

'Hint Fiction' Celebrates The (Extremely) Short Story

by NPR STAFF



wmshc_kiwi via Flickr

November 13, 2010

text size **A** **A** **A**

Can you tell a whole story in 25 words or fewer? Inspired by the six-word novel attributed to Ernest Hemingway — "For sale: baby shoes, never worn" — Robert Swartwood has compiled a new anthology of bite-sized fiction.

The stories in *Hint Fiction* are short enough to be text messages, but the genre isn't defined only by its length. It's characterized by the way the form forces readers to fill in the blanks, Swartwood tells NPR's Scott Simon. Most fiction hints at a larger story, he says, but the brevity of these stories

really challenges the reader's imagination.

Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer

By Robert Swartwood
Paperback, 188 pages
W.W. Norton
List price: \$13.95

Take Joe Schreiber's story, titled *Progress*:
After seventeen days she finally broke down
and called him "Daddy."

The short stories in *Hint Fiction* were selected from more than 2,000 submissions — Swartwood started small, soliciting stories on his [website](#), but the contest grew in scope when publisher W.W. Norton got involved. The anthology also features the writing of well-known authors, including Joyce Carol Oates, Ha Jin, Peter Straub and James Frey.

Swartwood has read a *lot* of very short stories by now, and he says he has identified some typical rookie mistakes. Many stories come across as "first sentences" or just "random thoughts," he explains. People think it's easy to write a story in 25 words or less — but it's much harder than you might think.

Edith Pearlman says it took her hours to compose her story, titled *Golden Years*:

She: Macular. He: Parkinson's. She pushing, he directing, they get down the ramp, across the grass, through the gate. The wheels roll riverwards.

Can You Write A Story In 25 Words Or Fewer?

Share your tiny work of fiction in the [comments section](#) below.

The stories are extremely short, and yet, they feel whole. "A lot of these stories could be expanded into longer stories," Swartwood says, "but as they are, they're complete — which is the challenge and the beauty of the form."

Swartwood occasionally fields questions from skeptics who fear the hint fiction trend will just further shorten already short attention spans. But Swartwood finds that these first 25 words often serve as a jumping-off point. A 25-word story is approachable; it allows new authors to "start small" and then gradually expand their storylines.

"It helps writers grow as writers," Swartwood says. "[Writing short fiction] helps them learn word choice and helps them with their longer forms."

Though it's hard to choose from the 125 bite-sized stories in the collection, Swartwood shares a few of his favorites:



W.W. Norton

You can find a list of Robert Swartwood's [recommended reading](#) at his [website](#) and follow him on Twitter @RobertSwartwood.

J. Matthew Zoss'
Houston, We Have a Problem

I'm sorry, but there's not enough air in here for everyone. I'll tell them you were a hero.

David Joseph's
Polygamy
I miss her more than the others.

Joe R. Lansdale's
The Return
They buried him deep. Again.

Excerpt: 'Hint Fiction' An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer

Edited by Robert Swartwood



Barry Napier
Through Tiny Windows

When they opened the cadaver, they found a house. A couple argued inside. There was rhythm to their words, like the beating of a heart.

Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer
By Robert Swartwood
Paperback, 188 pages
W.W. Norton
List price: \$13.95

L. R. Bonehill
Cull
There had been rumors from the North for months. None of us believed it, until one night we started to kill our children too.

Daniel A. Olivas
Better Than Divorce
The bull terrier watched the car fishtail and then straighten as it sped away. The dog turned, looked down, and gently licked his master's forehead.

Max Barry
Blind Date
She walks in and heads turn. I'm stunned. This is my setup? She looks sixteen. Course, it's hard to tell, through the scope.

Peter Straub

The Endless Mystery

When, on his deathbed, he last saw her, she had not aged by so much as a day.

John Cashman

One Month Too Soon

Penelope was wakened by the cheers from the agora. She turned to the man in her bed and whispered, "What have I done?"

Christoffer Molnar

Jermaine's Postscript To His Seventh-Grade Poem Assignment

"Ms. Tyler, the girl part was about Shantell. Please don't tell anyone."

Minter Krotzer

Dickie

Everyone in town went to the same gynecologist, Dickie. Even Dickie's sister went to Dickie. No one thought this was strange except for the out-of-towners.

Stuart Dybek

Ransom

Broke and desperate, I kidnapped myself.

Ransom notes were sent to interested parties. Later, I sent hair and fingernails, too.

They insisted on an ear.

Will Panzo

The Man Of Tomorrow Or Maybe You've Heard This One Before, But You've Never Heard It Like This
Dying planet. A boy, a rocket, a last hope. Kansas cornfield crash landing. Ma finds it sleeping in the crater. Pa fetches the shotgun.

Excerpted from Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer edited by Robert Swartwood. Copyright 2011 by Robert Swartwood. Original contributions copyright by the contributor. Reprinted by permission of W.W. Norton and Co. Inc.

Related NPR Stories

Can You Tell Your Life Story In Exactly Six Words? Feb. 3, 2010

Six-Word Memoirs: The Valentine's Day Edition Feb. 11, 2009

Six-Word Memoirs: Life Stories Distilled Feb. 7, 2008

comments

Please note that all comments must adhere to the NPR.org **discussion rules** and **terms of use**. See also the **Community FAQ**.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) / [Register](#)

Post this comment to Facebook, too? submit

NPR reserves the right to read on the air and/or publish on its Web site or in any medium now known or unknown the e-mails and letters that we receive. We may edit them for clarity or brevity and identify authors by name and location. For additional information, please consult our [Terms of Use](#).

Recent First ▾



Kathy Ceceri (KathyCeceri) wrote:
By my son Anthony Ceceri, age 14 11/12:

PROBLEM SOLVED
The giant bugs were quelled by the giant bats. This was not an improvement.
Monday, November 15, 2010 11:30:16 AM
[Recommend \(1\)](#) [Report abuse](#)



Thomas Sanjurjo (Sanjurjo) wrote:
Is it fair to explain your story with a long title?
Monday, November 15, 2010 10:31:39 AM
[Recommend \(0\)](#) [Report abuse](#)



Pat DeAngelis (Garabaldi) wrote:
"I don't know, why'd you marry yours?"
Monday, November 15, 2010 7:36:57 AM
[Recommend \(4\)](#) [Report abuse](#)



Lee Barber (creasey) wrote:
"Home, again."
The engine running warm, a cold doorknob awaits. He might go inside. If only someone were there to greet him. © 2010 Lee Barber
Monday, November 15, 2010 3:41:34 AM
[Recommend \(1\)](#) [Report abuse](#)



heather pickett (pirateheath) wrote:
Samantha. - Back on the highway, she noticed they'd left the dog behind. How long before the children were too much baggage and had to be jettisoned?
Monday, November 15, 2010 2:06:51 AM
[Recommend \(0\)](#) [Report abuse](#)



John Brookes (JTBSr) wrote:
In April the snow melted, exposing her leg.
Monday, November 15, 2010 12:16:19 AM
[Recommend \(4\)](#) [Report abuse](#)



Susanna Hartigan (CornFlakes_n_Applesauce) wrote:
I had heard of this a while ago but couldn't find it anywhere. I'm glad NPR did this article. Cool idea!
Sunday, November 14, 2010 11:26:35 PM

[Recommend \(2\)](#)

[Report abuse](#)



russell hall (ashevol) wrote:

Late night slippery road flashlight dimming
Sunday, November 14, 2010 10:49:38 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

[Report abuse](#)



Andrew Bergman (Mark_Lenard) wrote:

She told me that Tom Waits' "I Hope that I Don't Fall in Love with You" was stuck in her head.
Sunday, November 14, 2010 8:33:04 PM

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

[Report abuse](#)



Michele Malek (MichiProf) wrote:

"Pay Back"

Everyone said she lost her mind. In reality, I had hidden it.
Sunday, November 14, 2010 7:22:36 PM

[Recommend \(2\)](#)

[Report abuse](#)

[View all comments \(50\)»](#)