

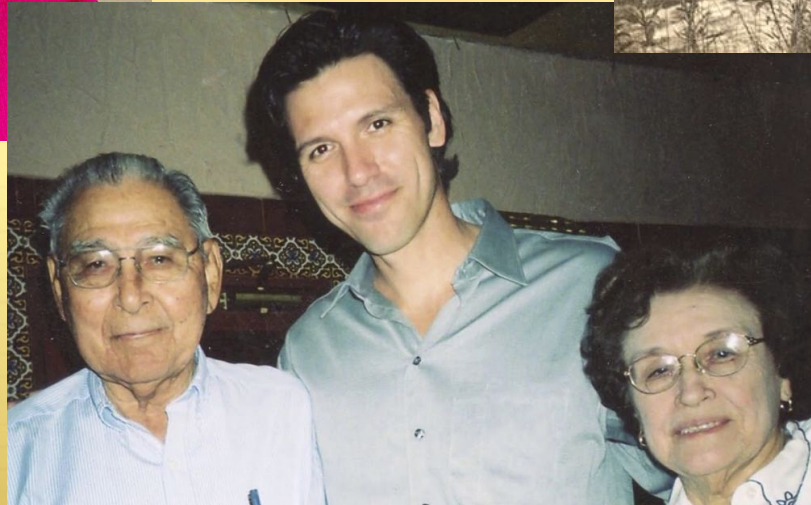
Teaching Short Fiction

Humanities Texas

Summer Webinar

James Cox

July 2023



*The Storytelling Animal:
How Stories Make Us Human (2012)*
Jonathan Gottschall




“Story—sacred and profane—is perhaps *the* main cohering force in human life. A society is composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas. What connects us beyond our kinship ties?

Story. As John Gardner puts it, fiction ‘is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy.’ Story is the counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart. Story is the center without which the rest cannot hold.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTNmLt7QX8E>

Neil Gaiman

Introduction to 60th anniversary edition of
Fahrenheit 451 (1953) by Ray Bradbury



“Ideas—written ideas—are special. They are the way we transmit our stories and our thoughts from one generation to the next. If we lost them, we lose our shared history. We lose much of what makes us human. And fiction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gift of seeing the world through their eyes. Fiction is a lie that tells us true things, over and over.”

Activity: Family Stories



Ask your students to think about the family stories they hear around the dinner table, especially during large gatherings on weekends or holidays.

Ask them to choose a story that they have heard repeatedly—one of the stories that it is guaranteed someone will tell when everyone is together—and to share it either in written or oral form.

Have the students discuss with each other the main elements of their story: who is the narrator? what is the setting? who are the characters? what is the plot? the action? the complication or conflict?

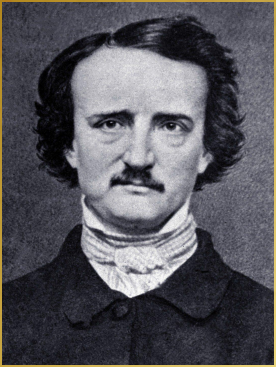
You might also ask the students if they changed any element of the stories in their own telling and if so, why?

And if you have time, you could ask the students to identify any similarities between the stories. It is a way to get them thinking about conventions.

ELA TEKS



- (1) Response skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student responds to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed. The student is expected to:
 - (A) describe personal connections to a variety of sources, including self-selected texts;
 - (B) write responses that demonstrate analysis of texts, including comparing texts within and across genres;
 - (C) use text evidence and original commentary to support an analytic response;
 - (D) paraphrase and summarize texts in ways that maintain meaning and logical order;
 - (E) interact with sources in meaningful ways such as notetaking, annotating, freewriting, or illustrating;
 - (F) respond using acquired content and academic vocabulary as appropriate;
 - (G) discuss and write about the explicit and implicit meanings of text;
 - (H) respond orally or in writing with appropriate register and effective vocabulary, tone, and voice;
 - (I) reflect on and adjust responses when valid evidence warrants; and
 - (J) defend or challenge the authors' claims using relevant text evidence.



Defining Short Stories: Edgar Allan Poe, from a review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, 1842



Were we called upon however to designate that class of composition which, next to such a poem as we have suggested, should best fulfill the demands of high genius — should offer it the most advantageous field of exertion — we should unhesitatingly speak of the prose tale, as Mr. Hawthorne has here exemplified it. We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences — resulting from weariness or interruption

Poe, continued



A skilfull literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

First Sentence of “The Fall of the House of Usher”



DURING the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.

The Short Story



Short story: a fictional prose tale of no specified length, but too short to be published as a volume on its own, as *NOVELLAS sometimes and *NOVELS usually are. A short story will normally concentrate on a single event with only one or two characters, more economically than a novel's sustained exploration of social background. There are similar fictional forms of greater antiquity—*FABLES, *FOLKTALES, and *PARABLES—but the short story as we know it flourished in the magazines of the 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in the USA, which has a particularly strong tradition.

Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001)

(Short) Fiction Vocabulary

Action – what happens to, or what is done by, the characters in a story.

Allegory – a literary work in which the characters and their situations clearly represent general qualities and types. Often the characters of allegory represent abstract vices or virtues such as greed, innocence, or faith.

Atmosphere – the enveloping spirit or mood of a story.

Character, round and flat – a round character has the same complex qualities that we note in real people, while a flat character has only a small fraction of human complexity.

Complication – the emergence of a problem out of the interaction between characters and the situation that prevails as the story begins. See exposition and resolution.

Conflict – the active opposition of characters, ideas, ways of life. Conflict is often considered the soul of fiction, as it gives rise to suspense, drama, and emotional tension.

Vocabulary, cont.



Convention – any aspect of the literary art that has been established by earlier and repeated usage as part of the way in which language represents experience.

Conventional – when used disparagingly, conventional means that the writer has tried to find approval by clinging to familiar narrative types and procedures, and noncontroversial values.

Didactic – a story is didactic if it deliberately teaches a lesson about the way people should behave.

Exposition – that part of a story – frequently at the beginning or near it – which gives information about the characters and their situation before the action begins to change them.

First- and third-person narration – in first-person narration the story is told by a character that habitually refers to himself or herself with the pronoun I. In third-person all characters are referred to by third-person pronouns, and the story is told directly by the author.

Vocabulary



Foreshadowing – hints about what might happen later in the story.

Imagery – figures of speech such as similes and metaphors, but also all descriptions that prompt the reader to visualize characters in their setting.

Irony – a discrepancy between what is expected and what is revealed. Irony may appear in the difference between a character's understanding of her situation and the reader's estimate of it.

Motivation – the internal or external forces that compel a character to take action. Sometimes these forces may be chiefly psychological, sometimes sociological, and sometimes a matter of hostility or opportunity in the physical environment.

Narration – a synonym for storytelling. In fiction, narrative passages are to be distinguished from descriptions and scenes.

etc., from R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*

Ernest Hemingway



In 1918, poor eyesight prevents Hemingway from joining the US armed forces, so he volunteers for the Red Cross Ambulance Corps and takes a trip to Michigan before going to Europe.

On July 8, 1918, he is seriously injured by a trench mortar in Italy. The standard count is that he had 227 wounds. While recovering, he falls in love with an American nurse, Agnes Von Kurowsky. In December, he returns to the U.S., after which she tells him she has fallen in love with an Italian officer. The experience forms the basis of both “A Very Short Story” and *A Farewell to Arms*.

In Our Time



Title: “Give us peace *in our time*, O Lord,”
from the *English Book of Common Prayer*

1923, six vignettes published, the first
one in *The Little Review*

1924, *in our time*, Three Mountains Press
32 pages comprised of 18 vignettes
presented as numbered chapters

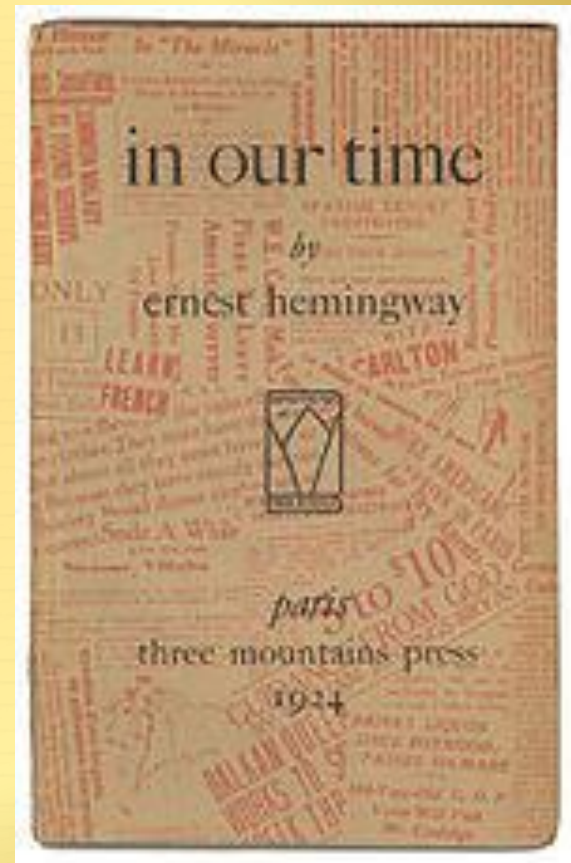
Chapters 3, 6, 9, 17: news items

Chapters 1, 4, 5, 7, 10: The Great

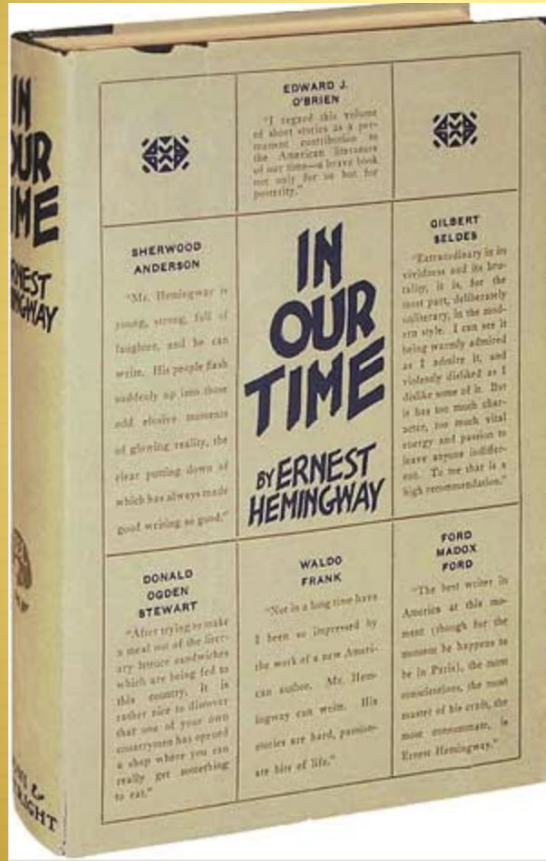
War chapters

Chapter 9: based on a *Kansas City Star* news story

Chapters 2, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16:
bullfighting



In Our Time



1925, *In Our Time*, Boni and Liveright

Hemingway used 16 of the 18 chapters as interchapters in the new edition and renumbered them. The collection has 14 total short stories.

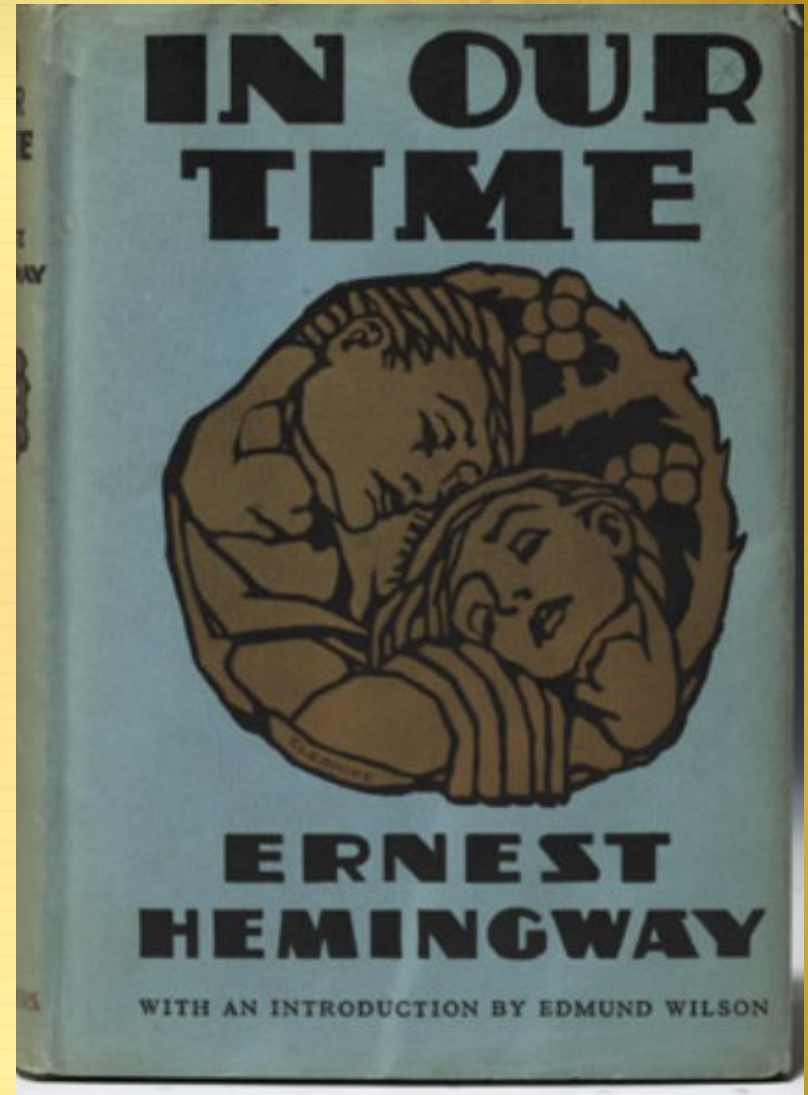
He rewrote “The Revolutionist” and “A Very Short Story” (love affair with nurse Agnes von Kurowsky) as short stories.

Hemingway wrote “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I” and “Big Two-Hearted River: Part II” as the conclusion to the collection.

In Our Time

1930, *In Our Time*

Hemingway added an
“Introduction” later titled “On the
Quai at Smyrna.”



Death in the Afternoon, 1932

The Iceberg Theory

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.





“Indian Camp”

“a miracle of compression”—Kenneth S. Lynn



Started in November 1923

Written mid-February to April 1924

Introduces Nick Adams

Chronologically earliest Nick Adams story

Original Opening



Nick was undressing in the tent. He saw the shadows of his father and Uncle George cast by the fire on the canvas wall. He felt very **uncomfortable** and **ashamed** and undressed as fast as he could, piling his clothes neatly. He was **ashamed** because undressing reminded him of the night before. He had kept it out of his mind all day.

Paragraph 2



His father and uncle had gone off across the lake after supper to fish with a jack light. Before they shoved the boat out his father told him that if any emergency came up while they were gone he was to fire three shots with the rifle and they would come right back. Nick went back from the edge of the lake through the woods to the camp. He could hear the oars of the boat in the dark. His father was rowing and his uncle was sitting in the stern trolling. He had taken his seat with his rod ready when his father shoved the boat out. Nick listened to them on the lake until he could no longer hear the oars.

Paragraph 3



Walking back through the woods Nick began to be **frightened**. He was always a little **frightened** of the woods at night. He opened the flap of the tent and undressed and lay very quietly between the blankets in the dark. The fire was burned down to a bed of coals outside. Nick lay still and tried to go to sleep. There was no noise anywhere. Nick felt if he could only hear a fox bark or an owl or anything he would be all right. He was not afraid of anything definite as yet. But he was **getting very afraid**. Then suddenly he was **afraid of dying**. Just a few weeks before at home, in church, they had sung a hymn, "Some day the silver cord will break." While they were singing the hymn **Nick had realized that some day he must die**. It made him feel quite sick. It was the first time he had ever realized that he himself would have to die sometime.

Paragraph 4



That night he sat out in the hall under the night light trying to read Robinson Crusoe to keep his mind off the fact that that some day the silver cord must break. The nurse found him there and threatened to tell his father on him if he did not go to bed. He went in to bed and as soon as the nurse was in her room came out again and read under the hall light until morning.


Paragraph 5



Last night in the tent he had had the same **fear**. He never had it except at night. It was more a realization than a **fear** at first. But it was always on the edge of **fear** and became **fear** very quickly when it started. As soon as he began to be really **frightened** he took the rifle and poked the muzzle out the front of the tent and shot three times. The rifle kicked badly. He heard the shots rip off through the trees. As soon as he had fired the shots it was all right. He lay down to wait for his father's return and was asleep before his father and uncle had put out their jacklight on the other side of the lake.

Robert Paul Lamb

from *The Hemingway Short Story*

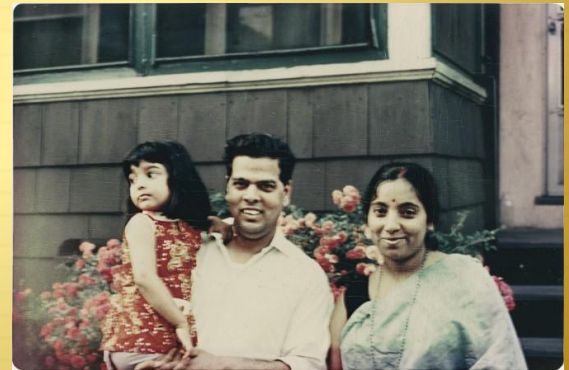


“Indian Camp” is a remarkably compressed story that eschews authorial explanations and makes its appeal to the reader’s senses in an efficient, suggestive prose. Superfluities are negligible, and words are carefully chosen that resonate with implications on many levels. Hardly anything is explained; the characters are evoked with economy; the theme [Lamb says “the fear of death” or the “recognition of one’s own finitude”] pervades the narration but lies beneath the surface of the action; and elements of the story (e.g., exposition, dialogue, action, settings) often perform multiple functions.



Jhumpa Lahiri

born 11 July, 1967
London, UK



Biographical Highlights



- Her Bengali parents immigrated from India to England before her birth.
- When she was two years old, her family immigrated to Rhode Island via Massachusetts. They travelled frequently to India.
- Lahiri holds a BA in English from Barnard College and four degrees from Boston University: an MA in English, an MFA in Creative Writing, an MA in Comparative Literature, and a PhD in Renaissance Studies.
- Lahiri lives in Rome with her husband Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a journalist for *Time*. His family is from Guatemala and Greece.

Works



- *Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999 (Pulitzer Prize)
- *The Namesake*, 2003 (film adaptation, 2007)
- *Unaccustomed Earth*, 2008
- *The Lowland*, 2013 (winner of the 2015 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature; short list for Man Booker Prize and long list for National Book Award)
- *Whereabouts*, 2018 (written in Italian)

Representative Critical Response



JHUMPA LAHIRI is not an immigrant writer. Nor is she a writer of cosmopolitan, international, or global fiction. She is an American realist. In the manner of John Updike, Philip Roth, and Jonathan Franzen — writers with whom she is never associated — Lahiri's magisterial canvases portray the elusive, vexed promises that comprise the mythos of the United States. But since her Pulitzer-winning debut *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri's multinational biography has dominated the reception of her fiction and obscured what is a distinctly American literary sensibility. The British-born, Indian-American writer is almost inevitably subsumed into an axis of immigrant-minority-ethnic-postcolonial writers such as Junot Díaz, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Zadie Smith. Accordingly, critics continue to overlook Lahiri's most significant literary achievement: a New England regionalism that contains the consciousness of a nation. — Urmila Seshagiri, 9 Oct 2013, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

Oscar Casares

Autobiography



I come from a town called Brownsville, located at the southern end of the Rio Grande River, just across the bridge from Matamoros, Mexico. Originally from San Luis Potosí, my ancestors settled in this border region back in the 1850s, and since then we have spread far and wide across the country. I live in Austin with my family now, only 350 miles north but a world away from where I started. Still, as it is for many us, regardless of where we come from, home remains home.

I write novels, stories, and essays about the border. My first book was a story collection called *Brownsville*, which was named a Notable Book of 2004 by the American Library Association and today is used in courses at several universities. *Amigoland*, my first novel, was selected for the 2009 Austin Mayor's Book Club, a citywide reading initiative by Austin Public Library. My work has earned me fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Texas Institute of Letters (Dobie Paisano), and the Copernicus Society of America. Since 2004, I've taught creative writing courses at the University of Texas at Austin.

Articles and Interviews



<https://www.oscarcasares.com/essays>

<https://www.texasmonthly.com/contributors/oscar-casares/>

<https://www.oscarcasares.com/news>

<https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2022/05/19/storytelling-is-how-we-stay-connected-an-interview-with-oscar-casares/>

Context: Regionalism



“During the two decades between the world wars, artists and intellectuals across the United States awakened to cultural and political possibilities that they believed to be inherent in the regional diversity of America. [...] In the decade or so after the war and prior to the onset of depression-era politicization, the regionalist movement took shape and rose to the task of cultural rejuvenation, seeking inspiration from the fresh materials of indigenous America--specifically, from Native American tribal cultures and from the European and African ‘folk-epic’ in the New World.” These cultures provided “materials not only for new styles of art, regionalists believed, but also the cultural means to transform modern society.”

Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (1923)

Texas Short Story Writers

- Donald, Frederick, and Steven Barthelme (Houston)
- Antonio Ruiz-Camacho (Austin via Mexico)
- Oscar Casares (Brownsville)
- Sandra Cisneros (San Antonio via Chicago)
- William Goyen (Trinity, East Texas)
- Bret Anthony Johnston (Corpus Christi)
- Katherine Anne Porter (Indian Creek, central Texas)
- William Sydney Porter, writing as O'Henry (Austin)
- Benjamin Alire Sàenz (El Paso via New Mexico)



Ten Teachable Short Stories



Charlotte Perkins Gilman,
“The Yellow Wallpaper”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Babylon
Revisited”

William Faulkner, “Barn
Burning”

Eudora Welty, “Why I Live at
the P.O.”

Alice Walker, “Everyday Use”

Sandra Cisneros, “Americans”

Tim O’Brien, “The Things
They Carried”

Gish Jen, “Who’s Irish?”

Sandra Tsing Loh, “My
Father’s Chinese Wives”

Thomas King, “Tidings of
Comfort and Joy”