Contemplating the appeal of the short story, Lorrie Moore writes in her introduction, A storys very shortness ensures its largeness of accomplishment, its selfhood and purity. Having long lost its ability to pay an authors rent (in that golden blip between Henry James and television, F. Scott Fitzgerald, for one, wrote stories to fund his novels), the short story has been freed of its commercial life to become serious art, by virtually its every practitioner. As a result, short or long, a story lies less. It sings and informs and blurts. It has nothing to lose. The twenty stories in this years volume sing to and inform the reader with honesty, intelligence, and often humor. Charles DAmbrosios story, Screenwriter, explores romance in a mental hospital. In Limestone Diner, Trudy Lewis lays bare one familys strained history in central Missouri. Angela Pneumans hilarious All Saints Day gives readers a childs-eye view of religious fundamentalism. And in John Edgar Widemans profound story, What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence, friendship leads to a meditation on freedom and fairness.

Lorrie Moore has selected twenty stories that rejoice in the absurdities of life, consider the hard truths, and arrive at potent moments of understanding. With The Best American Short Stories 2004 Lorrie Moore has done writers and readers a great service, Katrina Kenison writes in her foreword, for her own love of the form and keen sensibility have resulted in a volume that fairly hums with life.

My Personal Review:
First, let me state that I always recommend both the Best American and O. Henry annual short story anthologies to anyone with a modicum of interest in present-day American literature. By reading these volumes, you get exposed to a wide variety of some (but by no means all) of the best stories by some of our best writers (or at least those writers who produce in the short story format). A well-written short story is an easily consumed treat that also teaches something new about the human condition. Given the
time constraints of modern-day life, its surprising that short stories are not more popular. But certainly these anthologies deserve a wide audience.

I will also warn that, since interpreting works of art is subjective, others will have different reactions to the stories in this volume. My interpretation of the choices that Lorrie Moore made in putting this volume together was that she erred on the side of including instantly recognizable (but therefore not terribly innovative) stories by well-known authors, as well as including lengthier selections. Although the selections are made blind, without knowledge of the authors name, the pieces by Edward P. Jones, Alice Munro, Annie Proulx, John Updike, Mary Yukari Waters and John Edgar Wideman are all very recognizable via their subject matter and writing styles. Length, meanwhile, negates two of the main attributes of a good short story: brevity and pithiness. E.B. White, who always advocated using as few words as possible to communicate an idea, would not be pleased with all of Moores selections.

My favorite story in the 2004 volume is Thomas McGuianes Gallatin Canyon, a true masterpiece of a short story written in the O. Henry style. Not a word is wasted, and every seemingly innocent or minor event quickly builds towards a life-or-death conclusion that exposes the nature of the main characters. It is a model for how to apply the classical short story form in the 21st century. The most innovative story is Stuart Dybecks Breasts, which is truly (as Lorrie Moore so well characterizes) a Quentin Tarantino film transformed into short story format. However, like a Tarantino film, after all the violence has ended and the last joke has been played out, I find myself asking yes, but what is the point?. Other notable stories, I felt, were T. Coraghessan Boyles suspenseful modern day working-class romance Tooth and Claw, and Edward P. Jones A Rich Man, which presents a view into the culture of inner-city Washington D.C. that has produced, among other things, the TV images of Mayor Marion Barry smoking a crack pipe.

My least favorite stories in this volume were Trudy Lewiss Limestone Diner, which I felt was instantly forgettable, and, Im sad to say, Annie Proulx What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?. Normally I really enjoy Ms. Proulxs work, but I felt that in this story she was just painting by the numbers, by invoking too many clichés: the Vietnam War as a conscious-raising event, the evil energy companies who are even more damaging to the environment than cattle-herding ranchers, and even a homosexual son who falls for the beefcake ranch hand.

All in all, the 2004 edition of the Best American Short Stories serves up a wide variety of different slices of present-day American life. While not the best volume in the series, it is well worth reading.

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