These twenty short stories boldly and insightfully explore the extremes of human emotions. In her story Night Talkers, Edwidge Danticat reunites a young man and the elderly aunt who raised him in Haiti. Anthony Doerr brings readers a naturalist who discovers the surprising healing powers of a deadly cone snail. Louise Erdrich writes of an Ojibwa fiddler whose music brings him deep and mysterious joy. Here are diverse and intriguing characters -- a kidnapper, an immigrant nanny, an amputee blues musician -- who are as surprised as the reader is at what brings them happiness.

In his introduction, Walter Mosley explores the definition of a good short story, and writes, The writers represented in this collection have told stories that suggest much larger ideas. I found myself presented with the challenge of simple human love contrasted against structures as large as religion and death. The desire to be loved or to be seen, represented on a canvas so broad that it would take years to explain all the roots that bring us to the resolution. Each of these stories bravely evokes worlds brimming with desire and loss, humanity and possibility.

Since its inception in 1915, the Best American series has become the premier annual showcase for the countrys finest short fiction and nonfiction. For each volume, a series editor reads pieces from hundreds of periodicals, then selects between fifty and a hundred outstanding works. That selection is pared down to twenty or so very best pieces by a guest editor who is widely recognized as a leading writer in his or her field. This unique system has helped make the Best American series the most respected -- and most popular -- of its kind.

Lending a fresh perspective to a perennial favorite, Walter Mosley has chosen unforgettable short stories by both renowned writers and exciting newcomers. The Best American Short Stories 2003 features poignant tales
that explore the nuances of family life and love, birth and death. Here are stories that will, as Mosley writes in his introduction, live with the reader long after the words have been translated into ideas and dreams. That's because a good short story crosses the borders of our nations and our prejudices and our beliefs.

Dorothy Allison  
Edwidge Danticat  
E. L. Doctorow  
Louise Erdrich  
Adam Haslett  
ZZ Packer  
Mona Simpson  
Mary Yukari Waters

My Personal Review:
I don't think you can go wrong reading either the Best American or the O. Henry short story anthologies; I read both each year. It's somewhat surprising that they are not more popular, since they expose the reader to a wide variety of the best writers and writings, and since short stories can be easily fit into the busiest of lifestyles, especially plane and train rides. Having now read both 2003 editions, I would give the edge to this year's Best American anthology. The collection of stories that guest editor Walter Mosley has chosen are, in general, more readable, more entertaining, and cover a broader range of human emotions, subject matter, and genres. I would also rate the 2003 Best American anthology as a better-than-average or even a vintage year.

I especially enjoyed the two genre stories included, a horror story and a science fiction story. Each is memorable not because of the aspects of their plots that classify them in their genre, but for what they reveal about human nature. Dan Chaon's The Bees shows the dangers of keeping secrets in an attempt to escape the past, and Ryan Hartys Why the Sky Turns Red When the Sun Goes Down contains a bizarrely fascinating plot element (a robotic child for couples unable to conceive their own), but what it actually illustrates is the difficult decisions parents make about their children, the immense power they have over them, and the changing relationships when a couple becomes a threesome by having a child. Other highlights: Susan Straights' Mines, which is a stark, realistic portrayal of the tough choices facing people on both sides of the U.S. criminal justice system; Mary Yukari Waters' Rationing, which illustrates the generational differences in Japanese society; and Anthony Doerr's The Shell Collector, which is the only story chosen for inclusion in both the Best American and O. Henry anthologies (and rightfully so). Interestingly, there are actually two pairs of stories concerned with similar plot elements (robotic children, and father/son relationships after the mother has passed away), but each pair is very different. This shows why this collection is so strong: it's not so much due to the plot of each story, but rather to what each story says about the human condition.

Since choosing favorite stories is such a subjective process, each reader will no doubt have their own favorites. However, this year's Best American anthology provides plenty of good stories from which to choose your own favorites.