

Beattie, Ann. *The New Yorker Stories*. By Alexa

Never heard of Beattiesque writing? Try this collection of 48 short stories ranging from 1974 to 2006 previously published by *The New Yorker*, which gives the author credibility. This collection provides a clear overview of Beattie's snapshots of families and relationships, with themes that develop subtly over the years and a style emulated by many others.

Tensions are created through people's sexual liberation, affairs, separations and divorce, or through the awareness and tolerance of a partner who may not be or have the perfect match. People are obsessed with their own problems to the detriment of others. How sad in the story entitled *Wanda's* that the little girl, May, is treated so shoddily, getting shunted from one place to another while her parents follow their whims, going off in different directions.

Persistent and interrelated themes are change and unhappiness. In the earlier stories, people make changes by leaving their partner, only to find they are just as unhappy after making this move. For instance, in *Secrets and Surprises*, the narrator wants her husband back, even though he had left seven months beforehand and she now has a boyfriend. In *A Vintage Thunderbird*, Nick remains friends with Karen for 7 years in the hope of their relationship developing further; his lack of courage to move on only exacerbates his unhappiness. The youthful impulsiveness of the early stories matures into a mellow graciousness that comes with the wisdom of ageing (well, for some of the characters) in the later stories. Over the course of this collection, the unhappiness depicted in the early stories transforms into a quiet acceptance of how things have become. In the final story, *The Confidence Decoy*, Francis comments that life simply changes by someone telling you something.

A historical overview of the works reveal the changes that have taken over time. We meet Ellen's newly-found feminism in the first story, *A Platonic Relationship*, when she decides to leave her husband and enjoy a platonic relationship with the younger Sam, only to realise later that she was unsympathetic to her patient husband. The dope-smoking habits of Michael in *Fancy Flights* may seem cool and funny until we realise how narcissistic and irresponsible he is. The concerns regarding the Vietnam War appear in *Shifting* in which Andy had lost a leg and the use of his arms after getting blown up there. In response, Natalie had photographed her legs as a type of cold sculpture. In *Second Question*, Richard is dying of AIDS, a moving account of a person's last days. Keller has made his fortune by investing in Microsoft in *That Last Odd Day in L.A.* But poor old Keller is misunderstood by his wife and daughter who find his sense of humour provocative.

Due to Beattie's straightforward accounts, characters are drawn concisely and introduced quickly, yet they reflect keen observations. Some characters have no name, while others have little role to play. Beattie uses a range of narrative voices. The narrator's point of view shifts from first person in some stories to third in others, and she gives both male and female perspectives. There is a masterful showing (not telling) of mental or drunken states, such as Sharon counting things in *Distant Music* when she's in an argument, or Wanda dropping a serving spoon, having drunk too much tequila. In *Downhill*, we witness Maria's mental state through her frustration with hair. Then she explains things to the dog that she cannot express directly to her husband, Jon. I wonder about her take on reality and whether she will get better. Outstanding is *In the White Night* that illustrates the devastating sadness of a couple whose daughter has died.

Admirable is Beattie's talent for revealing so much about people through their natural and beguiling dialogue. Sudden humorous anecdotes or conversations lighten the mood and ease frustrations. *The Rabbit Hole as Likely Explanation* begins with a hilarious dialogue between the narrator and her elderly mother, showing an underlying sense of the narrator's endless patience with her mother's fears, which would otherwise be totally frustrating. Beattie is also adept using a character's inner voice to disclose past events that are triggered by a memory or association.

Men's attitudes towards women are cleverly depicted. They can be belittling, as Larry is towards Natalie in *Shifting*, and as George is towards Leonore in *Weekend*. Yet Leonore chooses to ignore his infidelity with Sarah, pretending to be mature about their open relationship, and stays with him for the security of home. Or men's attitudes can be distressing, as with Milo in *The Cinderella Waltz*, a manipulative and spoilt brat who betrayed his wife regarding his homosexuality. A woman's revenge is a shock for the husband in *Home to Marie*. He is flabbergasted by the way she leaves him; it's been years since he used to come home late at night, her cooking left cold. Jerome's misogynist attitude in *The Women of this World* is obnoxious; he only likes his "perfect" son.

It's not until the stories of the 1980s and later that they really hit their stride. They are shorter and more poignant, their last lines divulging the meaning of the title. In *Gravity*, Beattie uses more symbolism and imagery to depict relationships. Nick's former lover, Barbara is deep and cool, drawing Nick in to her like Narcissus, whereas his partner is lost in life, just as she was lost in the woods as a child when her

parents got drunk. *Like Glass* is a thoughtful depiction of the narrator's shard of sorrow, unable to accept her divorce.

Beattie's stories may be sparse, but they are packed full of the complications of life.

About the author:

Ann Beattie is an American short story writer and novelist who is currently Edgar Allen Poe Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Virginia. She was 26 when her first story, *A Platonic Relationship*, was published in *The New Yorker*. Her first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1976), was adapted as a film alternatively titled *Chilly Scenes of Winter* or *Head Over Heels* in 1979. In 2000, she received an award for excellence from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the PEN/ Malamud PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story form. In 2005 she received the Rea Award for the Short Story.