

Best American Short Stories 2007

Study Guide

1. Do all of these stories have anything in common? How do they differ? Which did you think were the most successful, and why? Which did you find the least successful, and why?
2. How would you characterize the narrator of "Pa's Darling"? Describe her relationships with the various men in her life. What does she mean when she says, "Peril blunts caution"?
3. Setting figures prominently in most of these stories. How does setting affect the characters and plot of "Toga Party"? Describe the narrative voice in this story. How does it reflect the characters' interior worlds? Were you surprised by the ending? Why or why not?
4. Describe the narrator's relationship with his sister in "Solid Wood." How has it changed over the years? How does it change within the story? What is the significance of the title of this story?
5. "Balto" employs alternating points of view. What does the reader gain from this access to the interior worlds of both Angelle and her father? Which characters did you find sympathetic? Why? Did this view change by the end of the story?
6. How do the visceral details of "Riding the Doghouse" add up to a sense of foreboding? How is the ending of the story foreshadowed? Do you think the narrator's current life is more like that of Doug Middleton's father or his own father?
7. Characterize the narrator of "My Brother Eli." Is he envious of his brother? How do the characters make judgments about other people? Describe the importance of image in this story.
8. Describe the use of language in "Where Will You Go When Your Skin Cannot Contain You?" How would the story change if it were told in a more straightforward manner? Is there something godlike about the Jeepster? Why or why not?
9. In "Eleanor's Music," how does Eleanor's personality enable her unconsummated marriage? Why has Eleanor continued to live with her parents for so long? What does the author mean by the statement, "Something had been taken from [Eleanor]"?

10. Describe the importance of history in "L. DeBard and Aliette." This story covers a large amount of time. How does this add to or detract from the story line? What does water symbolize in this story?

11. How do the characters reveal themselves through dialogue in "Wake"? How does humor figure into this story? What do the train and the train ride symbolize for the characters?

12. Describe the style of storytelling in "Wait." How does juxtaposition figure in this story? What is its effect? Is there a narrator in this story?

13. Structure is an important feature of "Findings & Impressions." What does it reveal about the narrator? What do the voice and tone contribute to this story? Why and how does the narrator's relationship with Alicia change over the course of the story?

14. In "Allegiance," what distinct view about the United States and England does each character hold? What do these two places mean to Glynnis, her mother, and her father? What is the significance of food in this story? Describe the social order of the fourth grade as it's portrayed here. How does it reverberate in Glynnis's home life?

15. In "The Boy in Zaquitos," how does the narrator's father influence the narrator's decisions? How does the narrator's work affect him emotionally? Why does he decide to save the boy?

16. What is the role of Mrs. Sands in "Dimension"? Is she a mother figure or something else to Doree? Is Doree a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Why does Doree visit Lloyd at the institution? What changes in her life, and why, by the end of the story?

17. What is the importance of truth and lies in "The Bris"? What is the role of forgiveness? Why would Marcus go to so much trouble to help his father? How might it relate to Marcus' marital history?

18. "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" is written mostly in the third person. What is the effect of this? What does it mean to be human in this story? What does it mean to be wild?

19. What is the significance of the title and the children's poem in "Horseman"? Why does James Cox so provoke Janet? Describe Janet and Robbie's marriage. What does it tell the reader about their personalities?

20. What does the narrator of "Sans Farine" mean when he says, ". . .it was unclear to me which in me. . . was stronger: hatred of my profession or hatred of myself"? How does politics figure in the narrator's view of himself? How does his work affect his marriage?

21. In "Do Something," why does Margaret want to take photos of the coffins of dead soldiers returning home? What does this mean: "James's death was her 9/11"? What is the significance of the title of this story?