beyond its concept as a reference book, and its accurately structured and well-organized development, the most significant contribution of *Distancias Cortas* lies in the presentation and analysis of the newest trends in the English, Irish and American short story as well as in the selection of the most actual writers of the genre and their stories.

Despite Nicholas Blincoe’s assertion, (qtd Fernández 2010: 24) that there is no market for the contemporary short story, I definitely agree with the position of the author here when he says that the Contemporary English short story is in a good

moment for the ongoing process of positive inertia we are involved in. Even if remarkable British writers such as Ali Smith and Toby Litt mentioned that some “new writing” was “dauntingly undaring” (qtd in Fernández 2010: 40), it must be taken into account the fact that there is, indeed, an improving and promising platform for the short narrative in England. And I should add that this progress is being carried out in terms of solid topics, new imaginative innovation, and most importantly, renewed genius. Writers like Will Self viewed as a distinctive writer among his contemporaries (Fernández 2010: 77) and “the new British” stories by Hanif Kureishi (Fernández 2010: 63) will fit into the picture of the “promising” short story in England.

*Distancias Cortas* is an invaluable source of information for gathering relevant writers, stories and collections in the last twenty years. One of these collections, in my opinion, is Nick Hornby’s *Speaking with the Angels* (2000). As Fernández emphasizes, the collection written not only by renowned writers such as Zadie Smith or Nick Hornby, includes interesting tales by not habitual writers such as Colin Firth. “The line up is stellar” (Seaton 2000) can be read in *The Guardian*. At the same time, the appearance of Salman Rushdie’s *East West* is worth mentioning here. In addition, the study of Nicholas Blincoe described as an unusual story writer (Fernández 2010:48), the study of Jacky Kay, also born in 1961 and described also as “peculiar” or the study of Bridget O’Connor’s very short narratives in first person, complete a very extensive canvas of the most updated English short story landscape.

If Fernández deals with the English short story, M. Elena Jaime de Pablos and Mónica Ramírez depict the current scenario of the Irish short story. In the same argumentative line as both Storey (2004) and Walter Allen, they open their argumentation in 1903 as the starting point for the modern Irish short story. If that was the past, the origins, the present and the Irish short story between centuries is somehow different. Following the words of one of the authors studied by Jaime de Pablos and Ramírez, William Trevor, it can be affirmed that “the modern short story (in Ireland) grew out of what remained, but it was so fruitful that its emergence as a literary form could not be denied” and concludes that “its intensity left an echo, a distinctive print on the mind.” (Trevor 1997: xiv)

Even though the research areas of these authors still purpose religion, Irish troubles, illness or violence as main topics, the trend of the Irish story moves towards the transformed image of traditional Ireland (Jaime de Pablos and Ramírez 2010: 93), the readers of Irish tales today will feel that “new print on the mind.” Although, as Anthony Burgess points out that when talking about the Irish short story, “when a word is used it carries not only its present meaning but a haze of harmonics derived from the long sounding of that word in literature in the past” (Burgess 1995: 18), it may be for that music from the past that, in spite of transformation, the topics set in the new contemporary Irish writings are deeply rooted in the aforementioned (Ramírez 2010: 97-128). However, it is worth insisting on the lack of academic studies on the Irish short story (Jaime de Pablos and Ramírez 2010: 95). Apart from the best known names purposed here such as Edna O’Brien or Julia O’Faolain or,

even, William Trevor, again, the most interesting aspect lies in those writers born in the 60's. Among others, it is particularly relevant the study of the realist, funny and shaking narrative of Keith Ridgway (Jaime de Pablos 2010: 176)

The current situation of the short story in United States is different from the situation in England and Ireland. José Ramón Ibáñez and Blasina Cantizano's contribution provides an extensive account of such difference. It is clear by the research of both professors that the Contemporary American short stories has followed different paths and has suffered a different pace in its development. According to them, not only is the American short story highly mature but it has also grown on solid grounds—both in terms of stories and critical work. Ibáñez (2010: 197) successfully places the “uptrend” of the genre in the interwar period and make a clear temporal reference for the 80's as the peak for the mentioned differentiation due to its fecundity and multiculturalism.” (212)

There are many worthy examples of this evolution from canonical foundations to modern representations in *Distancias Cortas*. However, in order to give just an idea, I would like to refer to the case of the short story in the American South among the many given by the authors and matters. From the very moment of the birth of the short story in United States, *Distancias Cortas* goes through the “grotesque realism” (Ibáñez 2010: 196) or the grotesque of the frequently shadowed and underestimated Sherwood Anderson up to the inevitable “A Rose for Emily”, as a story where the southern decadence is shown (Ibáñez 2010: 197) and the greatest moment of the short story tradition in the south. This classic and canonical line continues up to the end of the century to Tim Gautreaux and the way he prints his deep southern genes in his stories.

Apart from the relevant appearance of the Cajun Tim Gautreaux, the presence of the list of writers faithfully reflects in this chapter the great moment of the American Short story present in the second wave of non-native short story writers with Chinese, Polish or from any other nationality. Aleksandr Hemon, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ha Jin or even Junot Diaz, are names and writers that tell us about the new territory that the short story in USA is stepping on: a landscape of multiculturalism.

If these new writers transform and makes the short story vary, it is obvious that, in general, these tellers are not “transgressors” in form (Cantizano 2010: 216). It is precisely for this reason that the examples given by the author here, especially those of Heidi Julavitz and Anthony Doerr, are worthy mentioning here.

Apart from the multiculturalism and scarce transgression in form, an outstanding proof of the maturity and solidity of the new American short story is the aforementioned Pulitzer Prize won by the writer Jhumpa Lahiri in 2000. This is an example of the significance of the set of authors and the new tendencies opened here. These writers form and give an idea of that transformation and variety Bellamy and Allen wrote about.

However, one of the main assets of *Distancias Cortas* is bibliography. The careful selection of references updates the already existing bibliography on the issue by given

references organized by country. New researchers will surely find any aspect of the contemporary short story in English. From the roots with references to classical writers such as Wilde, Joyce or Faulkner, to references from short story critics such as Storey, Lohafer or the aforementioned May in English to Rodríguez-Strachan or Carrera Suárez, among the Spanish ones, the book covers a wide range of necessary references for anyone interested in this area. In other words, the relevance of this bibliographical closure lies in the amplitude of its proposal and the meaning of its references and finally a mirror for the imaginative, modern, experimental and widely-spread moment of the short story now that the 21st century is learning to grow up. In this sense, *Distancias Cortas*, definitely, fulfills a blank in the world of the short story and projects a valuable vision on that new century.

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