

CARGO

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Freight Stories author **Karen Brown** revels in her success

“The news of the [Best American Short Stories] selection came to me through an email from Heidi Pitlor, the series editor. I’d returned home after a day-long job interview that I knew would not result in a job offer. . . I checked my email and was very surprised, and I must admit, reassured. Whether the university wanted to hire me or not, I was still a writer.”

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The Editors’ Bedside Tables

Our house is made of books.

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Books on the Horizon

Two new releases you can’t stand to miss.

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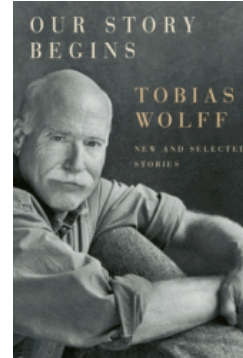
Books on the Horizon

Donald Ray Pollock's debut collection, *Knockemstiff*, has generated a lot of buzz lately, and after reading these 18 stories, you'll realize it's all deserved.



These tales, which explore life in the “holler” of Knockemstiff, Ohio—the author’s hometown, now a ghost town—are full of moments that knock you square in the gut, but not in the expected, easily masculine ways of lesser authors.

Despite its bleakness, there’s also humor throughout, with more than its share of guffaws.



Tobias Wolff needs no introduction. You don’t need us to tell you who he is, and he doesn’t need us to help spread the word about his *New and Selected Stories*.

Eleven new stories join an impressive roster of his greatest hits, including about half of those from *The Night in Question* (a “regular” collection that towers over many writers’ *Selected Stories*).

Wolff tinkered with some of the older stories, as needed, making this a must-have book by one of our most important storytellers.



An Interview with Karen Brown

Karen Brown's first collection of short stories, *Pins and Needles*, was the recipient of AWP's Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction and published in 2007 by the University of Massachusetts Press. Her work has appeared in *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2006*, and in journals that include *The Georgia Review*, *Epoch*, and *Tampa Review*. A story, "Galatea," to be included in *The Best American Short Stories 2008*, was first published in *Crazyhorse*. She studied creative writing at Cornell University and the University of South Florida in Tampa, where she is currently working on a novel. Her story "Girl on a Couch" appears in *Freight Stories* No. 1 (March 2008).

Talk a little bit about your writing life. When did you first decide to write fiction?

I've been writing fiction for as long as I can remember. One of my first stories was published in my fifth grade literary magazine. It was called "The Glass Heart" and it involved a love relationship, a car accident, and a final scene with a woman on a hill in the rain, holding a glass heart necklace and a knife. There was another one about a couple on the run from the law, hiding out in a cave, and yet another about a young girl, and the squirrels outside her window who convince her to leap to her death. That one was illustrated. I have no idea what I was reading that influenced me to write this sort of melodrama. It may have just been a fifth-grade thing. After reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* I wrote a historical romance, sitting on my bed in my room, filling up pages of a legal pad.

Writing had always been something I enjoyed doing, and something that I was told, from an early age, I did *well*. Teachers often served as mentors, and their encouragement was something I vividly remember. Fiction was an integral part of my life. Even in the years I didn't write I was conscious that I was in some sort of *dry spell*, and I always kept journals, or wrote letters. During high school, a time when I didn't write any fiction, I wrote thirty-page letters to friends. Thinking back now I realize they were fictionalized accounts of our lives, and the people in them. I didn't enter college until I was twenty-five, and it was in creative writing classes that I began focusing on writing stories for publication, and paying closer attention to contemporary fiction.

Where did you find the spark for “Girl on a Couch”—an image, a line of dialogue, a memory, or something else?

I usually begin a story from a remembered setting, and there were many farms and farmhouses like Maple Hill in my Connecticut town, and in the surrounding area—mostly dairy farms, all of them slowly fading away, the barn siding graying, the house in disrepair, the land sold off to developers for new subdivisions. I went to one of these farmhouses once with a boyfriend who knew the occupants, and watched television on a couch in the living room. This memory is murky—but a sense of the place stuck with me. Philly and Neil are variants of the town guys I knew as a teenager. They worked in automotive shops, or as welders, or they plowed parking lots, or mowed lawns. They had an easy banter, and hung out in the local restaurant bars at night, or the local park, showing off their cars or motorcycles. I grew up in a neighborhood of large colonials and split-levels that was once farm land, and the cows came up to the barbed wire fences in people's backyards. This contrast is something I tend to write about a lot—the affluence of suburbia pitted against the dissolving simplicity of another way of life.

After the accident, Philly loses his leg. Later in the story, Mandy is holding it—it's a very moving moment for readers. Were you conscious of Flannery O'Connor's “Good Country People” while you were composing, or revising, the story? It might be the best-known story with a fake leg.

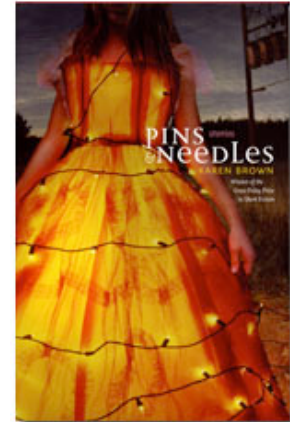
You know, I haven't read "Good Country People," but I'm curious to read it now. I'm not sure why I decided to have Philly lose his leg. I think the scene, with the snow, and the blood, and the cow—all of that made sense in the story. I didn't consciously choose to have his missing leg mean anything, but I think its loss does work to reinforce the sense of loss that permeates the setting, as well as Jules's life. I also liked the idea of Philly's leg as being detachable, something separate from him that was still intimately part of him. The women recognize this, but Philly and Neil seem somewhat oblivious. The leg is just functional to them. It doesn't have any other real meaning.

You said this story used to have a different title, and that it's part of a forthcoming collection. How long have you been working on it?

The collection, *The Drowned Girl*, is a series of stories set in the same Connecticut town. "Girl on a Couch" is one of the newest stories, and one that, once I'd written it, helped me realize that I might group it with others set in this same place, and rework them into a book. A few of the stories were some of the first I'd ever published—I was still an undergraduate, and the others were some I'd written with repeating characters from the same neighborhood. Revising the older stories, and writing new ones to include has taken me about a year, but the beginnings of the book date back about ten years or more.

Can you talk a little about your decision to write a novel-in-stories? What struggles have you encountered with this form? Is it any different than putting together your first collection, *Pins and Needles*?

I was just recently talking with a group of writer friends, and explaining my struggles with the book—organizing and linking various stories so that some kind of continuous narrative might emerge. "Oh, those things never work," they said of the form.



I think by this they mean that the form itself simply isn't very readable. And a big issue with a novel-in-stories is the way a reader approaches the work. If readers begin the work assuming each story is a separate entity, they are soon faced with the repetition of characters, and they begin to shift their approach. They begin reading the book as if it were a novel, with the same expectations they'd normally apply. Of course, these expectations aren't really met. You will never know if the couple you read about in the first three stories ends up divorcing, or reconciling. Or if the woman in one story ever stops drinking, or what happens to her daughter who is having an affair with a married man. Jules is the drowned girl of the title, and she is the only character you know what happens to with any certainty. I imagine this can be frustrating. Readers must both read the stories and *between* the stories. Whatever closure is implied is provisional, and for these reasons a novel-in-stories isn't read in the traditional way. So I have to ask, why use the form at all? Why not write a straightforward novel? In a novel, characters who would be minor characters and given very little time in a novel-in-stories can step forward and have their say. I like being able to tell the neighbor's perspective, and I like the chance to showcase a variety of characters who are all affected by similar events.

Pins and Needles was different. I simply took a step back and looked at all of the stories I'd been writing. I actually made a list of them at one point. Next to each story's title is marked one of four things: *single woman*, *pregnant teen*, *mother with child*, *married woman*. I suppose it was in this way that I discovered that women and mothers were the focus of the book—that I'd been writing these stories, one after another, in a certain mode.

Your story, “Galatea,” has just been selected for the next volume of *Best American Short Stories*. How did you find out? And what was your first reaction?

The news of the selection came to me through an email from Heidi Pitlor, the series editor. I'd returned home after a day-long job interview that I knew would not result in a job offer. (I did a teaching presentation—a creative writing exercise for a group of college students who seemed as if they wished they were anywhere but in the classroom.) Writing and teaching are two very different endeavors—it is so hard to be at the top of both

at once, and I thought the exercise went miserably. I checked my email and was very surprised, and I must admit, reassured. Whether the university wanted to hire me or not, I was still a writer.

Is “Galatea” part of the novel-in-stories? Will readers get to see more of Philly, Mandy, Neil, and Jules? Or, dare I imagine, Sarah Rose?

“Galatea” is the last story in *Pins and Needles*. It won the *Crazyhorse* fiction prize for 2007, and appeared in the journal in November, just before *Pins and Needles* came out. It was the beginning of a novel I’d begun with a first-person narrator. I liked the character’s voice, and I wanted a story to send out, so I put “Galatea” together from ideas I had about the book, which I’ve since finished, and put aside for now. Philly and Neil don’t make another appearance in *The Drowned Girl*, but they do reappear in the new novel I’ve been working on, as does Sarah Rose, who has an entire third of the book.

What’s next for you as a writer?

I will continue work on the new novel. It is told from the perspective of three women who have a shared past, and who are each dealing with the loss of a parent due to unusual and somewhat inexplicable circumstances. But I’m sure I will interrupt this work to write a story every so often. I like being able to go into a world for a brief time, make something happen, and then leave. I like the focus on language that the story’s brevity allows—the attention to every word. I don’t think I will ever stray from the form for very long.

And, finally, share for our readers the title of a book you recommend, and why.

I have to choose something by William Trevor, one of my favorite writers, and it might as well be his excellent new collection, *Cheating at Canasta*. His stories follow no real rules—their omniscient narrators decide what, when, and where we will learn what characters think, and these thoughts always mark a well-timed and significant revelation. The darkness in his stories is off-set by a shimmering prose, and odd, disconcerting details reveal characters and setting. Time is expertly handled—years pass in a line or two, and ordinary events become momentous when characters must revisit a past blemished by some moral discrepancy, or loss, or other tragic event. Trevor’s short stories are some of the best I’ve ever read. ★

The Editors' Bedside Tables

Andrew's Side

Michael Chabon, *Maps and Legends*

Sixteen essays that call for tearing down the walls around “serious” literature. Subjects includes comic books, Cormac McCarthy, and more.

Jason Brown

Why the Devil Chose New England for His Work: Stories

Long-awaited follow-up to *Driving the Heart*. He reminds me of Andre Dubus—high praise, but earned.

Rebecca Barry

Later, at the Bar: A Novel in Stories

I like bars. I like good stories. This one's an easy sell. And she's our MySpace friend!

Tessa Hadley, *Sunstroke and Other Stories*

A finalist for this year's Story Prize. Ten elegant stories about Great Britain's middle class.

Victoria's Side

Michael Pollen, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*

I adore food. I adore my food even more when I have some concrete idea about where it came from. Pollen makes sense of the American agricultural system in a way that should change the way we eat. Except that McDonald's cheeseburgers taste really, really good.

Samantha Hunt,

The Invention of Everything Else

Usually, when absolutely everyone is reading a book, I wait until they're done. But this novel is so charming, from its cover to the most minute details of its characters' lives, that I couldn't wait.

Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*

Okay, it's not actually on *my* bedside table—I read it twice in a row a few months back, and passed it on. But I picked up Andrew's copy while he was reading it, and totally didn't notice when the afternoon disappeared and night fell several hours later.

The Fine Print

Cargo

is produced each month by *Freight Stories* and its editors, Andrew Scott and Victoria Barrett. (All contents copyright the authors and editors.)

Interview with Karen Brown by Andrew Scott.
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Bedside books columns written by Andrew Scott & Victoria Barrett.

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Cargo invites short essays on your favorite books and reading experiences for future issues. Please send submissions to editors@freightstories.com.

Freight Stories

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