

To the aspiring fiction writer,

In my first blog, I encouraged you to write, to write for others as well as yourself, and to make it count.

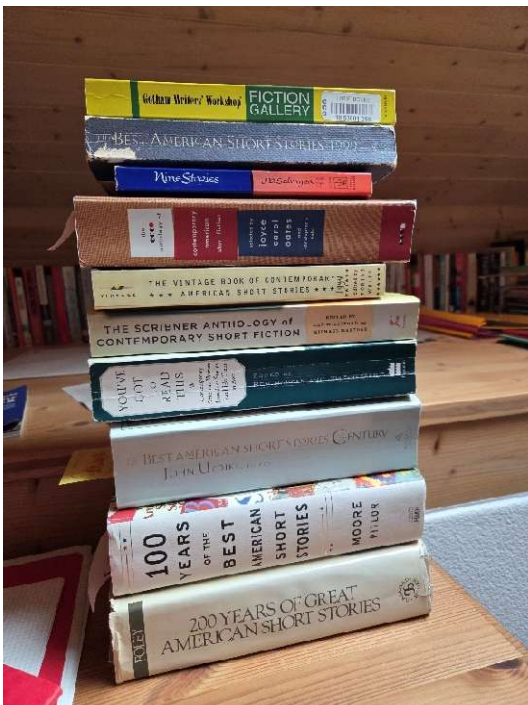
This blog is about the importance of *reading*. Now, don't get me wrong here. This is not an excuse to spend all your free time reading instead of writing. A writer writes. But the best way to learn the craft of writing is to read. I believe it's important to read mostly those books which are going to help you grow as a writer.

What should I read?

Times change, but this part remains pretty much the same: read the kind of stories or books that you want to write. If you want to write a romance novel, read best-selling romances, same with mysteries or horror. I love literary fiction, so I aspire to write literary fiction. When writing my first novel, *Just Lisa*, I read dozens of top literary novels with a first-person narrator: Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*, Ann Patchett's *The Dutch House*, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, and *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. I saturated my brain with fantastic prose so that their craft could work its way into my subconscious as I wrote *Just Lisa*. I didn't expect to match their level of writing in my debut novel, but it sure helped!

Let's back up a minute. When I decided to write fulltime beginning in 2019, I knew I had to eventually make money with my writing. Most writers will tell you: don't quit your day job. Sure, some journals will pay you a hundred bucks for that short story you spent months writing, but most pay nothing at all. In other words, it will take either a bestseller or a series of novels that sell better than average to make any real money as a writer. I knew the odds were slim, so my motto became *Go big or go home!* I decided I would put everything into writing a bestselling novel. But **I didn't begin my journey with novel-writing.**

First, I needed to learn the craft of writing. Not only grammar, although that is more important than I realized at the time. I needed to understand the components of storytelling—how to tell a good tale. I began with **flash fiction** (see the article in my [APRIL 26 Newsletter](#)) before moving up to short stories. I learned to hone my craft with 1000-word pieces by taking a flash fiction workshop, then by reading examples of flash fiction online (see Smokelong, Wigleaf, Flash Fiction Magazine, Fractured Lit). Only then, did I try my hand at **short stories**. Most literary journals want 3000 to 5000 words.



And here's the long game for future novelists: if some of your stories are accepted by recognized journals, you can list those esteemed magazines (five maximum) in your bio. A simple mention of previous publications in your query letter to an agent may be what gets them to take a look at your novel. Agents often search for potential novelists by scanning the top journals for new authors—similar to scouts visiting football games.

Note: There are hundreds of literary journals that publish flash fiction and/or short stories (more on submitting in my blogs). **I didn't subscribe to (as in pay for) any literary journals** when I first began writing, and I recommend waiting until you get to know the long list of magazines a little better. Some you can read for free. After I got a couple years of experience under my belt, I began subscribing to one or two different literary journals every year. It is costly, and when you start out, you should **spend more time reading stories that have stood the test of time.** At least, that is what I did. It's good to read what is currently being accepted by top journals, but trends come and go. Classics, even

more recent ones, are the jewels of literary fiction. I'm talking about stories that made it into a top literary

journal, then were chosen for a Best American Short Stories anthology, and maybe even won a Pushcart. Stories that last.

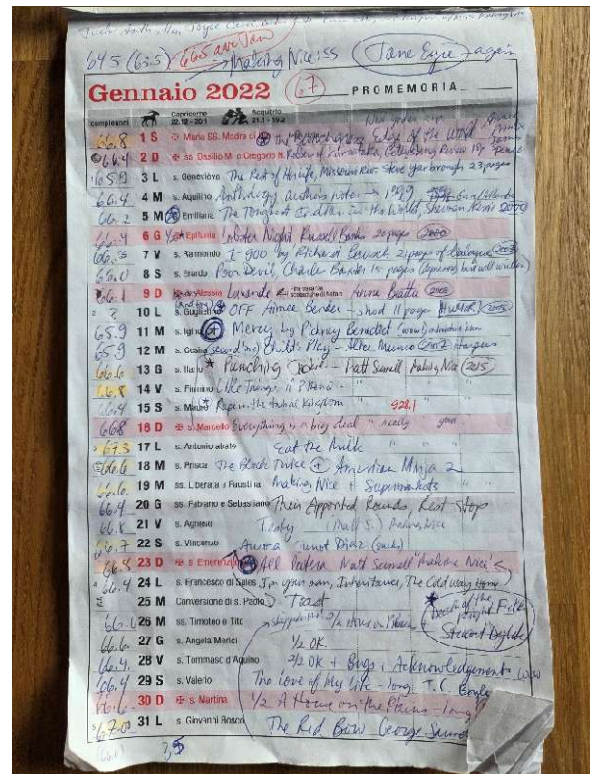
Once I'd written dozens of flash fiction and micro pieces, and even got a few published, I began to write short stories. I made the mistake of purchasing a number of short story collections, only to realize that very often only one of the stories they contained was really great. Here's the thing: **don't focus on the author.** Not everything they write will be amazingly good, and you want to read the best. What you should look for is famous anthologies, collections of the best short stories from a range of authors. **Here is what I read, in the order I recommend reading them in:**

- 1) 200 years of Great American Short Stories
- 2) 100 years of the Best American Short Stories
- 3) Best American Short Stories of the Century
- 4) You've Got to Read This
- 5) The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction
- 6) The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories
- 7) Contemporary American Short Fiction
- 8) Nine Stories
- 9) Best American Short Stories 1999
- 10) Fiction Gallery

I know it looks like a tall order. But you can do it, and it is DEFINITELY worth it. If you read these books, you can keep up with any discussion of short literature during a workshop. Not only will these make you a better writer, you will know your stuff.

Most of these, you can borrow from your local library. I purchased them because I LOVE to do highlighting and take notes in the margin. And I often refer back to these books, to remind me of a certain voice an author used, or to examine more closely a specific technique they used. If you need to save money, you can buy them USED (helps to save trees!).

I read for one hour or more every day. I averaged one short story a day, although some were very long, others much shorter. For three years, I wrote the title and author of each story I read on one of those free calendars I got from the grocery store. Pretty soon, I knew my authors, and I was subjected to a variety of writing styles. I stuck mainly to American short fiction initially because our style and word choice is different from British or Australian authors.



Let me walk you through the story collections I read:

1) Be sure to read the lengthy introduction to **Martha Foley's 200 Years**. It's a wonderful history of American short fiction and provides amazing insights into our field. The stories themselves will feel "old," especially the first half. But they will show you what makes a story and how the concept changed over time. Famous stories like *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *The Open Boat* will move you, and remind you that some things last forever.

2) **Lorrie Moore** also does an excellent job introducing *100 Years*, which contains stories from 1915 to 2015. These stories will get you into the swing of things, and include most of the famous authors of each decade, among them, some of my personal favorites such as Tillie Olsen's *I Stand Here Ironing* (1957), James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues* (1958), John Updike's *Pigeon Feathers* (1962), and Z.Z. Packer's *Brownies*

(2000). Glancing through my own copy, most of the stories in this anthology I've marked as good, excellent, or superb. You get the picture.

3) I didn't care for **John Updike's** novels, but several of his short stories made my favorites list. Updike excels at prose. His *Best of the Century* short story collection gives you a sample of Hemingway, Faulkner, Welty, Nabokov, and famous stories such as *The Ledge* (Hall), *The Things They Carried* (O'Brien), *Meneseteung* (Munroe), and *You're Ugly, Too* (Moore).

4) **Ron Hansen's** short story *Nebraska* is prose that transports the reader. His anthology *You've Got to Read This*, published in 1994, asks famous authors to share their favorite short story by another author and explain why they admire it. I suggest you read the story itself before reading the comments. It's like taking a workshop on short fiction. Carver's *Cathedral*, Barthelme's *The School*, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and Joyce's *The Dead*, are just a few of the choice nuggets...so, not all American.

5) By now, you'll have noticed that a couple of the stories are repeated in several editions (because they are so good!), but you won't want to miss *Scribner's Anthology* with stories from 1970 to 1999 because it contains *The Hermit's Story* by Rick Bass, *Caviar* by T.C. Boyle, *We Didn't* by Stuart Dybek, *The Pugilist at Rest* by Thom Jones, *Girl* by Jamaica Kincaid, and so much more! You'll also begin to see certain authors repeated (with different stories!), such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Joyce Carol Oates, showing that they wrote more than one precious gem.

6) **Tobias Wolff** is another famous American author, and his *Vintage Book* ends with two of my all-time favorites, Amy Tan's *Rules of the Game* and Stephanie Vaughn's *Dog Heaven*. So, this anthology is another must read.

7) **Joyce Carol Oates' ecco anthology of Contemporary American Short Fiction** came out in 2008 and contains my beloved *Mercy* by Pinckney Benedict, the hilarious *Off* by Amy Bender, *The Toughest Indian in the World* by Sherman Alexie, and *Disaster Stamps of Pluto* by Louise Erdrich...and so much more.

8) Next, I broke the rule I set earlier about not buying a story collection from one author. **J.D. Salinger** didn't allow any of his stories to be anthologized, so I purchased his *Nine Stories*, and it was well worth it. Three of them made it onto my all-time favorites list.

9) **B.A.S.S.** puts out a new collection every year, and this one, from 1999, was used in an online writing course I took through Stanford. If I had the time, I would read the B.A.S.S. collection every year, but many of the stories in this edition, selected by **Amy Tan**, had staying power.

10) Finally, you'll want to read *Fiction Gallery* (2004) from the **Gotham Writer's Workshop**. This book, along with its sister *Writing Fiction: The Practical Guide*, go along with the short story course offered by Gotham. If you take their Fiction 1 or 2 class, they offer some kind of discount on the books/course combination. See my [JULY 26 NEWSLETTER](#) for my suggestions about which writing courses to take when. If you aren't already receiving my free newsletter, you can subscribe under "contact" on this website.

I hope you'll take me seriously and begin reading a story a day once you get to the short fiction phase in your writing career. While reading these pieces, take a moment to look up the author. I created a file on my computer called "author portraits" to get to know them better. Each file contains a few lines about the author's accomplishments, their style (minimalist, realist, surrealist, satire, stream of consciousness) if applicable, and if I liked their story and why.

Reading is the best way of pursuing your craft as a writer. Be sure to read my next blog about **HOW TO READ LIKE A WRITER**, because there's more to it than curling up with a good book. Then you'll know how to get the most out of these anthologies I have recommended. Best of luck!

To read about my personal journey as I search for an agent and a publisher for *Just Lisa*, be sure to subscribe to my [free newsletter](#).

