

St. Petersburg Times May 5, 1991

## **WHAT WAS MINE: Stories**

*By Ann Beattie*

*Random House*

In her guest editor's "Introduction" to *Best American Short Stories 1987*, Ann Beattie declares that if the short story has supplanted the novel as the dominant fiction genre of our time, certainly it can't be because television has left us with limited capacity for attention.

The story demands greater attention from both reader and writer than does the novel. The novel is like baseball: leisurely, filled with pauses for reflection and soaking in. The story is like boxing: blink and you miss the knock-out. The story is easier to type, sure, but harder to write. Its constraints upon time, space and action force the writer to imply a history rather than describe one. It can't draw upon the resonance of a subplot nor waste a word. It views time as precious.

Fittingly, it is Beattie's favorite form, as in *What Was Mine*, her fifth collection of stories, the value of time has become her major theme.

Many of these stories relate loss, and the loss they view as most tragic is lost time. Masterfully, they exploit the ironic gap Beattie awakens between how fully she knows her characters and how slenderly they know themselves. In "In Amalfi" and "Honey," women entering middle age view the incidents of their present as mirrors upon their pasts, recalling dreams and hopes unfulfilled while beginning to sense the patterns in their lives.

In some stories, people become mirrors to each other. "The Longest Day of the Year," while filled with humor, brings two disenchanted women together to shed light upon each other's life: one about to end her third marriage, the other a Welcome Wagon lady facing a dry future in a soul-dead town. A lifelong victim, whose wife makes a prank out of leaving him, tastes a moment of intimacy in "Home to Marie" that serves merely to show him how other people make love in the same place he gets mugged. In "Television," one person's life-changing interlude proves another's wistful compromise, one woman's roses become another's nightmare.

Though disquieting, these stories are far from bleak. On the contrary, Beattie, who has expressed impatience with prose where "little is revealed about the beauty and wonder of our existence," insists that time is forever redeemable. She deals with qualitative, not quantitative, time, the constantly open present moment, not what we failed to achieve yesterday.

Time, Beattie shows, is simply as full or empty as what it contains. In three stories, each in the male viewpoint which Beattie has always rendered superbly, this discovery comes with a power that goes beyond literary epiphany and borders on

mysticism. In "Imagine a Day At the End of Your Life" (the title itself evoking Thoreau's warning not to reach death only to realize we have never really lived), a retired milkman undergoes virtually a zen *kensho*. Married 40 years, with five grown children, one day while storing a photo album with autumn leaves he understands the necessity of filling our time with exactly we want in it, how such a life can make possible a peaceful death.

A house-husband who marred his good fortune in wife, daughter and leisure with constant dread and anxiety resolves in "You Know What" to step out of the way of his own happiness. The excellent title story presents a man who grasps late, but not too late, the lesson in ebullient living he'd received as a child from a surrogate father, the role to which Beattie paid tribute in her 1990 novel *Picturing Will*.

Like that novel, these stories show a deepening Beattie. While they rake complacency with a leopard's swipe they feel smooth as kittens, for Beattie's style, as ever, is elegantly spare. Knowing that "it's often the spark that convinces us and not the fire," she persuades by finding the unforgettable detail: a woman dumping chocolate-covered macadamia nuts on the floor and playing marbles with them, a professor delivering his whole lecture in interrogatives, zombie-eyed women wheeling carts into the supermarket.

A friend once noted, "As they get older, people get more like themselves." In the best stories here, Beattie goes farther in giving us what we expect from an Ann Beattie story: a fictional world revealed with complete authority, filled with surprise while feeling unmistakably true—in short, as Picasso said art should be, the lie by which we see the truth.