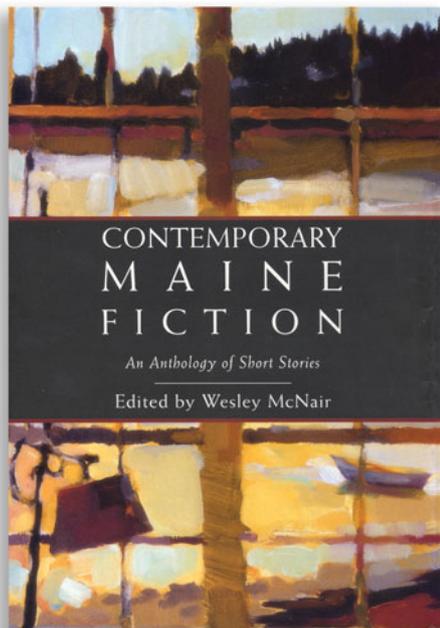


Fourteen Stories Worth Savoring



Contemporary Maine Fiction An Anthology of Short Stories

edited by Wesley McNair

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WESLEY MCNAIR, A WRITER, poet and resident of Mercer, Maine, has collected in *Contemporary Maine Fiction*, 14 short stories that enter the hearts and minds of ordinary people and reveal the complexities of the human spirit. The anthology's authors are all natives or newcomers to the state, literary stars and emerging writers. In order of appearance they are Monica Wood, Cathie Pelletier, Lily King, Richard Ford, Richard Russo, Ellen Cooney, Susan Kenney, Elaine Ford, Bill Roorbach, Carolyn Chute, Lewis Robinson, Debra Spark, Stephen King, and Jim Nichols. Some of the stories are published here for the first time. Others previously appeared in literary journals or other anthologies. Each one honors Maine's tradition of great storytelling.

Events unfold in towns or down bumpy roads that are familiar, even when what happens is completely unexpect-

ed. We recognize Maine in the weather patterns and local architecture; coastline, islands, and woods; meals, clothing, dog breeds, kitchen garden plants, and things found abandoned in the yard. That grounding makes us pause, perhaps nod in recognition. There are human dramas that are often deeply affecting.

Consider Cathie Pelletier's story, "The Music of Angels," which taps into our memories of being a child, half listening, half not, in the company of adults. As it begins, Grammy Willa could be seated in my kitchen, or that of my neighbor, spinning her tale while birds feast nearby:

"Her eardrums exploded," Grammy Willa said. "She was on an airplane headed for Las Vegas." It was the part of her story where Grammy Willa always paused, waiting for the visual horror to settle down in the minds of her listeners. Outside, wind rocked the porch swing and a thin spray of rain ran down the big kitchen window. Sarah was staring out at the little pile of sunflower seeds she'd left on the back porch. She had brought the seeds from home, a nice handful stuffed into a plastic sandwich bag. As usual, a chickadee was the first to discover the stash, and now others were coming to eat, along with some goldfinches.

The entire life of a child is seen through the window of a single day, Sarah's tenth birthday. The girl wavers between childhood and maturity, struggling with her parents' divorce while seeing them for who they are: one fallible, the other determined to improve her lot in life.

In another story, "A Job at Little Henry's," writer Bill Roorbach explores the frightening ease with which Richard Milk sinks into the murky world of his neighbors. Milk's a regular guy who

moved here from away—educated, middle class, trying too hard to be accepted by the locals. You can see how it would happen, how almost unaware he becomes consumed with the activities of his handyman until he's caught in a web of dubious activities with the man and his lowlife buddies. Events spiral, the law is broken, things twist out of control. The reader wonders, could I be Richard Milk? Could I fall into that trap? Would I act as he does in the end?

In "Monhegan Light," Richard Russo takes us to the island of the title where a Californian, accompanied by his West Coast girlfriend, comes face-to-face with his late wife's lover, a painter. In "The Reach," Stephen King, whose body of work includes a short story adapted as the haunting movie, "Stand By Me," again proves his mastery of the short story form. This time, remembrances, dreams, and real life swirl around Stella Flanders, the oldest resident of Goat Island—95 years old and not once has she stepped on the mainland. Now Bill, her late husband, calls to her from Raccoon Island, across the reach. She hears her name in the wind and embarks on what is at once a journey into old age and an ageless picture of love.

In "The Death of the Dog and Other Rescues," Susan Kenney knows what it is to be an overwrought mother and pet owner. She conveys both in a whirlwind tale of modern family dynamics. Even the petless will gasp at times while reading her story and appreciate how an animal can become the heart of a home.

In truth, all 14 stories in this collection would deserve mention in this review if space allowed. *Contemporary Maine Fiction* surprises the reader with its breadth of subjects and writing styles. The form itself seems to be enjoying a resurgence and deservedly so. Don't rush through the book. These stories deserve to be savored. —Janet Mendelsohn