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"I Am Your Brother": Short Story Studies



Synopsis

"I Am Your Brother": Short Story Studies is a study of the short story as a genre, written both for academic and general readers. After establishing the origins of the short story in myth, the book examines issues of genre and history, discusses the difference between the short story and the novel, and analyzes the importance of obsession, mystery, and metaphoric motivation in the form. Chapters also are devoted to mythic perception in the short fiction of John Steinbeck and Bernard Malamud, love and separateness in the short stories of Eudora Welty, and the birth of the modern short story by Anton Chekhov. The final two chapters are extended discussions of the short stories of Raymond Carver and Alice Munro.

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Customer Reviews

I first came across Professor Charles May's blog eighteen months ago and was immediately struck by the quality of May's insights into the short story form. May has published 8 books and over 300 articles on the subject of short stories, and I Am Your Brother is the culmination of forty years of teaching and thinking about this often misunderstood and disparaged prose form. True scholarship, in the sense of being heart-felt as well as erudite, is unmistakeable, and I recommend this book both to readers and writers of short stories, and to those who have not, up until now, given them much thought. One of May's central concerns is that short stories have suffered in the past, and continue to suffer, by being compared, in a simplistic way, to novels; by being considered no more than bits of novels, constructed according to the same formal patterns and with the same narrative ends in view. He sets out to dismantle these false assumptions and he does so very convincingly. Short stories have ancient ancestors, and have remained connected to their roots in the sacred parable,

allegory and myth. The everyday passage of time, cause and effect, the development of individual characters within a social framework are all hallmarks of the novel from the eighteenth century onwards. In the short story, because of its shortness, and because its writers started out with very different aims, time is just as likely to be compressed, or frozen. In discussing Edgar Allan Poe's approach to the short story, May points out that it 'reflects the basic paradox inherent in all narrative: the writer's restriction to the dimension of time juxtaposed against his or her desire to create a structure that reflects an atemporal theme.

Taking its title from a key piece of dialog in Nikolai Gogol's classic short story "The Overcoat," this book is a fascinating and highly engaging examination of the short story. As Professor May points out, the short story is often regarded as nothing better than a poor cousin to the novel -- "a smaller, simpler, easier, and less important form of the novel," as a reviewer in the London Academy once said. But in fact the short story is its own art form; one that is distinct from, but not less than, the novel. Short story writers can achieve effects of expression that can't be achieved in the novel, just as other effects that can be produced in the novel aren't available to the short story. May discusses the factors that distinguish the short story from other genres or modes of writing, and in this discussion he draws not only on his own opinions and analyses, but also on the writings of many other scholars, critics, and short-story authors. Some general and repeating themes emerge, and these serve to point up the unique qualities and values of the short story. While I don't feel it would do justice to May's book to summarize those themes here without their surrounding arguments and examples, I will say that I found this part of the book thoroughly fascinating. The second half of the book is devoted to in-depth looks at some particular short-story authors, including Bernard Malamud, Anton Chekhov, Raymond Carver, Alice Munro, and others. Here too May's knowledge of and feeling for his subject is excellent. I particularly enjoyed his analysis of Raymond Carver's stories.

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