

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Ambition of the Short Story

By STEVEN MILLHAUSER

Published: October 3, 2008

The short story — how modest in bearing! How unassuming in manner! It sits there quietly, eyes lowered, almost as if trying not to be noticed. And if it should somehow attract your attention, it says quickly, in a brave little self-deprecating voice alive to all the possibilities of disappointment: “I’m not a novel, you know. Not even a short one. If that’s what you’re looking for, you don’t want me.” Rarely has one form so dominated another. And we understand, we nod our heads knowingly: here in America, size is power. The novel is the Wal-Mart, the Incredible Hulk, the jumbo jet of literature. The novel is insatiable — it wants to devour the world. What’s left for the poor short story to do? It can cultivate its garden, practice meditation, water the geraniums in the window box. It can take a course in creative nonfiction. It can do whatever it likes, so long as it doesn’t forget its place — so long as it keeps quiet and stays out of the way. “Hoo ha!” cries the novel. “Here ah come!” The short story is always ducking for cover. The novel buys up the land, cuts down the trees, puts up the condos. The short story scampers across a lawn, squeezes under a fence.

Of course there are virtues associated with smallness. Even the novel will grant as much. Large things tend to be unwieldy, clumsy, crude; smallness is the realm of elegance and grace. It’s also the realm of perfection. The novel is exhaustive by nature; but the world is inexhaustible; therefore the novel, that Faustian striver, can never attain its desire. The short story by contrast is inherently selective. By excluding almost everything, it can give perfect shape to what remains. And the short story can even lay claim to a kind of completeness that eludes the novel — after the initial act of radical exclusion, it can include all of the little that’s left. The novel, when it remembers the short story at all, is pleased to be generous. “I admire you,” it says, placing its big rough hand over its heart. “No kidding. You’re so — you’re so —” So pretty! So svelte! So high class! And smart, too. The novel can hardly contain itself. After all, what difference does it make? It’s nothing but talk. What the novel cares about is vastness, is power. Deep in its heart, it disdains the short story, which makes do with so little. It has no use for the short story’s austerity, its suppression of appetite, its refusals and renunciations. The novel wants things. It wants territory. It wants the whole world. Perfection is the consolation of those who have nothing else.

So much for the short story. Modest in its pretensions, shyly proud of its petite virtues, a trifle anxious in relation to its brash rival, it contents itself with sitting back and letting the novel take on the big world. And yet, and yet. That modest pose — am I mistaken, or is it a little overdone? Those glancing-away looks — do they contain a touch of slyness? Can it be that the little short story dares to have ambitions of its own? If so, it will never admit them openly, because of a sharp instinct for self-protection, a long habit of secrecy bred by oppression. In a world ruled by swaggering novels, smallness has learned to make its way cautiously. We will

have to intuit its secret. I imagine the short story harboring a wish. I imagine the short story saying to the novel: You can have everything — everything — all I ask is a single grain of sand. The novel, with a careless shrug, a shrug both cheerful and contemptuous, grants the wish.

But that grain of sand is the story's way out. That grain of sand is the story's salvation. I take my cue from William Blake: "To see a world in a grain of sand." Think of it: the world in a grain of sand; which is to say, every part of the world, however small, contains the world entirely. Or to put it another way: if you concentrate your attention on some apparently insignificant portion of the world, you will find, deep within it, nothing less than the world itself. In that single grain of sand lies the beach that contains the grain of sand. In that single grain of sand lies the ocean that dashes against the beach, the ship that sails the ocean, the sun that shines down on the ship, the interstellar winds, a teaspoon in Kansas, the structure of the universe. And there you have the ambition of the short story, the terrible ambition that lies behind its fraudulent modesty: to body forth the whole world. The short story believes in transformation. It believes in hidden powers. The novel prefers things in plain view. It has no patience with individual grains of sand, which glitter but are difficult to see. The novel wants to sweep everything into its mighty embrace — shores, mountains, continents. But it can never succeed, because the world is vaster than a novel, the world rushes away at every point. The novel leaps restlessly from place to place, always hungry, always dissatisfied, always fearful of coming to an end — because when it stops, exhausted but never at peace, the world will have escaped it. The short story concentrates on its grain of sand, in the fierce belief that there — right there, in the palm of its hand — lies the universe. It seeks to know that grain of sand the way a lover seeks to know the face of the beloved. It looks for the moment when the grain of sand reveals its true nature. In that moment of mystic expansion, when the macrocosmic flower bursts from the microcosmic seed, the short story feels its power. It becomes bigger than itself. It becomes bigger than the novel. It becomes as big as the universe. Therein lies the immodesty of the short story, its secret aggression. Its method is revelation. Its littleness is the agency of its power. The ponderous mass of the novel strikes it as the laughable image of weakness. The short story apologizes for nothing. It exults in its shortness. It wants to be shorter still. It wants to be a single word. If it could find that word, if it could utter that syllable, the entire universe would blaze up out of it with a roar. That is the outrageous ambition of the short story, that is its deepest faith, that is the greatness of its smallness.

Millhauer's most recent book is "Dangerous Laughter: Thirteen Stories."