



# THE LONG AND SHORT




# OF THE SHORT STORY

The short story is a classic for a reason – and editors say it isn't going anywhere any time soon. Here's a look back at the form from its origins to the present, plus tips and fresh insight on where to find homes for your stories in the future.

By **Kerrie Flanagan**

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**T**he art of storytelling has been around for centuries: Aesop's fables, Greek mythology. These short stories were passed down verbally through generations until they were finally written down, and we still enjoy versions of them today. Regardless of what is happening in society or what technology we have available, we will always love stories. But there is something uniquely satisfying about the short story: Unlike longer forms, short fiction is a piece of work that can be enjoyed in a single reading session. But it's rare to see short story collections anywhere on bestseller lists, let alone in the top position. Book clubs seem to gravitate toward memoirs and novels or the rare essay collection, and with the viral exception of Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person," short stories rarely dominate literary conversations on social media or in real life. With Netflix, video games, and social media, do readers even enjoy this short form anymore?

The short answer is yes. Which is good for writers who love the form. But just how vibrant and lucrative is the current market? Let's begin our long dive into the short form by looking back to see how we got to where we are today.

#### The origin of the form

Again, storytelling has been around for centuries, but short stories as a print form didn't really come into their own until the late 1800s. Novels had been around for a couple centuries at this point, but books could be expensive for consumers. Magazines and journals, however, were much more affordable. The first U.S. magazines were launched in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: *Scientific American* (1845), which claims to be the oldest continuously published magazine in the U.S., and *Harper's Magazine* (1850), which continues to publish short fiction today. Literary journals like *North American Review* and the *Yale Review* were also launched in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as was this very magazine, which was founded in Boston in 1887 as a "monthly magazine for literary workers" and frequently covered the short story market in its pages.

Rudyard Kipling, Washington Irving, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Katherine Mansfield, Anton Chekhov, Agatha Christie...all of these authors had popular stories published around the turn of the last century, and they paved the way for contemporary writers.

In an article in *Prospect* magazine explaining the history of short stories, award-winning author William Boyd explains the short story grew in popularity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and entered its "golden age."

"The adjective is very apt: In the early decades of the century you could become rich writing short stories, particularly in America," Boyd writes. "Magazines proliferated, readers were eager, circulation rose, fees went up and up. In the 1920s, [E.] Scott Fitzgerald was paid \$4,000 by the *Saturday Evening Post* for a single short story. You need to multiply by at least 20 to arrive at any idea of the value of the sum in today's terms."

The turn of the century also saw the birth of "pulp magazines," named for the cheap, wood pulp paper they were printed on. The first one, *Argosy*, grew a monthly circulation of 500,000 in just 10 years. More pulps came on board. They published mostly genre

fiction: science fiction, mystery, fantasy, romance...and also were known for their lurid and sensational subject matter. They were seen as "low-brow" writing by the literary community, but they were popular because they could be bought for a few cents and provided great entertainment for readers. Writers were paid by the word, and a few of these magazines' many contributors include Mary Roberts Rinehart, H.P. Lovecraft, and Isaac Asimov.

While the '20s and '30s were a lucrative time for pulp and other magazines, World War II brought challenges, including paper shortages and unrest in the country. Then, in the 1950s, another threat appeared: The television became an affordable household appliance. Couple that with the rise of inexpensive mass-market paperbacks, and the glory days of the pulps ended at last.

#### In the mainstream

Glossy consumer magazines were also popular for publishing fiction, especially women's magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, but men's magazines published fiction as well. In his memoir, *On Writing*, Stephen King talks about writing short stories for men's magazines and how it helped support his wife and kids: "From a financial point of view, two kids were probably two too many for college grads working in a laundry and the second shift at Dunkin' Donuts. The only edge we had came courtesy of magazines like *Dude*, *Cavalier*, *Adam*, and *Swank*. By 1972...fiction was on its way out, but I was lucky enough to ride the last wave. The stories I sold to the men's magazines between August of 1970, when I got my two-hundred-dollar check for 'Graveyard Shift,' and the winter of 1973-1974, were just enough to create a rough sliding margin between us and the welfare office."

No form's glory days can last forever. During the 1990s, due to budget issues and readers' shifting attention elsewhere, many magazines found it easier to attract advertisers by featuring products instead of fiction.

But throughout all of these ups and

downs, literary journals continued publishing great short stories. They were, and still are, the solid foundation for this genre, no matter if they publish in print or online. Boyd writes that even though it may have become harder than ever to earn a larger paycheck for short fiction in this country (let alone elsewhere around the world), the American short fiction market still exists: "For the taste among readers for short fiction, inculcated over the last century and a half, has never really gone away, despite the vagaries of publishing economics."

#### Short story collections

Along with magazines and journals printing standalone stories, publishers – from the Big Four to the smaller presses – also consistently release short story collections. Interestingly, 2017 saw a surge in the sales of these titles, with NPD BookScan reporting that 50% more short story collections were sold than in the previous year, due in part to the popularity of Tom Hanks and Jojo Moyes' collections that year. Some hoped this statistic meant there was a growing popularity and a renaissance of the short story form.

But author Chris Powers argued in 2018 in *The Guardian* that this idea of a "short story renaissance" has been floated by publications quite frequently in recent years – and if that's the case, a resurgence can't be claimed given the frequency of its perceived rebirth. "Plodding through these random explosions of joy, the short story continues to exist with or without the glare of widespread attention. Each year, good collections are published; some are noticed, some are not. Most don't sell many copies (a debut collection from one of the major publishing houses might have a print run of 3,000, with little expectation of a reprint). When a collection is fortunate enough to be reviewed, it will very often be a discussion not just about the book but also the form generally." Powers argues that during any year, you can find terrific story collections that were published; sometimes even more than in 2017, sometimes less, but enough to suggest a healthy genre either way.

## New era

All of this leads us to where we are today. Short stories *are* still thriving, although they are not as lucrative as they once were in the golden days of the form. There are still plenty of places to publish and plenty of reasons to write in this market. As Windy Lynn Harris, short story writer and author of *Writing & Selling Short Stories & Personal Essays*, says, “In the time from 2006, when I started writing and publishing short stories, to now, I haven’t seen any change whatsoever. It’s always been this secret underground. For the past 15 years, it has been this wonderful showcase of writers where people are trying new things, and writers get noticed by literary agents. It’s a way to show what you can do and also try something new.”

Established in 1956, *The Colorado Review* continues to thrive as a short fiction market. Steven Schwartz, the journal’s fiction editor and a creative writing professor at Colorado State University, says short stories are here to stay. “If our submission queue at *Colorado Review* is any indication, more writers than ever are submitting, writing, and presumably reading stories. We may never return to the golden age of short stories when writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald made a living at the practice, but the readership thrives in classrooms, with literary journals, and amongst devotees who prefer the form in our hurried times. And although our print readership at *CR* has remained stable, our online readership has swelled with the work we feature, reaching many readers in the U.S. and internationally.”

*The Vestal Review*, the longest-running magazine dedicated to flash fiction, launched in March of 2000. David Galef, the current editor, has been with the magazine for a year and a half and during this time has seen the number of followers for *The Vestal Review* increase. He defines flash fiction as stories that are “compressed but dramatic, short but packed with life” – and they seem to suit web audiences. He has noticed that short stories have held steady while the popularity of flash stories has zoomed upward. “They’re everywhere,

in anthologies and magazines and classrooms and contests. Even *The New Yorker* started publishing a flash fiction section a few years ago,” Galef notes.

## Why write short stories?

Even if short stories are not as lucrative as they once were, there are still good reasons to write and publish in this genre. Harris believes it’s still a worthwhile place to improve your craft and to find your voice. “It’s about earning your chops and getting better. With short stories, you are taking all the [crucial] storytelling moments like beginnings, middles, ends, and epiphanies and zooming in and zooming out over and over again.”

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Short stories allow you to take risks and try new styles and techniques without committing to a full-length novel. For example, Harris notes that if you want to play around with omniscient, which is not nearly as easy as third person but can be really compelling, you can play around with that in a short story. “If it works, do another short story that way. Then, when you understand what you need to know about it, you can step into your next novel idea with it, and you understand what you are getting into – and how it can serve you, so you won’t get lost along the way.”

Look at your writing goals. Think about what you are trying to accomplish with short stories. Do you just want them published? Do you want something cool on your writer resume? Do you want to experiment with different styles? Do you want to impress literary agents? Do you want to make some money from your stories? These are all good goals to have, but you have to be savvy and realistic about how you go about achieving them.

If you want to make money from your short stories, only submit to paying markets. If you want to experiment with your writing, seek out publications open to unique styles. To build literary credentials, seek out prestigious literary publications. There are plenty of short story markets to submit your work to, and it’s easy to get lost in the literary woods, so find the path that best fits your goals and stick to those.

## Where to publish

Harris says there are plenty of places looking for well-written stories, especially ones around 3,500 words, which she calls the *sweet spot* for having the most market opportunities. She estimates there are thousands of available markets. “You’ll find short stories in literary magazines. Genre magazines. Children’s magazines and commercial magazines. I mention the caveat at *well-written* stories because even though there are many outlets for short stories, the competition to earn a space on the page of a journal is quite stiff. For any writing project, you must create, revise, and polish your work until it meets the standards of the market to which you’re submitting, and in the world of short stories, that standard is skyscraper tall. Short stories are some of the most clever, experimental, urgent, and fresh prose being written today.”

Schwartz agrees. “Places abound to publish, and more spring up every day, wanting work ranging from flash fiction to longer stories. You may not be able to make a living or even pay your rent publishing short stories, but there are innumerable publications, print and online, that want to honor a writer’s work with handsome production values and

# Other unique markets

TECHNOLOGY HAS EXPANDED TO ADD SOME NEW AND INTERESTING SHORT STORY MARKETS.

## PODCASTS

With the rise in popularity of audiobooks in the last few years, it is no surprise there is a rise in short story podcasts. One of those is *The Other Stories*, a weekly podcast featuring the best in horror, sci-fi, and thriller fiction. The podcast launched in 2016, and has since celebrated eight million downloads and a This is Horror Award for Best Fiction Podcast.

Luke Kondor, one of the founders of *The Other Stories*, believes the timing of the podcast launch helped with its initial success. “We launched our podcast just as the horror fiction podcast scene exploded, and so we very quickly rocketed up the podcast charts, and within a few months, we were seeing several thousand downloads every day.” It consistently releases a new episode every Monday, which creates loyal listeners who can count on new stories each week. Plus, Kondor says, “We’ve also incrementally improved our production skills and have built up our team – which is more of a community – of audio wizards, illustrator extraordinaire, Photoshop tinkerers, super-powered voice artists, and writers of all shapes and sizes, both new and established.”

Podcasts like this one and others accept submissions from writers. This is a solid way to expand your reach to new audiences.

## SHORT STORY PODCASTS

- **The Other Stories:** [theotherstories.net](http://theotherstories.net)
- **Selected Shorts:** [npr.org/podcasts/381443486/pri-selected-shorts](http://npr.org/podcasts/381443486/pri-selected-shorts)
- **The Truth:** [thetruthpodcast.com](http://thetruthpodcast.com)
- **LeVar Burton Reads:** [levarburtonpodcast.com](http://levarburtonpodcast.com)
- **LitReading:** [litreading.com/stories](http://litreading.com/stories)
- **Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Podcast:** [elleryqueenmysterymagazine.com/the-crime-scene/podcasts](http://elleryqueenmysterymagazine.com/the-crime-scene/podcasts)
- **Brick Moon Fiction:** [brickmoonentertainment.com](http://brickmoonentertainment.com)

## SHORT STORY DISPENSER

Short Edition is a French-based publisher, with an office in the U.S. as well, that has been around since 2011 ([short-edition.com](http://short-edition.com)). In 2016, it launched the Short Story Dispenser. Its goal was to make literature accessible to all by providing free short stories for all ages. These machines connect readers across countries and cultures by publishing contemporary short stories, free of charge, at the push of a button. Readers can choose a story by reading time (one minute, three minutes, five minutes), audience, and language. Each story is printed on recyclable paper through thermal printing, so there is no ink cartridge.

There are more than 350 Short Story Dispensers on five continents. The 110 in the U.S. can be found in public libraries, universities, schools, airports, train stations, and hospitals. The stories are curated through the literary review *Short Circuit*. Each week, the editorial team reads through hundreds of submissions to choose the very best for publication, which are then sent to the Dispensers. Over the past decade, more than 5 million stories have been distributed, and thousands of writers have been paid for their work.

### WHERE TO FIND MARKETS

**Duotrope (\$5/month):**  
duotrope.com

**New Pages:** newpages.com

**Submittable:**  
submittable.com

**The Nonconformist:**  
nonconformist-mag.com/  
the-big-big-list-of-literary-  
magazines-and-journals



### WHERE TO READ SHORT STORIES ONLINE

**Flash Fiction Online:**  
flashfictiononline.com

**Fictionaut:** fictionaut.com

**365 Tomorrows (Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction):** 365tomorrows.com

**Daily Science Fiction:**  
dailysciencefiction.com

**Morning Short:**  
morningshort.com

**East of the Webs Short Stories:** eastoftheweb.com/  
short-stories

whatever remuneration – contributor copies or payment – they can afford.”

While there are many markets where you can submit your work, they are not known for their speed in responding and publishing. Patience is key, especially with bigger markets like *The Paris Review* or *The Sun*. You can spend months querying, and then when you get a “yes,” it may take a year or more before it is actually published. Harris says the fastest thing to hit the market usually is flash fiction. Writers can often sell it and have it published in a month or two.

Many literary magazines have gone completely online or launched as a digital-only publication; *The Vestal Review* is one of them. For over 20 years, it has published flash fiction (and it is a paying market). Galef says the publication has remained strong for two decades because the previous editorial regime showed acumen in everything from choosing excellent work to showcasing it in print and online. “They paid for fine writing, and they slowly gathered

a following. The authors who’ve published with us, and the awards the work has won, make for an impressive list. We no longer have a print edition, and we use but try not to abuse social media, but we do have a magazine with a reputation worth promoting. We’re eclectic, which is to say, I don’t think there’s a typical *Vestal Review* brand of fiction, and I think that also helps.”

#### Finding markets

Researching the right market for your stories can be time-consuming, but it’s a necessary part of the process. The more work you do upfront, the more likely you are to find a home for your piece. Sending it out to a bunch of publications that aren’t a good fit is only going to result in more rejections, and no one wants that.

There are resources and websites available that can help make the process of finding the right market a bit easier. One popular website is Duotrope, where you can find up-to-date listings, and it will track your submissions.

There is a small monthly fee (\$5), but it definitely saves time. Submittable is another submission site, and that one is free.

Author and short story writer Alice Kaltman says it’s important to read the different journals, magazines, and literary reviews to see if your style fits with what they typically publish. “There are many publications I love to read, but I know they’d never go for my quirks. Another good thing to do is see where writers you admire publish, those with whom you feel a certain literary kinship. Who knows? Maybe you deserve a place at their table, too!”

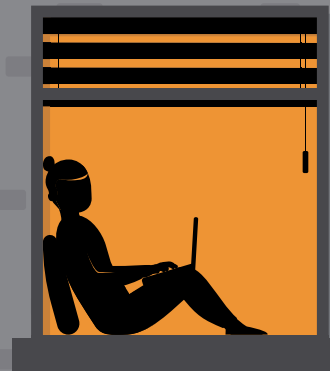
By taking the time to research markets, reading the stories in those publications, and only submitting to those that are the best fit, your chances of getting an acceptance will increase.

Keep track of your submissions through a platform like Duotrope or Submittable or create your own Excel spreadsheet. Record your rejections and submissions. If something gets rejected, try not to take it personally. Instead, find a new market and send it out again.

AS WE’VE SEEN, THE SHORT STORY world has grown and evolved over the years. Sometimes it’s been in the spotlight, other times it’s been more underground, but it has never gone away. In the modern era, Harris says, “It’s just never really been for mass market. And that’s OK. It’s an experimental, exciting place to be where there’s a whole lot of love.”

Join in this excitement by making the time to read and write short stories. 📖

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