

THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY CYCLE

Jennifer J. Smith (author)

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Reviewed by Leonardo Nolé

When *A Visit from the Goon Squad* came out in 2010, critics and reviewers struggled to find a good definition for Jennifer Egan's book. Is it a collection of closely intertwined stories or just a novel characterized by a highly fragmented narrative? Almost seventy years before, William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* met the same fate. Despite the author's complaint, the publishers at Random House added "and other stories" to the title, trying to specify the ambiguous nature of the text. More examples could be added, from Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* and John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven* to Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. All of them bear witness to the uninterrupted and often ignored presence in modern and contemporary American literature of a hybrid literary genre – the short story cycle – halfway between the novel and the collection of short stories. The definition comes mostly from Forrest L. Ingram's seminal *Representative Short Story Cycle of the Twentieth Century*, the first of a small body of works that have been trying to bring to light the genre's innovative characteristics and distinctive "Americanness" since the Seventies. *The American Short Story Cycle* by Jennifer J. Smith is the most recent work to follow in this tradition. Building on the former studies, this book opens new critical perspectives on the genre and puts it in dialogue with more urgent theoretical questions. Compared to Smith's previous articles on the same topic, where she also advocates for the value of the cycle in the teaching of American literature, this longer work offers an updated commentary and numerous close readings of a variety of examples. By broadening the scope of both the genre and the critical discussion, Smith underlines from the beginning two of the main outcomes the cycle accomplishes through its journey. On the one hand, it helps to redefine the mimetic ability

of literature in a modern and contemporary world that denies any totalizing description. On the other, it becomes a fertile, welcoming field for various marginalized voices, eager to express themselves and deconstruct established narratives.

The first of Smith's achievements in the opening chapters is to walk the reader through the modern evolution of the short story cycle, gradually exposing the dialogue between the genre and the most influential American literary movements. Following some earlier studies, Smith dates the rise of the proper cycle to the very beginning of the twentieth century. But of course, the previous success of the short story in popular American magazines and the emergence of other peculiar forms of short narratives led the way to the shaping of the genre. *The Sketch Book* by Washington Irving and *Twice-Told Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne are often acknowledged among the precursors to the cycle, and in Smith's argument they become proof of its focus on regional and defined spaces. It is exactly through the notion of "limited locality" that Smith discusses a first group of short story cycles, headed by Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. In the pages devoted to this masterpiece, she explains how the formal innovations of the text allow the author to both expose the isolation of the individual and criticize the processes of industrialization and modernization. Her reading, in fact, addresses the problematic connection between the limitedness and elusiveness of the village and the feeling of alienation the grotesque inhabitants of Winesburg all share. Haunted by their loneliness, obsessed with their memories, these characters show a nostalgic desire for communication that makes them tell the stories we read in the cycle. Anderson notoriously worked as a model for many modernist writers, but Smith proves that his influence extends to more contemporary authors, such as Russell Banks, Cathy Day or Rebecca Berry. Their cycles – *Trailerpark*, *The Circus in Winter*, and *Later, at the Bar* – exploit the resources of this literary genre to address in new historical and social contexts the same questions of loneliness, nostalgia, and desire for connection.

A second organizing principle Smith recognizes in the history of the short story cycle is the use of unconventional temporalities. In her words, "short story cycles' deployment of temporal metaphors shows how subjective and objective times coexist and

how such metaphors bridge the perceived divide between personal and public times” (2018, 61). Here the main reference is to Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. Thanks to its use of ellipses and simultaneity, Smith sees Bradbury’s text as reflecting the concerns of the Cold War period, as well as depicting in its structure the division of time under capitalism and industrialization. In her reading, the peculiar structure of the cycle implies a critique of the way systems of power use a linear concept of time to foster the myth of progress and the practice of exploitation. Similarly, Smith writes, Erdrich’s book addresses the destructive force of linear time through the specific history of Native Americans, challenging the more traditional role of causality and individual point of view in the narrative.

The family is the third topos chosen by Smith to keep exploring the potential of the cycle, through a comparative reading of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*. She notes that ethnicity, gender, and kinship are central elements to these cycles’ representation of the life of minorities in the United States, especially for female characters that end up “negotiat[ing] gender and sexual roles in plural environments, treating identity as multiple, and contingent” (2018, 89). The disjointed structure of the cycle works particularly well to depict these developing identities, as well as an idea of kinship as something to be chosen and built, not just inherited. The model Smith provides for these family-centered cycles is William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*. Focused on various members of the McCaslin family, Faulkner’s book deploys all the elements discussed so far. Ike, the most recurrent character, is in fact involved in an identity-building process against his family’s dubious practices, and Faulkner’s fragmented and disordered narrative complicates the questions of time, place, and belonging.

Finally, Smith’s last chapter is devoted to *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan, presented as an example of the so-called “atomic character” of the short story cycle. Made of fragments that – according to Smith – resist unity, shaped and animated by the powerful tension between the stories, Egan’s book highlights once again how non-linear

narratives work against a fixed idea of time and identity, even more so when depicting contemporary society.

The American Short Story Cycle is an engaging book that traces an alternative path in the study of American literature and underlines the relevance of this genre to the present critical debate. Its strength comes from Smith's effort in updating the body of works discussed, moving from the well-known Modernist masterpieces to new and diverse examples. At the same time, the numerous close readings occasionally affect the linearity of the argument, which doesn't always provide the general framework needed to understand the working mechanisms of this complex form. For instance, I see the lack of consistency among the three main elements Smith chooses to examine – place and time, which refer to the narrative, and family, which is just one of the topics cycles address – as a problematic choice that raises questions about the nature of the genre and its relationship to other literary forms. The book's general argument, together with the insistence on the cycle's rejection of resolution and totality, seems in fact to underestimate the difference between the cycle and the collection of short stories. But other scholars – like Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris in their *The Composite Novel* – rightly note that the cycle's individual stories also work similarly to the chapters of a novel, since they progressively build the meaning of the whole text. It is precisely the liminal space occupied by the cycle that makes its definition still unclear, questioning its difference from other literary forms that emerge from similar needs and the fictional possibilities it opens to present and future writers. Despite – or because of – the cycle's refusal of totality and resolution, there is more theoretical work to be done to comprehend it in its entirety.

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