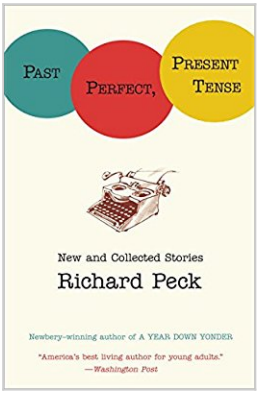

Past Perfect, Present Tense

By Richard Peck

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Compiled for the first time, here are all of Newbery Award– winning author Richard Peck's previously published short stories and two brand-new ones. From comedy to tragedy to historical to contemporary; from "Priscilla and the Wimps," Peck's first short story, to "Shotgun Cheatham's Last Night Above Ground," which inspired both A Long Way from Chicago and A Year Down Yonder, to "The Electric Summer," Peck's jumping-off point for Fair Weather, readers will thrill at Peck's engaging short fiction. Complete with the author's own notes on the stories as well as tips and hints for aspiring writers and two new stories, this vibrant and varied collection offers something for everyone.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Richard Peck has written more than thirty novels, and in the process has become one of the country's most highly respected writers for children. In fact *The Washington Post* called him "America's best living author for young adults." A versatile writer, he is beloved by middle-graders as well as young adults for his historical and contemporary comedies and coming-of-age novels. He lives in New York City, and spends a great deal of time traveling around the country to speaking engagements at conferences, schools, and libraries.

Mr. Peck is the first children's book author to have received a National Humanities Medal. He is a Newbery Medal winner (for *A Year Down Yonder*), a Newbery Honor winner (for *A Long Way from Chicago*), a two-time National Book Award finalist, and a two-time Edgar Award winner. In addition, he has won a number of major honors for the body of his work, including the Margaret A. Edwards Award, the ALAN Award, and the Medallion from the University of Southern Mississippi.

A story isn't what is. It's what if? Fiction isn't real life with the names changed. It's an alternate reality to reflect the reader's own world.

But what is a short story not? It's not a condensation of a novel, or an unfinished one. It's not Cliffs Notes to anything. It has its own shape and profile. It's not the New York skyline; it's a single church spire. Its end is much nearer its beginning, and so it can be overlooked.

The short story is much misunderstood. There are even aspiring writers who think they'll start out writing short stories and work their way up to the big time: novels. It doesn't work like that. A short story isn't easier than a novel. It has so little space to make its mark that it requires the kind of self-mutilating editing most new writers aren't capable of. It has less time to plead its case.

I hadn’t meant to be a short story writer.

BOOKS BY RICHARD PECK

NOVELS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Don’t Look and It Won’t Hurt

Dreamland Lake

Through a Brief Darkness

Representing Super Doll

The Ghost Belonged to Me

Are You in the House Alone?

Ghosts I Have Been

Father Figure

Secrets of the Shopping Mall

Close Enough to Touch

The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp

Remembering the Good Times

Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death

Princess Ashley

Those Summer Girls I Never Met

Voices After Midnight

Unfinished Portrait of Jessica

Bel-Air Bambi and the Mall Rats

The Last Safe Place on Earth

Lost in Cyberspace

The Great Interactive Dream Machine

Strays Like Us

A Long Way from Chicago

A Year Down Yonder

Fair Weather

Invitations to the World

The River Between Us

Past Perfect, Present Tense

The Teacher's Funeral: A Comedy in Three Parts

Here Lies the Librarian

NOVELS FOR ADULTS

Amanda/Miranda

London Holiday

New York Time

This Family of Women

PICTURE BOOK

Monster Night at Grandma's House

NONFICTION

Anonymously Yours

Invitations to the World

New and Collected Stories by

Richard Peck

I acknowledge with thanks the editors who generously have included my work in their anthologies:

Lois Duncan

Lisa Rowe Fraustino

Donald R. Gallo

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M. Jerry Weiss and

Helen Weiss

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CONTENTS

A short story, like fiction of any length, is always about change. Even in a handful of pages, the characters can't be the same people in the last paragraph whom we met in the first. If there's no change, there's no story, unless you write fiction for *The New Yorker* magazine.

A word writers use is "epiphany." In ancient Greece the word described the miraculous appearance of a god or goddess. The Christian church uses the word with a capital *E* to define Twelfth Night, the moment when the Magi, the Three Kings, made the long-heralded discovery of the Christ child.

In fiction writing, the epiphany is a sudden breakthrough of understanding, of self-awareness. It's that moment of change that changes every moment after. It's the lightbulb switched suddenly on over somebody's head. Novels tell of epiphanies acted upon. A short story tends to turn upon a single epiphany, sometimes in the last line. The change to come is to play out in the reader's mind.

In real life we have epiphanies all the time. But we wait for them to go away. Change is too hard, and threatening. That's why we have fiction. Stories are better than real life, or we wouldn't have them. Stories for the young present the metaphor of change upon the page to prepare the readers for the changes coming in their lives. Non-readers will never be ready.

Again, like all fiction, a short story is never an answer, always a question. Writers with answers write nonfiction: advice columns and government pamphlets and textbooks. Fiction writers have only questions, and the eternal question all fiction asks the reader is:

WHAT IF I WERE THE CHARACTER IN THIS STORY? WHAT WOULD I DO?

This is the great gift readers receive: They can be anybody and go anywhere. They can try on all these lives to see which ones fit.

Stories raise every kind of question. Stories for the young regularly invite their readers to ask themselves:

WHEN WILL I START TAKING CHARGE OF MY LIFE?

A comic story can ask serious questions. So can a tale of the supernatural, which is only another device for questioning actual people and wondering how they work. A story set in past times can ask a modern reader timeless questions about all those issues history and progress never solve. Even an animal character can be a way of asking what moves and motivates humans. Fiction writers creep up on as many sides of their readers as they can. They use as many techniques as they can think of.

And so a short story is like all fiction: It's a question about change.

All stories begin with those same two words:

WHAT IF?

A story isn't what is. It's what if? Fiction isn't real life with the names changed. It's an alternate reality to reflect the reader's own world.

But what is a short story not? It's not a condensation of a novel, or an unfinished one. It's not Cliffs Notes to anything. It has its own shape and profile. It's not the New York skyline; it's a single church spire. Its end is much nearer its beginning, and so it can be overlooked.

"One tends to overpraise a long book because one has got through it," said E. M. Forster—a novelist. His tongue was in his cheek, but he makes a point. A full-length novel with its community of characters, its multiple epiphanies, its changing scenes, is taken more seriously—in class, in reviews, in the book club.

The short story is much misunderstood. There are even aspiring writers who think they'll start out writing short stories and work their way up to the big time: novels. It doesn't work like that. A short story isn't easier than a novel. It has so little space to make its mark that it requires the kind of self-mutilating editing most new writers aren't capable of. It has less time to plead its case.

Only poetry is less forgiving. But poetry can teach you how to throw out all the words that aren't pulling their weight. In a short story there's no place to hide, whether you're the writer or the reader.

I hadn't meant to be a short-story writer. I'd hoped to be Mark Twain. The first of his books to lift me out of my world and into a bigger one was *Life on the Mississippi.*

It seemed to be autobiography, and true. I little knew how much fictional technique, and fiction, that book embodied. I fell for nonfiction, the romance of the real.

But later when I was a teacher, an English teacher naturally, my students preferred fiction to reality. They were in junior high, and so they preferred ANYTHING to reality. But our curriculum was heavy-laden with full-length novels, even when I drew up the reading list myself. I harbored the wan hope of stretching their attention spans.

Junior-high teaching made a writer out of me. The first question a writer has to answer before putting pen to paper is:

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WHO MIGHT BE WILLING TO READ WHAT I MIGHT BE ABLE TO WRITE?

I found those people in my roll book. They were the people I knew the best, and liked the best. From our first morning together I knew things about them their parents dared never know. Better yet, as their English teacher I saw in their compositions what they would never say aloud within the hearing of their powerful peers. The voices in their pages still ring in mine.

When I quit teaching to write, I had novels in mind. First one, to see if I could do it, and now thirty-two novels through these thirty-two years later. But as the years went by, the short story found its own way into my career.

Most of the short stories in this collection were written as assignments. Editors like Donald R. Gallo and Michael Green, writing colleagues like Lois Duncan and Harry Mazer, ask us to write short stories for collections they're putting together. Sometimes they give us a theme, sometimes not. Sometimes they give us the length, sometimes not. They always give us deadlines. Real life turns out to be strangely like school: You have assignments—and deadlines. Yet deadlines are our friends. The deadline helps us find the time to write the story.

But how much easier to talk about writing than to write. How much easier to generalize about a whole generation of readers than to reach just one of them upon the shared page . . .

The First

The first short story stands alone because it's the first one I ever wrote. And because it may be the most widely read of anything I've ever written, of any length. From this story, I learned that short stories can go places novels can't—into textbook anthologies and other people's collections and endless magazine reprints in any number of languages.

This one goes first because it proves that a writer can't have a master plan for his career. A writer has to be ready to turn on a dime.

One day more than twenty-five years ago, I was bent over the typewriter in the midst of a novel when the phone rang. It was the editor of a magazine for teenagers. She said she'd been reading my novels and wanted me to write a short story for her magazine. It had to be set in junior high/middle school. She already had too many stories about high school.

When I could get a word in, I told her I didn't do short stories.

"We pay three hundred dollars," she said.

"I'll try," I said.

"It has to be very short," she said, "about a thousand words, and it needs to end with a bang. That's the good news. The bad news is that we'll need it by Thursday."

She hung up, and I had thirty-six hours to write my first short story. All I knew about it was that it had to be set in junior high, so I assumed the girl would be bigger than the boy. The story unfolded from there.

I knew too that I wouldn't be working on my novel for thirty-six hours, that I wouldn't be leaving the house, that I'd be bringing my meals to the desk.

What I didn't know was that years later in another century, I'd be putting together a collection of my short stories because of that one and how it opened a new door.

I called it "Priscilla and the Wimps."

Priscilla and the Wimps

Listen, there was a time when you couldn't even go to the *restroom* around this school without a pass. And I'm not talking about those little pink tickets made out by some teacher. I'm talking about a pass that would cost anywhere up to a buck, sold by Monk Klutter.

Not that Mighty Monk ever touched money, not in public. The gang he ran, which ran the school for him, was his collection agency. They were Klutter's Kobras, a name spelled out in nailheads on six well-known black plastic windbreakers.

Monk's threads were more . . . subtle. A pile-lined suede battle jacket with lizard-skin flaps over tailored Levi's and a pair of ostrich-skin boots, brass-toed and suitable for kicking people around. One of his Kobras did nothing all day but walk a half step behind Monk, carrying a fitted bag with Monk's gym shoes, a coil of restroom passes, a cash box, and a switchblade that Monk gave himself manicures with at lunch over at the

Kobras' table.

Speaking of lunch, there were cases of advanced malnutrition among the newer kids. The ones who were a little slow in handing over a cut of their lunch money and were therefore barred from the cafeteria. Monk ran a tight ship.

I admit it. I'm five foot five, but when the Kobras slithered by, with or without Monk, I shrank. And I admit this too: I paid up on a regular basis. And I might add: so would you.

This school was old Monk's Garden of Eden. Unfortunately for him, there was a serpent in it. The reason Monk didn't recognize trouble when it was staring him in the face is that the serpent in the Kobras' Eden was a girl.

Practically every guy in school could show you his scars. Fang marks from Kobras, you might say: lumps, lacerations, blue bruises. But girls usually got off with a warning.

Except there was this one girl named Priscilla Roseberry. Picture a girl named Priscilla Roseberry, and you'll be light years off. Priscilla was, hands down, the largest student in the school. I'm not talking fat. I'm talking big. Even beautiful, in a bionic way. Priscilla wasn't inclined toward organized crime. Otherwise, she could have put together a gang that would turn Klutter's Kobras into a bunch of garter snakes.

Priscilla was basically a loner except she had one friend, a little guy named Melvin Detweiler. You talk about The Odd Couple. Melvin's one of the smallest guys above midget status ever seen. They even had lockers next to each other in the same bank as mine. I don't know what they had going. I'm not saying this was a romance. After all, people deserve their privacy.

Priscilla was sort of above everything, if you'll pardon a pun. And very calm, as only the very big can be. If there was anybody who didn't notice Klutter's Kobras, it was Priscilla.

Until one winter day after school when we were all grabbing our coats out of our lockers. And hurrying, since Klutter's Kobras made sweeps of the halls for after-school shakedowns.

Anyway, up to Melvin's locker swaggers one of the Kobras. Never mind his name. Gang members don't need names. They have group identity. He reaches down and grabs little Melvin by the neck and slams his head against his locker door. The sound of skull against steel rippled all the way down the locker now, speeding the crowds on their way.

"Okay, let's see your pass," snarls the Kobra.

"A pass for what this time?" Melvin asks, probably still dazed.

"Let's call it a pass for very short people," says the Kobra. "A dwarf tax." He wheezes a little Kobra chuckle, and already he's reaching for Melvin's wallet with the hand that isn't circling Melvin's windpipe. All this time, of course, Melvin and the Kobra are standing in Priscilla's big shadow.

She's taking her time shoving her books into her locker and pulling on an extra-large coat. Then, quicker than the eye, she brings the side of her enormous hand down in a chop that breaks the Kobra's hold on Melvin's throat. You could hear a pin drop in that hallway. Nobody'd ever laid a finger on a Kobra, let alone a hand the size of Priscilla's.

Then Priscilla, who hardly ever says anything to anybody except to Melvin, says to the Kobra, "Who's your leader, wimp?"

This practically blows the Kobra away. First he's chopped by a girl. Now she's acting like she doesn't know Monk Klutter, the Head Honcho of the World. He's so amazed, he tells her. "Monk Klutter."

"Never heard of him," Priscilla mentions. "Send him to see me." The Kobra just backs away from her like the whole situation is too big for him, which it is.

Pretty soon Monk himself slides up. He jerks his head once, and his Kobras slither off down the hall. He's going to handle this interesting case personally. "Who is it around here doesn't know Monk Klutter?"

He's standing inches from Priscilla, but since he'd have to look up at her, he doesn't. "Never heard of him," says Priscilla.

Monk's not happy with this answer, but now he's spotted Melvin, who's growing smaller in spite of himself. Monk breaks his own rule by reaching for Melvin with his own hands. "Kid," he says, "you're going to have to educate your girlfriend."

His hands never quite make it to Melvin. In a move of pure poetry Priscilla has Monk in a hammerlock. His neck's popping like gunfire, and his head's bowed under the immense weight of her forearm. His suede jacket's peeling back, showing pile.

Priscilla's behind him in another easy motion. With a single mighty thrust forward, she frog-marches Monk into her own locker. It's incredible. His ostrich-skin boots click once in the air. And suddenly he's gone, neatly wedged into the locker, a perfect fit. Priscilla bangs the door shut, twirls the lock, and strolls out of school. Melvin goes with her, of course, trotting along below her shoulder. The last stragglers leave quietly.

Well, this is where fate, an even bigger force than Priscilla steps in. It snows all that night, a blizzard. The whole town ices up. School closes for a week.

The Past

I call 1900 the year of my birth, but Mama claims to have no idea of the day.

—"The Special Powers of Blossom Culp"

These next four stories appear together because they're set in the past, and the past is my favorite place. All fiction is historical fiction the minute the ink is dry, particularly if you write for the young.

Very little history is learned in school or college now, but that only spurs on the fiction writer. Whole generations of us fell for history, not in class but in the pages of *Gone with the Wind* and *The Young Lions,* just as an even earlier generation was swept up and carried back in time by *Ben Hur.* The first book I ever loved throbbed with the turning wheel of a long-vanished riverboat plying the nineteenth century.

"Shotgun Cheatham's Last Night Above Ground" is set in 1929. "The Electric Summer" goes to the great world's fair of 1904. Blossom Culp displays her Special Powers during the 1910 school year. "By Far the Worst Pupil at Long Point School" is set in that timeless territory, the recollections of old folks.

Three of these stories have something else in common. They all relate somehow to my novels. My first story, "Priscilla and the Wimps," had taught me how a short story can inspire a novel. I found I liked Priscilla and Melvin and wanted to see more of them. I wanted to learn how the friendship between the largest girl in school and the smallest boy would work out. They therefore reappear as Teresa and Barnie in a novel called

Secrets of the Shopping Mall that had a long and happy life of its own, in several languages.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Floyd Wyatt:

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