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Author(s)	Sally Ferguson
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Humanities

SHORT STORIES: Wonderfully Loving Transpositions

It is not surprising that television should turn to America's bookshelves for rich dramatic material. For great fiction is timeless, it speaks to us of human truths.

In America, short fiction has been a favored form of wresting truths from the national experience. Spare and incisive, the short story is "the way we most clearly see ourselves," according to literary critic Wallace Stegner.

For a century after the Civil War, American magazines and newspapers peppered the land with tales and insights of writers like Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Eudora Welty, James Thurber and others. Their tales are animated by social and intellectual commentary. In them, we find recurring themes, values and preoccupations to define and redefine our "rites of passage" as people and as a nation.

So there were no opening night jitters April 5 when the Public Broadcasting Service aired the premiere telecast of "The American Short Story." They knew they had a winner. *"The American Short Story,"* which was funded entirely by the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a series of nine films of short stories by outstanding American writers. The series is scheduled for Tuesday evenings April 5 through May 10.

The nine stories, chosen for the project on the basis of "their literary merit, social insight and entertainment potential," are: Sherwood Anderson's "I'm a Fool"; F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair"; Henry James's "The Jolly Corner"; Richard Wright's "Almos' a Man"; John Updike's "The Music School"; Ambrose Bierce's "Parker Adderson, Philosopher"; Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel"; Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person"; and Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home." Actress Colleen Dewhurst introduces each film with historical and biographical information. Several are followed by panel discussions among their director, producer, actors or scholarly advisors.

"The stories reflect 100 years of examination of American values," says Robert Geller, president of Learning in Focus, Inc., the non-profit educational film group which received the NEH grant, and executive producer of the film project. "Our challenge has been to capture, on film, the perceptions, style, and narrative power of the author. Fidelity to the author has

been one of our main concerns."

No easy feat. For the problem is in the media: to educe film from fiction is not unlike turning a geode inside out. In the outward movement of the film, the glimmering crystals of the story's complex planes are revealed.

Impressively, that fidelity to the authors' stories has been achieved in "The American Short Story," and Geller allows that this is due to the active collaboration of the television and theater talent with the project's committee of twelve literary scholars. Himself a writer, producer and professor of literature and film, Geller points with pride to the enthusiastic participation of such noted American scholars as Henry Nash Smith, University of California at Berkeley; Matthew Bruccoli, University of South Carolina; James Cox, Dartmouth College; Blake Nevius, UCLA; Earl Rovit, City College of City University of New York; and Calvin Skaggs, Drew University.

It's apparent that the prominent actors who audi-



Shelley Duvall had title role in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," first film in The American Short Story series.

tioned for "The American Short Story" were attracted by the high caliber of scripts that resulted from the scholar/production consultations. All were paid standard public television scale.

LeVar Burton appears as a painfully naive youth struggling to become a man in Richard Wright's "Almos' a Man." Ron Howard, of ABC's "Happy Days," is Andy, a young hot-walker at an Ohio race track whose lie about non-existent wealth costs him the girl of his dreams in Sherwood Anderson's "I'm a Fool." Shelley Duvall, Bud Cort and Veronica Cartwright star in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1919 tale about a shy girl who decides to become a woman on her own terms. And in Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," Irene Worth, Shirley Stoler, Robert Earl Jones and John Houseman appear in a microcosm of rural society in the 1940s.

Free of the time strictures of commercial television, "The American Short Story" films last only as long as is necessary to tell their stories. They range in length from 28½ to 56 minutes. Six are paired for airing during the series run on the Public Broadcasting System. The network plans to rerun the series at least four times in the next three years. It will also be made available for school and non-school audiences.

Chloe Aaron, PBS senior vice president for programming, says, "We are looking forward to 'The American Short Story' as the highlight of our Spring 1977 season. This series represents public television in its fullest potential. It combines the finest writing of American authors with some of the best directing, scripting and acting talent this country has to offer. Certainly the series will not only entertain but will also introduce millions of Americans to significant aspects of our literary heritage."

Which is just the kind of expectation the Endowment had responded to. Under the guidelines of the NEH Media Program, funding is given to develop imaginative television, radio and film production in the humanities for national broadcast and distribution. Projects must be geared to the general adult public and involve direct interaction between scholars in the humanities and producers, directors, writers and actors of solid professional stature. Past projects have included: "The Adams Chronicles," "War and Peace," and "Classic Theatre."

The short story series began in 1974 with the pilot film "Parker Adderson, Philosopher," a tale by Ambrose Bierce, the only prominent American writer who actually fought and was wounded in the Civil War. Robert Geller, writer-director Arthur Barron, and scholar Alfred Kazin united to shape the taut Civil War story with the surprise ending in which a man's true character is revealed on the brink of death.

With continuing support from the Endowment, the three helped formulate the initial design for the film

MINNESOTA PREVIEW

To highlight the opening of "The American Short Story" to be telecast beginning on April 5, a preview of the F. Scott Fitzgerald story, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," was presented on March 25 at the University Club, St. Paul, Minnesota, in the neighborhood where Fitzgerald was born. More than 250 guests attended the event hosted by the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minnesota Humanities Commission.

Some critical comments resulting from the premiere of *The American Short Story*:

The Washington Post (*Tom Shales*): "The American Short Story . . . is about the most promising and provocative thing to happen to TV this spring. . . . It's the kind of thing that reawakens one's dormant excitement for the possibilities of television. . . . It is for everybody."

The New York Times (*John J. O'Connor*): "The short story has been the special creation and pride of American literature, but . . . a rich source of programming material has been largely and inexplicably ignored. . . . Now, with the funding of . . . the National Endowment for the Humanities, the potential can be solidly grasped. . . . The American Short Story series is off to a singularly impressive beginning. . . ."

The Washington Star (*Patricia Simmons*): ". . . a hit . . . not to be missed." (*Bernie Harrison*): "If . . . 'The American Short Story' can hold to this quality, it'll give us something to watch besides the commercial reruns and sports."

series, originally titled "Anthology: the American Short Story." They had three major objectives. They would film great fiction reflecting central themes in the American experience. They would explore the shape of American social and intellectual mores through the history of her short stories. And they would whet their audiences' appetite for fine literature and television programming.

Then began the arduous task of choosing the remaining eight stories. Geller estimates they read at least 500 stories before selecting the 100 which were subsequently appraised by the project's committee of literary scholars. Committee chairman Calvin Skaggs recalls, "It was a very detailed process. We handled it informally so we could maneuver. We knew we wanted certain things to get a series which would be powerful on film and representative of 100 years of American short fiction."

They wanted, for instance: writers reflecting a diversity of experience; a variety of writing styles, from humorous sketches to deep philosophical probings; and recurring themes such as conquering the land, man's sense of aloneness, our passage rites from youth to old age, and statements about how we deal with crisis points in our lives.

"We got most of what we wanted," says Geller, "the regional, young and old, the bad and the beautiful."

Two scholars worked with the writers, directors, and actors on each story. Their critical review was weighed throughout the production. Yet never was there any sense that production was hamstrung.

Typically, scripts were reviewed and rewritten several times before approval. The process is seen in a scholar's note attached to the first draft of "Almos' a Man": "Eliminate all padding which relies on (other characters') development. Since a virtue of the story is its spareness, its economy—a hard persistent concentration on Dave's problem of adolescence—any padding should pertain directly to Dave's state of mind."

Always, the guideline of "faithfulness to the author's intent" was followed. In some cases, however, story adjustments were made to clarify or tighten dramatic moments. In James's "The Jolly Corner," literary advisor Henry Nash Smith suggested the introduction of a seance scene to externalize the very internal conflicts of Sheldon Brydon's psyche. Smith notes that Henry James and his brother William, an early psychologist, were experimenters with telepathic communication and habitués of seances.

The only major change in any of the stories occurs in the film of Crane's "The Blue Hotel." After much discussion, director Jan Kadar and scholar Alfred Kazin decided to compress the story's final scenes to one location and time frame. Geller points to the decision as "an exciting moment in literary discussion. The question is not which is better, but why we did what we did." To drive the point home, he tells an anecdote.

Fritz Weaver, featured in "The Jolly Corner" by Henry James, one of nine films in The American Short Story series.



In the back lot of MGM a young goat and an old goat are grazing on a mound of film nitrate cans containing the movie "Gone with the Wind." "Hey, this is great stuff," squeals the young goat, knocking off can after can. "Oh, I don't know," says the old goat, "I thought the book was better."

"Each medium has its own restraints and possibilities," says Geller. "The trick is to enhance the material by maximizing the latter."

W

hile literary fidelity was the talk of the sets, the sets themselves were meticulously authentic. The same farm near Milledgeville, Georgia, where the late Flannery O'Connor lived and wrote served as the set for her story "The Displaced Person." Fitzgerald's "Bernice" was shot on location in a lovely period home (the owners moved to a motel for a month) in which "every spoon, every bowl and room was intact." In "Parker Adderson, Philosopher," the rebel regiment is a ragged outfit, mostly young boys with peach-cheeks and old men with sagging jaws and gazes. For that was what was left of the Southern army then.

At the same time, "The American Short Story" staff inventively kept production costs for each film within a specified budget, about a half to a third what similar commercial ventures would cost. In "I'm a Fool," for instance, the racetrack scene is filled with church member "extras" whose building was painted in exchange for their work.

Now, as "The American Short Story" premieres, the series is "getting the kudos," as Geller puts it. And there are hopeful signs that commercial television may pick up the creative "ball." Well and good. We need more serious television programming which is not afraid to make its major responsibility making the audiences feel pain, whether the pain of discovery or the pain of empathizing with someone.

Indications are that audiences and artists want the challenge. Irene Worth was bowled over when shown Horton Foote's script for "The Displaced Person." "It's a poem, it's a poem, it's a poem," she said.

But perhaps no response to "The American Short Story" has the force of that received from John Updike, the only living writer represented in the series.

He saw his story "The Music School." "Thank you," he wrote the producers.

The film, written and directed by John Korty, is about a 1970s writer who, during a 24-hour period, struggles to find a focus in his life. Actor Ron Weyand relied almost exclusively on movement, expression and gesture for his performance.

To Updike "it seemed a wonderfully loving and inventive transposition into film imagery of the almost untranslatable verbal interweave of my rather essayistic story."

"A wonderfully loving transposition . . ." It was just what "The American Short Story" had in mind.

—Sally Ferguson