

IN REVIEW

Writers Harvest 3: good writing for a good cause

Reviewed by Patricia Lindahl
Guest contributor.

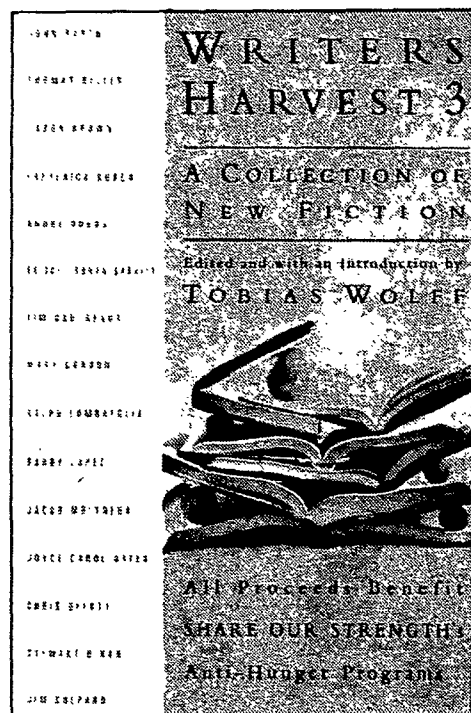
"What a simple, beautiful idea — to allow artists the chance to put their work at the service of others without any sanctioning distortions of their voices and interests." Thus Tobias Wolff, editor of *Writers Harvest 3*, describes the purpose behind this collection of 15 contemporary American short stories.

The contributors to this anthology have donated their work so that all profits go for the relief of hunger through the "Share Our Strengths" anti-hunger programs. Through benefit readings and anthologies such as this one, writers have helped SOS raise many millions of dollars over the past 15 years. As Wolff proudly asserts, "These stories have only this in common: All are gifts."

This collection features some writers who are well established and others who are relative newcomers. All have earned an impressive array of awards and recognition in both publishing and academic circles. Included are such prolific writers as Joyce Carol Oates and John Barth; Mary Gordon, whose works such as *Final Payments* and *The Company of Women*, have earned her much acclaim; and Barry Lopez, perhaps best known for his passionate and lyrical writing about the natural world. Tobias Wolff himself is well known for such works as his memoir *This Boy's Life* (which later became a popular film), published while he was on the faculty of Syracuse University.

The stories embrace a wide range of human complexity — from Andre Dubus' brief opening tale of a marine corporal who claims God talks to him, to Stewart O'Nan's closing account of a teenager's determination to eat 20 "Fat Man" hamburgers at one sitting so the rest of her teammates on the bus can eat free (a rather ironic choice for an anti-hunger book).

The menace and cruelty of the title character of Joyce Carol Oates' "The Photographer" is reflected through his effect on Norma Jean, a worker in an aircraft factory. The Photographer in this story



wears black "like a magician or a priest." Simultaneously attracted to and repelled by his Machiavellian power, she is incapable of escaping his savagery or his world in which "life is sheer unmitigated suffering, only illusion saves us ..." Although his profound hostility toward her masquerades as admiration, ultimately she crumples under the weight of his hatred as though she were "a soiled tissue." Like the row of fuselages in the factory "laid out like torsos on a dissecting table," she too will be laid out, dissected, used.

John Barth's "Extension" uses a home remodeling project as a wistful metaphor for the shrinking of life as we grow older. Told in a detached tone from a first-person perspective of 20 years later, the narrator observes how an apparently unremarkable home improvement project leads to the rueful discovery that he really didn't need so much extra space any longer. The universe itself was expanding while his world had begun to shrink.

In Ralph Lombreglia's wry holiday tale "Cashmere Christmas," a 39-year-old woman who has grown increasingly cynical over the years, is quite irritated to realize that she is still stricken with guilt

many years after she left the church. ("And suddenly she was battling ancient Catholic dragons rising out of her brain.") But one memorable Christmas, she discovers the possibility of miracles in the unlikely creature of a mysterious bat, a magical creature who arrives to bring things you don't deserve because deserving is beside the point.

Other stories explore issues such as the anguish of death in the family; blindness; coming of age in spite of ourselves; and family relationships. These stories deal with serious subjects in a thoughtful and insightful manner.

In his introduction, however, Wolff

warned that "Though the writers in these pages are doing good work, there is no sign of any intention to commit Good Works." Readers need to be aware that the subjects are sometimes controversial and the language can be quite blunt. For admirers of contemporary American fiction, however, this is a valuable collection of both highly-renowned writers and some of our newest voices.

Patricia Lindahl taught high school English for more than 30 years. She continues to pursue her love of literature through the lively discussions she enjoys through her book club, which originated at St. Paul's Church in Webster.

Author, author



John Powell/Photo intern

Tony and Beverly Shaw talk to Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor, while he signs their copy of his new book, *A Concise Guide to Canon Law*, at Holy Ghost Church in Gates on June 4. The book, published by Ave Maria Press, is intended to provide an easy reference to church law for pastoral ministry.

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