

43 of the Most Iconic Short Stories in the English Language

L lithub.com/43-of-the-most-iconic-short-stories-in-the-english-language

Emily Temple

August 13, 2020



Last year, I put together this list of the [most iconic poems in the English language](#); it's high time to do the same for short stories. But before we go any further, you may be asking: What does “iconic” mean in this context? *Can* a short story really be iconic in the way of a poem, or a painting, or Elvis?

Well, who knows, but for our purposes, “iconic” means that the story has somehow wormed its way into the general cultural consciousness—a list of the *best* short stories in the English language would look quite different than the one below. (Also NB that in this case we're necessarily talking about the American cultural consciousness, weird and wiggly as it is.) When something is iconic, it is a highly recognizable cultural artifact that can be used as a shorthand—which often means it has been referenced in other forms of media. You know, just like Elvis. (So for those of you heading to the comments to complain that these stories are “the usual suspects”—well, exactly.) An iconic short story may be [frequently anthologized](#), which usually means frequently read in classrooms, something that can lead to cultural ubiquity—but interestingly, the correlation isn't perfect. For instance, Joyce's “Araby” is anthologized more often, but for my money “The Dead” is more *iconic*. Film adaptations and catchy, reworkable titles help. But in the end, for better or for worse, you know it when you see it. Which means that, like anything else, it all depends on your point of view—icon status is (like most of the ways we evaluate art) highly subjective.

So, having acknowledged that there's no real way to make this list, but because this is what we're all here to do, here are some of the most iconic short stories for American readers in the English language—and a few more that deserve to be more iconic than they are.

Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820)

I agonized over whether I should pick “Rip Van Winkle” or “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” from Irving’s oeuvre. Both have many, many adaptations to their name and are so ubiquitous as to have drifted into the folklore realm. The latter certainly has more memorable recent adaptations, but the *former* is the only one with a bridge named after it. Ah, screw it, we’ll count them both.

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843)

Poe’s early stream-of-consciousness horror story, unreliable narrator and heart beating under the floorboards and all, is certainly one of the most adapted—and even more often referenced—short stories in popular culture, and which may or may not be the source for all of the hundreds of stories in which a character is tormented by a sound only they can hear. (Still not quite as ubiquitous as Poe himself, though . . .)

Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853)

Once, while I was walking in Brooklyn, carrying my Bartleby tote bag, a woman in an SUV pulled over (on Atlantic Avenue, folks) to excitedly wave at me and yell “Melville! That’s Melville!” Which is all you really need to know about *that*.

Ambrose Bierce, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1890)

I will leave it to Kurt Vonnegut, who famously wrote, “I consider anybody a twerp who hasn’t read the greatest American short story, which is “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” by Ambrose Bierce. It isn’t remotely political. It is a flawless example of American genius, like “Sophisticated Lady” by Duke Ellington or the Franklin stove.”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892)

Odds are this was the first overtly Feminist text you ever read, at least if you’re of a certain age; it’s become a stand-in for the idea of women being driven insane by the patriarchy—and being ignored by doctors, who deem them “hysterical.” This is another one with lots of adaptations to its name, including a memorable episode of *The Twilight Zone*, which concludes: “Next time you’re alone, look quickly at the wallpaper, and the ceiling, and the cracks on the sidewalk. Look for the patterns and lines and faces on the wall. Look, if you can, for Sharon Miles, visible only out of the corner of your eye or... in the Twilight Zone.”

Henry James, “The Turn of the Screw” (1898)

Technically a novella, but discussed enough as a story that I’ll include it here (same goes for a couple of others on this list, including “The Metamorphosis”). It has, as a work of literature, inspired a seemingly endless amount of speculation, criticism, unpacking, and stance-taking. “In comment after comment, article after article, the evidence has been sifted through and judgments delivered,” Brad Leithauser wrote in *The New Yorker*. Fine, intelligent readers have confirmed the validity of the ghosts (Truman Capote); equally fine

and intelligent readers have thunderously established the governess's madness (Edmund Wilson)." And nothing that inspires so much interpretive interest could escape the many interpretations into other media: films, episodes of television, and much other literature.

Anton Chekhov, "The Lady with the Toy Dog" (1899)

Widely acknowledged as one of Chekhov's best stories, if not *the* best, and therefore almost no students get through their years at school without reading it. Has been adapted as a film, a ballet, a play, a musical, and most importantly, a Joyce Carol Oates short story.

W. W. Jacobs, "The Monkey's Paw" (1902)

So iconic—be careful what you wish for, is the gist—that you probably didn't even know it started out as a short story. My favorite version is, of course, the Laurie Anderson song.

O. Henry, "The Gift of the Magi" (1905)

According to Wikipedia, there have been 17 different film adaptations of O. Henry's classic short story about a couple's thwarted Christmas; the essential format—Della sells her hair to buy Jim a watch chain; Jim sells his watch to buy Della a set of combs—has been referenced and replicated countless times beyond that. I even heard Dax Shepard refer to this story on his podcast the other day, and so I rest my case.

James Joyce, "The Dead" (1914)

The last story in Joyce's collection *Dubliners* and one of the best short stories ever written; just ask anyone who wanted to have read some Joyce but couldn't crack *Ulysses*. (Or anyone who could crack *Ulysses* too.) And let's not forget the John Huston movie starring Anjelica Huston as Gretta.

Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis" (1915)

Everyone has to read this in school, at some point—which is probably the reason why it's been parodied, referenced, and adapted many times in just about every format. And why not? What could be more universal than the story of the man who wakes up to find himself transformed into an enormous insect?

Richard Connell, "The Most Dangerous Game" aka "The Hounds of Zaroff" (1924)

"The most popular short story ever written in English" is obviously the one about aristocrats hunting people. Widely adapted, but one of my favorite versions is the episode of *Dollhouse* in which a Richard Connell (no relation except the obvious) hunts Echo with a bow.

Ernest Hemingway, "The Killers" (1927)

I was tempted to include "Hills Like White Elephants" because of the number of people forced to read it to learn about dialogue (happily, there are other options), but "The Killers," while less often anthologized, is more influential overall, and gave us not only two

full length film adaptations and a Tarkovsky short but Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," which I do think is a very good story to learn from, if not for dialogue, then for story-making.

Zora Neale Hurston, "The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933)

Hurston is most famous for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but those who know will tell you that this story of love, marriage, betrayal, and love again—which was also made into a 2001 film—is a classic, too.

Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" (1948)

The short story that launched a thousand letters to *The New Yorker*—or if not a thousand, then at least "a torrent . . . the most mail the magazine had ever received in response to a work of fiction." Still taught widely in schools, and still chilling.

J. D. Salinger, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (1948)

The very first story to destroy many a young mind. In a good way, obviously.

Ray Bradbury, "There Will Come Soft Rains" (1950)

Bradbury's work has thoroughly permeated pop culture; plenty of his stories are widely adapted and referenced, so I could have chosen a few others here ("The Veldt" is my personal favorite). But every year, the image of a smart house going on long after the death of its occupants becomes more chilling and relevant an image; we can't help but keep going back to it.

Daphne du Maurier, "The Birds" (1952)

I know it's really the Hitchcock film adaptation that's iconic, but you wouldn't have the Hitchcock without the du Maurier.

Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953)

Another oft-assigned (and oft-argued-over) story, this one with so many title rip-offs.

Elmore Leonard, "Three-Ten to Yuma" (1953)

I know, I know, it's "Fire in the Hole" that gave us *Justified*, and we're all so very glad. But "Three-Ten to Yuma" has more name recognition—after all, it was adapted into two separate and very good films, the former of which (1957) actually created contemporary slang: in Cuba, Americans are called *yumas* and the United States is *La Yuma*.

Philip K. Dick, "The Minority Report" (1956)

As a whole, Philip K. Dick's work has had massive influence on literature, film, pop culture, and our cultural attitudes toward technology. Most of his best-known works are novels, but when a short story gets made into a Steven Spielberg/Tom Cruise film, you're basically assuring iconic status right there. (Or at least that's how it used to work...)

James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” (1957)

Baldwin’s best known short story pops up in plenty of anthologies, and can be thanked for being the gateway drug for many budding Baldwin acolytes.

Alan Sillitoe, “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner” (1959)

Not only is the story itself widely known and read—just ask Rod Blagojevich (remember him?)—that title has been rewritten and reused thousands of times for varying ends—just ask the reporter who wrote that piece about Blagojevich. Or Adrian Tomine.

John Cheever, “The Swimmer” (1964)

Cheever’s most famous story nails something essential about the mid-century American sensibility, and particularly the mid-century American suburbs, which is probably why everyone knows it (it’s also frequently anthologized). Or maybe it’s more about Burt Lancaster’s little shorts? Either way.

Joyce Carol Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (1966)

Another frequently anthologized and unwaveringly excellent short story; and look, it’s no one’s fault that Laura Dern turns everything she touches iconic.

Toni Cade Bambara, “The Lesson” (1972)

Yet another story often assigned in schools (the good ones, anyway), which hopefully means one day we’ll wake up and find out that everyone has read it.

Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973)

As others have pointed out before me, Le Guin’s most read and most famous short story is almost always chillingly relevant.

Donald Barthelme, “The School” (1974)

This one might only be iconic for writers, but considering it’s one of the best short stories ever written (according to me), I simply couldn’t exclude it.

Jamaica Kincaid, “Girl” (1978)

Another staple of a writer’s education, and a reader’s; “are you really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?” being a kind of bandied-about shibboleth.

Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (1981)

I struggled choosing a Carver story for this list—“Cathedral” is more important, and probably more read, but “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” has transcended its own form more completely, at least with its title, which has spawned a host of echoes, including Haruki Murakami’s *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, and Nathan Englander’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, to the point that I think it’s recognizable to just about everyone. A quick Google search will reveal that the framing has been used for almost everything you can think of. There’s—and I kid

you not—a *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books/War/Sex/God/The Tube/Games/Rape/Money/Creative Writing/Nanoclusters/Hebrew/The Weather/Defunding the Police/Free Speech/Taxes/Holes/Climate/The Moon/Waste/Cancel Culture/Impeachment/Gender/Digital Inclusions/Exacerbations of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease/COVID-19*. You see what I'm getting at here.

Stephen King, “The Body” (1982)

Otherwise known, to the general public, as *Stand By Me*.

Amy Hempel, “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” (1983)

Want to feel bad about your writing? This was the first short story Amy Hempel ever wrote.

Lorrie Moore, “How to Be an Other Woman” (1985)

A very very good short story that has given rise to so many bad ones.

Mary Gaitskill, “Secretary” (1988)

Bad Behavior is iconic as a whole, but probably the story to have most acutely permeated the wider culture is “Secretary,” on account of the film adaptation starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and James Spader—despite the fact that it totally butchers the ending.

Amy Tan, “Rules of the Game” (1989)

This story originally appeared in *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan's mega-bestseller, so probably almost everyone you know has read it. The film version didn't hurt either.

Tim O'Brien, “The Things They Carried” (1990)

Why, it's only the most anthologized short story of the last 30(ish) years. That's why even the people you know who haven't picked up a book in their adult lives have read it.

Denis Johnson, “Emergency” (1992)

When I left New York to go get my MFA, a friend gave me a copy of *Jesus' Son* with the inscription “Because everyone in your MFA will talk about it and you don't want to be the girl who hasn't read it. (It's also really good).” He was not wrong.

Annie Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain” (1997)

Everybody knows this story—even if they only know it from its (massively successful and influential, not to mention the true Best Picture Winner of 2006) film adaptation—and not for nothing, coming out when it did, it went a long way towards making some Americans more comfortable with homosexuality. Open the floodgates, baby.

Jhumpa Lahiri, “A Temporary Matter” (1998)

The story that made Lahiri a household name.

Ted Chiang, “Story of Your Life” (1998)

Otherwise known as *Arrival*. (Also technically a novella.)

Alice Munro, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” (2001)

At this point, almost everyone has read at least *some* Alice Munro, right? This story is one of the best from one of the greats, and was also adapted into a fantastic but heartbreaking film, *Away From Her*.

Kristen Roupenian, “Cat Person” (2017)

Sure, it’s recent, so it’s not quite as ingrained as some of the others here, but it’s also the story that broke the internet—and quite possibly the only *New Yorker* story that thousands of people have ever read.

*

Finally, as is often the case with lists that summarize the mainstream American literary canon of the last 200 years, it is impossible not to recognize that the list above is much too white and male. So for our future and continuing iconography, your friends at Literary Hub suggest reading the following stories, both new and old:

Eudora Welty, “Why I Live at the P.O.” (1941)
Clarice Lispector, “The Imitation of the Rose” (1960)
Leslie Marmon Silko, “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” (1969)
Ralph Ellison, “Cadillac Flambé” (1973)
Octavia Butler, “Bloodchild” (1984)
Bharati Mukherjee, “The Management of Grief” (1988)
John Edgar Wideman, “Fever” (1990)
Sandra Cisneros, “Woman Hollering Creek” (1991)
Christine Schutt, “To Have and to Hold” (1996)
ZZ Packer, “Brownies” (2003)
Edward P. Jones, “Marie” (2004)
Karen Russell, “Haunting Olivia” (2005)
Kelly Link, “Stone Animals” (2005)
Edwidge Danticat, “Ghosts” (2008)
Yiyun Li, “A Man Like Him” (2008)
Claire Vaye Watkins, “Ghosts, Cowboys” (2009)
Ottessa Moshfegh, “Bettering Myself” (2013)
Amelia Gray, “House Heart” (2013)
Zadie Smith, “Meet the President!” (2013)
Carmen Maria Machado, “The Husband Stitch” (2014)
Diane Cook, “The Way the End of Days Should Be” (2014)
Kirstin Valdez Quade, “Five Wounds” (2015)
NoViolet Bulawayo, “Shhhh” (2015)
Mariana Enriquez, “Spiderweb” (2016)
Ken Liu, “State Change” (2016)
Helen Oyeyemi, “Sorry Doesn’t Sweeten Her Tea” (2016)

Lesley Nneka Arimah, “What Is a Volcano?” (2017)

James McBride, “The Christmas Dance” (2017)

Viet Thanh Nguyen, “War Years” (2017)

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, “Friday Black” (2018). . .

Honestly, this list could go on forever, but let’s stop and say: more short stories of all kinds in the hands of the general public, please!