

FOREWORD

There are no stories like O Henry's yet the evident comparison is with their neighbours in time. Guy de Maupassant was in creative flow in the 1880s and Damon Runyon in the 1930s, O Henry precisely in full bloom from 1901 to his death in 1910. The publication of this Capuchin Classics collection marks that centenary.

The stories of each raconteur belong to the very instant of their composition and the very places each knew well at first hand, such as Maupassant's Normandy and Brittany and Paris, Runyon's downtown New York, and O Henry's New York City, Texas and elsewhere. Each is drawn to the nobodies, wannabes, riff-raff, often enough on life's seamy side. Each possessed those blithe disciplines of short-story mastery, namely arresting the attention and holding it by pace, concision and precision in all things – above all of ear and dialogue – to fix the protagonists, capture the scene, sustain suspense, and pull off the surprise. O Henry is a writer who in apparent idleness has picked up two straws and in a few deft minutes has involuntarily twisted them into an object of poignancy and wit that none catching sight of it can bear to toss aside.

Here is O Henry fixing for ever an East Side tough guy New Yorker:

How magnificent was Billy McMahan, with his great, smooth, laughing face; his grey eye, shrewd as a chicken hawk's; his diamond ring, his prince's air, his plump and active roll of money, his clarion call to friend or comrade – oh, what king of men he was! How he obscured his lieutenants, though they themselves loomed large and serious, blue of chin and important of mien, with hands buried deep in the pockets of their short overcoats! But

Billy – oh, what a small avail are words to paint
for you this glory as seen by Ikey Snigglefritz.

The Social Triangle

Naturally it is Ikey we are soon to care about.

O Henry draws our attention to those we would not normally notice – whom scripture calls the “poor in spirit” – the hollow-chested clerk, shopgirl, waitress, roughneck, the insecure dude, anxious apprentice, lost tart, impoverished artist, small-time crook, hobo, ill-starred lover. We find them in their brownstone tenements, department stores, bars, park benches, drugstores, jails, farms. . . . And alongside the underdog, of course, the overdog: the boss, landlady, sharp lawyer, prison warder, he with the wad of bucks, the pastiche grandee with his fleeting dominance.

What O Henry brings so infectiously to all these gifts is the sheer fun he has in telling a story, and in using words for the joy and wit of them. This we know: when O Henry was writing a story he was truly living.

The young Will Porter (such being his real name) had not set out to be a writer, and it took a cussed turn of events to turn him into a true one, justifying his topsy-turvy existence by his gift of drawing stories from it. In all he wrote over 600 of them in a space of scarcely twenty years – faster than one a fortnight. Of these, 341 were by “O Henry” and the rest – the early ones – appearing under other aliases or anonymously, mostly in the *Houston Post*. Linda Kelly has drawn upon them all for this collection of O Henry gems, ascribing the lot to the *nom de plume* of his fame. They are gems which tumble over the sides of any casket. Nothing of what I have read of his has missed. Among the stories brought back here, few are longer than two or three thousand words – the very longest in the collection, *Past One At Rooney’s*, nudging 5,000, is a rarity – since the magazines of the day wanted them short. Today, alas, there aren’t the magazines, so there aren’t the stories or their writers.

They've gone from the literary scene like the miniatures of old Persia or the Elizabethan court.

Will Porter took the alias by which he is known because he needed one desperately. In 1897, in his mid-30s, he went to jail. They sent him down on a five-year rap for embezzlement. He had a gift for writing: that he knew. Now he was required to provide for his seven-year-old daughter Margaret whose mother had died of tuberculosis the previous year. Banged up in the State of Ohio's penitentiary in Columbus, if Porter was to place a story in McClure's Magazine he needed a clean name. He took letters 1 and 2 of *OHIO* and 2 and 3 and the final two of *PENITENTIARY* and O Henry was born. (This is my preferred theory: he himself offered a quite other bland, implausible explanation.) It is said that Margaret, who died in 1927, never got to learn that her then famous father had served a term in chokey. Her guardians had told her he was away "on business". He was released for good behaviour after three years, having spent most of his bird in the prison's dispensary, in whose arts he happened to be qualified.

Will was born the son of a physician, Dr Algernon Porter, in 1862, in Gainsboro, North Carolina. Consumption took his mother when he was three, and his paternal grandmother brought him up and sent him to his aunt's elementary school. Out of class he read with voracity, reaching at length to the classics. He was a young man of parts, becoming licensed as a pharmacist by the age of 19, and sought after as a singer and mandolinist, and in demand as a witty caricaturist of local citizenry. A dry cough plagued him. In his early 20s he took up as a hand on a friend's ranch in Texas to strengthen up, learning French and Spanish from the rest of the cowmen. With his friend's elevation to political office, he qualified as a draughtsman to join Texas's General Land office in Austin, the state capital. He fell in love, eloped and married. On his sponsor's loss of political office and patronage he took a job as

a teller with the First National Bank of Austin. While still employed there he launched his own satirical magazine, *Rolling Stone*, which survived a year but drained him of cash and had him taking a reporter's job on the *Houston Post*. He added another ten bucks a week to his reporter's pittance of \$15 by writing unsigned stories for the *Post*, each of which is recognisable today as by the young O Henry from its style, wit, topic and deft plotting. These too have been drawn upon in this collection.

But something had gone amiss with his spell at the bank, and in February 1896 the Federal Grand Jury at Austin indicted him on a charge of embezzling. Summoned for trial in the summer, he set off for Austin, switched trains, went on the run first to New Orleans and then to Honduras. (It was O Henry who, in a later story, was to coin the term "banana republic".) Early in 1897 word reached him of his wife's contraction of the very sickness that had carried away his mama. Back in Austin, he surrendered to the authorities, who doubled his bond. His wife died that summer, and Will Porter went on trial the following February, 1898. He pleaded not guilty, yet seemed strangely indifferent to defending himself. It was at that nadir of life that his true commitment as a writer was to be sown.

When he came out of prison, soon moving to New York, he wrote and drank, and wrote and wrote, mostly for the *New York World Sunday Magazine*, whose readers fell addictively upon his weekly stories. In that brief decade remaining to him, his work was already being collected in hardcover editions. In 1907 he married Sara Coleman, a sweetheart of his North Carolina days. Maybe his drinking was too much for Sara, or maybe she had not bargained for being second to his muse. She quit in 1909. His health cracked. Next year he was halfway through a story, *The Dream* (of one awaiting execution), when his pen slipped from his hand and he could not go on. Capuchin Classics publishes this fragment, with the few notes pointing

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to the way it would go that he jotted down before the cirrhosis of his liver put out O Henry's rare and precious light. He was 47.

“And most wonderful of all are words,” he wrote (about his imagined foreign correspondent in *Calloway's Code*), “and how they make friends with one another, being oft associated, until not even obituary notices them do part.”

What play and panoply he made with them!

Tom Stacey
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