

Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION

Chapter Author(s): Jane McCafferty

Book Title: 20 More

Book Subtitle: Selected Stories from Drue Heinz Literature Prize Winners, 2001-2021

Book Author(s): Various Authors

Published by: University of Pittsburgh Press. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2382dmc.3>

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INTRODUCTION

Jane McCafferty

Four years ago, after many years of serving as the editor of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, the poet Ed Ochester asked me to take over the role. I felt this was an honor and a chance to show gratitude for the role the prize played in my own life, when way back in (gulp) 1992, Ed called me on the phone to tell me that John Edgar Wideman had chosen my manuscript as the next winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize. Every writer who receives the prize will forever remember being notified of winning, and how, after the shock wears off, the feeling of having been catapulted into another universe sets in. In this universe, created by Drue Heinz and sustained by the dedication of a consistently great press, people actually care about short fiction, care that you've spent years of your life writing and revising short stories. You always knew they didn't sell, that they were largely ignored by the majority of readers (unless you were in Ireland, where the short story has always been beloved) but you wrote them anyway, loving how they offered distinct occasions for exploring different points of view without having to take the risk of committing to the endless project a novel can be. Best of all, you could fail countless times and dust yourself off and begin again—until you got one right. As Lorrie Moore wrote, "Short stories are love affairs. The novel is a marriage."

At the time Ed Ochester called me to say that I won, I had been teaching John Edgar Wideman's book *Brothers and Keepers*, as Wideman was someone who'd inspired me for years both as writer and human being, thus making it even harder for me to believe that the phone call wasn't a dream, something my unconscious had concocted. So the first thing I wanted to do when asked to write this introduction was to read John Edgar Wideman's introduction to *20: Twenty of the Best of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize*, the first volume of twenty Drue Heinz Literature Prize winners, which I'd admired years ago when the book was initially published. I remembered how Wideman reflected on how few African American writers were getting published, but the years had blurred my memory of the story he told of his own short fiction being rejected from the *New Yorker* on the grounds that they didn't publish what they had termed in the rejection letter as "vernacular fiction." From this vantage point, it seems shameful that this didn't inspire fervent, collective, immediate protest. Why didn't I, why didn't many, respond more passionately to this racism at the time? Of course many are asking questions like this regarding race in every sector of the society.

The *New Yorker* editor was probably unconscious of the role they played in keeping closed the white gates of publishing in America. Multiply Wideman's story by thousands, and it's easy to imagine how countless Black writers turned away from writing (speaking here of the minority who had the privilege to honor their talent to begin with), sensing they would find no genuine invitation to attend the ongoing literary party.

Things have changed some—or are certainly in the process of changing. No editor from the *New Yorker* would tell a Black writer that their short story had been rejected on the grounds that the magazine didn't publish "vernacular fiction." On a recent list of twenty must-read short story collections from Penguin Random House, eleven of the twenty are writers of color. Six of ten writers of color are featured on Electric Lit's Favorite Short Stories list for 2020. The lens is on race now, but according to an intensive 2020 study of writers published in the *New York Times*, "Just How White Is The Book Industry," 95 percent were white. The more significant changes will be charted in the coming years, when the moral reckoning this culture is in midst of

starts to bear more practical, measurable fruit in the literary world. And that's when we'll see more diversity in the Drue Heinz Literature Prize winners.

* * *

Some say short stories will become increasingly popular as podcasts seduce more readers. (Who doesn't love being read to?) The short story, as a form, will live on, and the Drue Heinz Literature Prize will thrive at the center of that living and continue to reflect the always changing societal forces that be. I am grateful to each of these prize winners, and have taught most of their books and some of them more than once, appreciating the variety of sensibilities and the risks these writers have taken. They've offered the world memorable characters, unique moral vision, and often surprising beauty, with each writer bearing witness to the power of imagination and the ability of language to reshape experience and to shine light on events and interior lives that otherwise would be overlooked. I've just finished a semester where I taught 2020 Drue Heinz Literature Prize winner Caroline Kim's *The Prince of Mournful Thoughts*, one of the very best collections I've ever read.

Whether we're celebrated story writers, mostly anonymous in our pursuit, or devoted readers and fans of this form, I like to think we're woven together in an evolving spiritual community, and that this community will continue to reflect, deepen, and expand our sense of what it means to be a human being, alive in our particular given history.

Long live the Drue Heinz Literature Prize and all the writers and readers who keep trying to make sense of the broken world.

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