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The LGBTQ Short Story

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Shockley's contribution to contemporary American lesbian and gay culture emerges in her fiction as much as in her scholarship. Upon the publication of Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974), Jewelle Gomez acknowledged that black lesbians were, for the first time, able to recognize themselves in the pages of a novel. Reprinted in 1997, *Loving Her* is now Shockley's most renowned work, known as the first novel to deal openly with an interracial lesbian relationship—an especially bold move given that it was conceptualized at the height of black nationalism and its emphasis on racial unity. Her volume of short stories *The Black and White of It* (1980) investigates themes like homophobia in some black communities as well as racism and sexism that affect the lives of African American lesbians. Shockley's 1982 novel *Say Jesus and Come to Me* again approaches gay oppression, this time in the black church. Here, a strong critique of middle-class values comes through more clearly than the underlying class resentment in *Loving Her*. Shockley's unflinchingly lesbian feminist writing earned her the 1990 OUTlook Award honoring her groundbreaking contribution to lesbian and gay writing.

Recently, Shockley went on to pen *Celebrating Hotchpaw* (2005), which follows similar themes to her previous work, this time amid the backdrop of a southern black college and its efforts to stay afloat in spite of financial scarcity. Following her earlier interest in documenting and challenging antqueer ideas in African American subcultures, she attends to the politics of transgenderism and passing. Shockley continues to publish critical essays and short stories in journals like the *African American Review* and *Snister Wisdom*.

**Further Reading**


*Mimi Iimuro Van Ausdall*

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**short stories**

The short story has been readily adopted by contemporary LGBTQ authors as a flexible and powerful form with which to represent an increasingly wide range of voices, concerns, and experiences. In particular, the racial and ethnic diversity of current LGBTQ short story authors promotes ever more nuanced acts of creative expression, cultural identification, and cross-cultural understanding. Further, the length of short stories, typically between 1,000 and 7,500 words, allows for publication in a rich mix of venues, including single-author short story collections, national literary and LGBTQ-oriented journals, and community-based newsletters and magazines. Gay and lesbian authors have been able to achieve wide-scale recognition through the growing practice of publishing LGBTQ short story anthologies, including works such as *Lavender Mansions: 40 Contemporary Lesbian and Gay Short Stories* (1994), *Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing* (1995), and the long-running *Women on Women* and *Men on Men* series. These compilations
demonstrate the increasing awareness of and cultural capital attached to collective LGBTQ identities. The sometimes striking differences within and between such collections simultaneously point to the divisions that run through and help to define various LGBTQ communities. Presented here are 25 of the most well-known and representative contemporary LGBTQ short story authors.

The conventions of short fiction, which include single settings, simple or distilled plotlines, a limited number of characters, epiphanic moments, central crises that are often not fully resolved, and ambiguous moral lessons, can lend themselves in unique ways to representations of gay and lesbian experiences, the epiphanic moment being a foremost example. The startling moment of recognition, understanding, or disclosure that typifies the short story in general has particular salience for LGBTQ short narratives in which epiphany is structured by a character’s revelation of his or her LGBTQ identity, an act known as coming out. Such a revelation can not only provide the central moment of crisis in a story but, moreover, sometimes indicate a complete rupture of past and future for the LGBTQ character who comes out. Thus, in Sandy Boucher’s “The Day My Father Kicked Me Out,” published in The Notebooks of Leni Clare and Other Short Stories (1982), the rejection of the lesbian narrator by her parents opens an unbridgeable emotional and geographic space between them. In contrast, the full outcome and repercussions of the epiphany coming out are often left necessarily unexplored in LGBTQ short stories. For example, Ann Allen Shockley, known for her groundbreaking representations of black lesbians, portrays in “Family Reunion” (1996) a mother living in the Deep South who is struggling to accept her lesbian daughter who has returned after a long exile. That difficult homecoming, eased by an aunt’s own coming out and interpreted through the lens of social justice efforts in the civil rights era, reconnects mother and daughter but does so with clear markers of how difficult the work of reforging family bonds can be after coming out. Equally revelatory are moments in which characters discover unknown or unexpected LGBTQ friends, relatives, and communities. In Richard Hall’s “Country People,” collected in Fiddles (1992), a college instructor of gay literature realizes he has been teaching a community of kindred spirits—literally ghosts—dramatizing the importance of knowing and sharing LGBTQ history, of keeping the past alive through stories. Similarly, but in a different cultural context, Jewelle Gomez, in the title story to her 1998 collection Don’t Explain, emphasizes the importance to Letty, a black lesbian waitress in 1959, of being invited to a party comprised, to her surprise, entirely of other black lesbians.

As these stories suggest, the search for and celebration of community has been a major theme in LGBTQ short stories. One of the most celebrated LGBTQ short story authors, Allen Barnett, writes a classic tale of gay men summering on New York’s Fire Island even as their numbers are diminished by the AIDS epidemic. “The Times as It Knows Us” (1990) raises painful and poignant questions about what a community owes to its members, arguing, ultimately, for a more expansive sense of humanity. Similarly, Beth Brant’s title story “Food and Spirits” (1990), informed by her Mohawk heritage, imagines an expanded community created through the open-hearted, open-minded tradition of sharing food. However, other
LGBTQ authors recognize that “community” is an ever-contested term for people with minority social and sexual identities. The Latina lesbian community of Terri de la Peña’s 1991 story “Mujeres Morenas” appears vibrant in its differences, standing in stark contrast to the earlier feminist lesbian community of Shuckley’s 1979 story “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters,” fractured as that assembly is by racism expressed between black and white women. Such tales remind readers that collective LGBTQ identities offer the potential for safety but also for risk.

Indeed, a range of risks and vulnerabilities are exposed by LGBTQ short stories. Gil Cuadros’s “Unprotected,” collected in City of God (1994), explores the psychology of an HIV-infected Latino man fatally drawn to potentially dangerous sexual encounters. Concerned with the difficulties of lesbian embodiment, Patricia Roth Schwartz’s “Bodies,” originally published in the renowned feminist literary journal Sojourner, offers a wide-ranging critique of the ways the female body is undermined by impossible standards of “fitness,” the effects of age, and the inevitability of death. Although a phrase associated with gay male safe-sex educational efforts, when adapted by Ruthann Robson, “Kissing Doesn’t Kill” (1991) becomes a powerfully ironic commentary on the physical and emotional threats to lesbians in times of homophobic political crisis at both local and national levels. While threats to gay men and women thus often diverge, risks of the body also make for interesting parallels between them, as in Barnett’s titular story “The Body and Its Dangers” (1990). In that story, the cancer of the lesbian narrator represents only the most urgent of assaults on the body, others of which include misogyny, pregnancy, sex, abortion, and, for the gay man’s body, AIDS. A similar gender parallel arises in “Zigzagger,” the title story of Manuel Muñoz’s 2003 collection, when the author draws a parallel between a Chicana mother, wise to the dangers of forbidden desire, and her teenage son, similarly seduced by the touch of a handsome stranger.

As “Zigzagger” attests, the difficulties of youth are central to many contemporary LGBTQ short stories. Like Muñoz, John Keene refuses to oversimplify portraits of LGBTQ people coming of age. In “My Son, My Heart, My Life” (1996), Keene offers a complex depiction of a 13-year-old adolescent clearly attuned to the erotic possibilities, both treacherous and at times intriguing, that exist between children and adults. Jacqueline Woodson, in both “Tuesday, August Third” (1994) and “What Has Been Done to Me” (1996), laments the ways African American children, both gay and straight, are lost to drugs, sexual molestation, war, and suicide. Woodson thus reveals the complexity of the struggle to move out of one’s painful history, specifically, out of the hollow childhood structured simultaneously by racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Stories such as Woodson’s are significant in that they take up the work of remembering and recording the often-forgotten or untold stories of LGBTQ youth. Joan Nestle, an outspoken figure in the struggle to create powerful and positive representations of lesbians, engages in the politics of remembering in a story of unfulfilled adolescent desire, “Liberties Not Taken,” written for her 1987 collection, A Restricted Country. The missed lesbian encounter that catalyzes the narrative prompts a reflection on the necessity of lesbian role models and the difficulty of maturing without a lover’s touch, a touch that is made
impossible not only by cultural prohibitions on homosexuality but also by the sexist appropriation of young women's bodies by older men. Robson also takes up the case of the absent lesbian role model in "pas de deux," the story of a vanished ballet instructor and her star pupil's long and ultimately successful search to locate her, if not literally then metaphorically, everywhere.

One of the most consistent themes in recent gay and lesbian short fiction is that of the family drama. Such narratives portray moments when familial bonds are tested, broken, strengthened, or renewed. Often they reveal the dangers that families pose to LGBTQ members, as in Hall's "The Jilting of Tim Weatherall," which recounts the resentment of a gay son dying from AIDS whose Texas family has rejected him, and Jess Wells's "Aqua" (1987), which portrays lesbians, daughters living in the shadows of unhappy mothers. The astonishing capacity of a family to turn violently against one of its own, especially when she is considered to be sexually "deviant," powerfully reverberates through the finale of Cuadros's Mexican American family drama, "Indulgences" (1994).

But as contemporary LGBTQ short stories portray families divided by homophobia, they just as often reveal family bonds to be resilient, if tenuous. The politics of familial separation ground Beth Brant's "A Long Story" (1995), a dual narrative of two grieving mothers—one an American Indian in 1890, the other a divorced mother in a lesbian relationship in 1978—whose children are forcibly removed from them by the government and the court system, respectively. Brant's story is at once painful and empowering, however, as lesbian union becomes a foundation of strength and courage for coping with loss. Similarly, both Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Patricia Roth Schwartz place grown children within family genealogies of love and pain in "Jewish Food, Jewish Children" (1990) and "The Names of the Moons of Mars" (1989), focusing on the difficulty of relating to one's parents as an adult child.

Schwartz simultaneously maintains a focus on the economic strains of women who are divorced from their husbands and struggling to regain a sense of financial and emotional security in a patriarchal system that dramatically disempowers the divorced lesbian and mother, as suggested by her suffocating title "Underwater Women" (1989). Indeed, contemporary LGBTQ authors have been especially attuned to issues of class and the ways that socioeconomic structures support homophobic and heterocentricist interests. Sandy Boucher, in "Charm School" (1982), portrays a young female employee disempowered both economically and sexually by her abusive male employer. The story ends ambiguously, with the reader unsure whether the protagonist ultimately learns to counteract the ways men can use sex as a tool of power. In "Learning to See," the opening story of Eye of a Hurricane (1989), Robson turns the lens of class back onto the white female narrator, exposing the social reality of the narrator's photography as an exploitative act of cultural tourism. Class- and race-based exploitation takes on an erotic valence in Muñoz's tale of sexually vulnerable Mexican American boys who are both desired for and silenced by their brown skin in "Everything the White Boy Told You."

Unquestionably, a central concern of LGBTQ short story authors has been to offer insight into the complex ways desire circulates through and becomes meaningful in deals with the ability to speak an immigrant's suspicious of his divide between one and multiple in several collections of the Heart sexual revelatory portraits of gay of being Jewish engaged "Secret in a coherent voice, is taken up based on the life of a protagonist con pressures to be t and gay, and to his many selves, unified.

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As suggested in the works of Raphael and Hall, the act of writing is often foregrounded in LGBTQ short stories. Writing about writing, or metatextuality, serves the special interests of LGBTQ authors who, reacting against the long history of suppression and silence that has made LGBTQ lives invisible, not only redress the problem of the blank page but also thematize and promote writing as a politically engaged act within their stories. Lesléa Newman, perhaps most widely known for her children's book titled Heather Has Two Mommies (1989), emphasizes the importance of recording one's history of loss and survival in the title story to her 1998 collection, A Letter to Harvey Milk, by intertwining stories of gay and Jewish responses to subjugation and murder. Newman also raises the craft-oriented issue of point of view by adopting the subject position of an elderly heterosexual Jewish man in the story. In doing so, she implicitly argues that the act of storytelling can be a vicarious experience, an exercise in giving voice to histories not directly our own but in need of telling. Other LGBTQ short story authors also find value in writing from diverse subject positions, crossing borders of race, sexuality, and generation, for instance. Brian Leung, in his award-winning collection of stories entitled World Famous Love Acts (2004), thus incorporates elements from his Asian American heritage in stories such as “Six Ways to Jump Off a Bridge” and “White Hand,” but in “Executing Dexter” he takes the point of view of a young African American boy. Like Newman, Leung writes from various gay and straight points of view; the category of the LGBTQ short story thus cannot be delimited in terms of gay or lesbian content. It is more appropriate to understand these stories as informed, but not bounded, by the experiences of their LGBTQ authors.
Nevertheless, one of the dominant features of many LGBTQ short stories is an author's attempt to translate personal experience into fiction so as to redress the underrepresentation of minorities and people of color within LGBTQ literature. Leung thus joins authors such as Lola Lai Jong in bringing stories of LGBTQ Asian Americans to light. Already mentioned are the efforts of Gil Cuadros, Terri de la Peña, and Manuel Muñoz to represent the lives of Latinx/Latina and Chicano/Chicana peoples. Achy Obejas and Mariana Romo-Carmona can be added to this list. Obejas's collection, humorously titled "We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This" (1994), records the story of a family's immigration from Cuba to the United States and the regrets that accompany such a border-crossing. Beth Brant has been largely responsible for bringing the stories of American Indian culture to the printed page, both in her collections and in her edited volume A Gathering of Spent (1984, 1988). The stories of Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Leslie Newman, and Lev Raphael thread Jewish and LGBTQ identities together, just as Jewelle Gomez, Ann Allen Shockley, John Keene, and Jacqueline Woodson depict minority sexual identities woven into the African American community.

The strength of many contemporary LGBTQ short stories lies not in the relative "newness" of their effort to recover suppressed or invisible lives but, rather, in their capacity to extend and reshape long-standing literary traditions. While Gomez, for example, reconstructs the intriguing and complicated sexual life of black women in New York City in "White Flower," another story entitled "Houston" (which continues the work of her 1991 novel, The Gilda Stories) participates in the science fiction and fantasy genres, mixing lesbian desire with mystical impulses in a futuristic vampire story. In Gomez's reimagining of that story, however, the vampire named Gilda draws blood without killing, allowing for a more nuanced tale of unrecognized alliances and populations at risk. Lawrence Schimel also adopts the fantasy genre in the title story to his 1997 collection, The Drag Queen of Elfland, enabling him to effectively translate typically straight archetypical characters into gay ones. Likewise, in the hands of Ruthann Robson the traditional murder mystery receives a lesbian valence in "The Death of the Subject." Jacqueline de Angelis, in "Joshua in the City with a Future" (1995), adopts the aesthetic style of naturalism in order to set the petty minutiae of relationship struggles against the grand scope of a threatening natural environment; while Mariana Romo-Carmona's "Death of Rabbits" does not address specifically gay and lesbian concerns, as a tale of magical realism it effectively demonstrates the range of literary genres LGBTQ authors are working in today.

Reflecting the concerns of LGBTQ people striving to form romantic relationships, LGBTQ short stories are often intimately framed by matters of the heart. At times these stories suggest that love is universal, as some have argued that Annie Proulx's famous "Brokeback Mountain" does, and at times they dramatize the particularities and differences that set LGBTQ intimacies apart. While both Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Achy Obejas portray the unraveling of lesbian love, the former sets "The Printer" (1990) in the context of a broader world where lesbian relationships happen to exist while the latter sets "Wrecks" (1994) in the microcosmic world of an ur-pict complicated portrait marrying foregrounds the maintaining as a sacred act, their lives in ful


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Aaron Shurin (1947–)

Aaron Shurin is a gay poet and writer, born in Manhattan, whose childhood transplanted him to Texas and then Los Angeles. As an undergraduate at Berkeley in 1969, Shurin studied under Denise Levertov who influenced him poetically and in social activism. Following graduation he moved to Boston, where he was active within the Boston Gay Liberation Front, which founded Fag Rag magazine. In this atmosphere, Shurin cofounded Good Gay Poets in 1972, one of the country's first gay men's publishing collectives.

After his move to San Francisco in 1974, Shurin engaged in homosexual activist politics and in his own style of self-reflexive gay poetics. Throughout the 1980s,