Stories are a part of daily life in every culture. Stories are what we tell when we return from vacation or survive an accident or illness. They help us make sense of growing up or growing old, of a hurricane or a war, of the country and world we live in. In conversations, a story may be invited by the listener (“What did you do last night?”) or initiated by the teller (“Guess what I saw when I was driving home!”). We assume such stories are true, or at least that they are meant to describe an experience honestly. Of course, many of the stories we encounter daily, from jokes to online games to television sitcoms to novels and films, are intended to be fiction—that is, stories or narratives about imaginary persons and events. Every story, however, whether a news story, sworn testimony, idle gossip, or a fairy tale, is always a version of events told from a particular perspective (or several), and it may be incomplete, biased, or just plain made up. As we listen to others’ stories, we keep alert to the details, which make the stories rich and entertaining. But we also need to spend considerable time and energy making sure that we accurately interpret what we hear: We ask ourselves who is telling the story, why the story is being told, and whether we have all the information we need to understand it fully.

Even newspaper articles, which are supposed to tell true stories—the facts of what actually happened—may be open to such interpretation. Take as an example the following article, which appeared in the New York Times on January 1, 1920:

**ACCUSED WIFE KILLS HER ALLEGED LOVER**

**Cumberland (Md.) Woman Becomes Desperate When Her Husband Orders Her from Home.**

Special to The New York Times.

CUMBERLAND, Md., Dec. 31.—Accused by her husband of unfaithfulness, Mrs. Kate Uhl, aged 25, this morning stabbed to death Bryan Pownall, who she alleged was the cause of the estrangement with her husband, Mervin Uhl.

Mrs. Uhl, who is the mother of three children, denies her husband’s charge of misconduct with Pownall, asserting that the latter forced his attentions on her by main physical strength against her will.

The stabbing this morning came as a dramatic sequel to the woman’s dilemma after she had been ordered to leave her home. Mrs. Uhl summoned Pownall after her husband had gone to work this morning, and according to her story begged him to tell her husband that she, Mrs. Uhl, was not to blame. This Pownall refused to do, but again tried to make love to her, Mrs. Uhl said. When Pownall sought to kiss her Mrs. Uhl seized a thin-bladed butcher knife and stabbed the man to the heart, she admitted.

The report’s appearance in a reliable newspaper; its identification of date, location, and other information; and the legalistic adjectives “accused” and “alleged”
suggest that it strives to be accurate and objective. But given the distance between us and the events described here, it’s also easy to imagine this chain of events being recounted in a play, murder mystery, Hollywood film, or televised trial. In other words, this news story is still fundamentally a story. Note that certain points of view are better represented than others and certain details are highlighted, as might be the case in a novel or short story. The news item is based almost entirely on what Kate Uhl asserts, and even the subtitle, “Woman Becomes Desperate,” plays up the “dramatic sequel to the woman’s dilemma.” We don’t know what Mervin Uhl said when he allegedly accused his wife and turned her out of the house, and Bryan Pownall, the murdered man, never had a chance to defend himself. Presumably, the article reports accurately the husband’s accusation of adultery and the wife’s accusation of rape, but we have no way of knowing whose accusations are true.

Our everyday interpretation of the stories we hear from various sources—including other people, television, newspapers, and advertisements—has much in common with the interpretation of stories such as those in this anthology. In fact, you’ll probably discover that the processes of reading, responding to, and writing about stories are already somewhat familiar to you. Most readers already know, for instance, that they should pay close attention to seemingly trivial details; they should ask questions and find out more about any matters of fact that seem mysterious, odd, or unclear. Most readers are well aware that words can have several meanings and that there are alternative ways to tell a story. How would someone else have told the story? What are the storyteller’s perspective and motives? What is the context of the tale—for instance, when is it supposed to have taken place and what was the occasion of telling it? These and other questions from our experience of everyday storytelling are equally relevant in reading fiction. Similarly, we can usually tell in reading a story or hearing it whether it is supposed to make us laugh, shock us, or provoke some other response.

TELLING STORIES: INTERPRETATION

Everyone has a unique story to tell. In fact, many stories are about this difference or divergence among people’s interpretations of reality. A number of the stories in this anthology explore issues of storytelling and interpretation.

Consider a well-known tale, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” a Buddhist story over two thousand years old. Like other stories that have been transmitted orally, this one exists in many versions. Here’s one way of telling it:

The Elephant in the Village of the Blind

Once there was a village high in the mountains in which everyone was born blind. One day a traveler arrived from far away with many fine things to sell and many tales to tell. The villagers asked, “How did you travel so far and so high carrying so much?” The traveler said, “On my elephant.” “What is an elephant?” the villagers asked, having never even heard of such an animal in their remote mountain village. “See for yourself,” the traveler replied.

The elders of the village were a little afraid of the strange-smelling creature that took up so much space in the middle of the village square. They could hear
it breathing and munching on hay, and feel its slow, swaying movements disturbing the air around them. First one elder reached out and felt its flapping ear. "An elephant is soft but tough, and flexible, like a leather fan." Another grasped its back leg. "An elephant is a rough, hairy pillar." An old woman took hold of a tusk and gasped, "An elephant is a cool, smooth staff." A young girl seized the tail and declared, "An elephant is a fringed rope." A boy took hold of the trunk and announced, "An elephant is a water pipe." Soon others were stroking its sides, which were furrowed like a dry plowed field, and others determined that its head was an overturned washing tub attached to the water pipe.

At first each villager argued with the others on the definition of the elephant, as the traveler watched in silence. Two elders were about to come to blows about a fan that could not possibly be a pillar. Meanwhile the elephant patiently enjoyed the investigations as the cries of curiosity and angry debate mixed in the afternoon sun. Soon someone suggested that a list could be made of all the parts: the elephant had four pillars, one tub, two fans, a water pipe, and two staffs, and was covered in tough, hairy leather or dried mud. Four young mothers, sitting on a bench and comparing impressions, realized that the elephant was in fact an enormous, gentle ox with a stretched nose. The traveler agreed, adding only that it was also a powerful draft horse and that if they bought some of his wares for a good price he would be sure to come that way again in the new year.

The different versions of such a tale, like the different descriptions of the elephant, alter its meaning. Changing any aspect of the story will inevitably change how it works and what it means to the listener or reader. For example, most versions of this story feature not an entire village of blind people (as this version does), but a small group of blind men who claim to be wiser than their sighted neighbors. These blind men quarrel endlessly because none of them can see; none can put together all the evidence of all their senses or all the elephant's various parts to create a whole. Such traditional versions of the story criticize people who are too proud of what they think they know; these versions imply that sighted people would know better what an elephant is. However, other versions of the tale, like the one above, are set in an imaginary "country" of the blind. This setting changes the emphasis of the story from the errors of a few blind wise men to the value and the insufficiency of any one person's perspective. For though it's clear that the various members of the community in this version will never agree entirely on one interpretation of (or story about) the elephant, they do not let themselves get bogged down in endless dispute. Instead they compare and combine their various stories and "readings" in order to form a more satisfying, holistic understanding of the wonder in their midst. Similarly, listening to others' different interpretations of stories, based on their different perspectives, can enhance your experience of a work of literature and your skill in responding to new works.

Just as stories vary depending on who is telling them, so their meaning varies depending on who is responding to them. In the elephant story, the villagers pay attention to what the tail or the ear feels like, and then they draw on comparisons to what they already know. But ultimately, the individual interpretations of the elephant depend on what previous experiences each villager brings to bear (of pillars, water pipes, oxen, and dried mud, for example), and also on where (quite literally)
he or she stands in relation to the elephant. In the same way, readers participate in re-creating a story as they interpret it. When you read a story for the first time, your response will be informed by other stories you have heard and read as well as your expectations for this kind of story. To grapple with what is new in any story, start by observing one part at a time and gradually trying to understand how those parts work together to form a whole. As you make sense of each new piece of the picture, you adjust your expectations about what is yet to come. When you have read and grasped it as fully as possible, you may share your interpretation with other readers, discussing different ways of seeing the story. Finally, you might express your reflective understanding in writing—in a sense, telling your story about the work.

Questions about the Elements of Fiction

- Expectations: What do you expect?
  - from the title? from the first sentence or paragraph?
  - after the first events or interactions of characters?
  - as the conflict is resolved?
- What happens in the story? (See chapter 1.)
  - Do the characters or the situation change from the beginning to the end?
  - Can you summarize the plot? Is it a recognizable kind or genre of story?
- How is the story narrated? (See chapter 2.)
  - Is the narrator identified as a character?
  - Is it narrated in the past or present tense?
  - Is it narrated in the first, second, or third person?
  - Do you know what every character is thinking, or only some characters, or none?
- Who are the characters? (See chapter 3.)
  - Who is the protagonist(s) (hero, heroine)?
  - Who is the antagonist(s) (villain, opponent, obstacle)?
  - Who are the other characters? What is their role in the story?
  - Do your expectations change with those of the characters, or do you know more or less than each of the characters?
- What is the setting of the story? (See chapter 4.)
  - When does the story take place?
  - Where does it take place?
  - Does the story move from one setting to another? Does it move in one direction only or back and forth in time and place?
  - What do you notice about how the story is written?
- What is the style of the prose? Are the sentences and the vocabulary simple or complex?
  - Are there any images, figures of speech or symbols? (See chapter 5.)
  - What is the tone or mood? Does the reader feel sad, amused, worried, curious?
- What does the story mean? Can you express its theme or themes? (See chapter 6.)
  - Answers to these big questions may be found in many instances in your answers to the previous questions. The story’s meaning or theme depends on all its features.
READING AND RESPONDING TO FICTION

When imaginary events are acted out onstage or onscreen, our experience of those events is that of being a witness to them. In contrast, prose fiction, whether oral or written, is relayed to us by someone. Reading it is more like hearing what happened after the fact than witnessing it before our very eyes. The teller, or narrator, of fiction addresses a listener or reader, often referred to as the audience. How much or how little we know about the characters and what they say or do depends on what a narrator tells us.

You should read a story attentively, just as you would listen attentively to someone telling a story out loud. This means limiting distractions and interruptions; you should take a break from social networking and obtrusive music. Literary prose, as well as poetry, works with the sounds as well as meanings of words, just as film works with music and sound as well as images. Be prepared to mark up the text and to make notes.

While reading and writing, you should always have a good college-level dictionary on hand so that you can look up any unfamiliar terms. In the era of the Internet it's especially easy to learn more about any word or concept, and doing so can help enrich your reading and writing. Another excellent resource is the Oxford English Dictionary, available in the reference section of most academic libraries or on their websites, which reveals the wide range of meanings words have had over time. Words in English always have a long story to tell because over the centuries so many languages have contributed to our current vocabulary. It's not uncommon for meanings to overlap or even reverse themselves.

The following short short story is a contemporary work. As in "The Elephant in the Village of the Blind," this narrator gives us a minimal amount of information, merely observing the characters' different perceptions and interpretations of things they see during a cross-country car trip. As you read the story, pay attention to your expectations, drawing on your personal experience as well as such clues as the title; the characters' opinions, behavior, and speech; specifics of setting (time and place); and any repetitions or changes. When and how does the story begin to challenge and change your initial expectations? You can use the questions above to guide your reading of any story and help you focus on some of its important features.

LINDA BREWER
20/20

By the time they reached Indiana, Bill realized that Ruthie, his driving companion, was incapable of theoretical debate. She drove okay, she went halves on gas, etc., but she refused to argue. She didn't seem to know how. Bill was used to East Coast women who disputed everything he said, every step of the way. Ruthie stuck to simple observation, like "Look, cows." He chalked it up to the fact that she was from rural Ohio and thrilled to death to be anywhere else.

She didn't mind driving into the setting sun. The third evening out, Bill rested his eyes while she cruised along making the occasional announcement.

"Indian paintbrush. A golden eagle."
KEY CONCEPTS

As you read, respond to, and write about fiction, some key terms and concepts may be useful in comparing or distinguishing different kinds of stories. Stories may be oral rather than written down, and they may be of different lengths. They may be based on true stories or completely invented. They may be written in verse rather than prose, or they may be created in media other than the printed page.

STORY AND NARRATIVE

Generally speaking, a story is a short account of an incident or series of incidents, whether actual or invented. The word is often used to refer to an entertaining tale of imaginary people and events, but it is also used in phrases like “the story of my life”—suggesting a true account. The term narrative is especially useful as a general concept for the substance rather than the form of what is told about persons and their actions. A story or a tale is usually short, whereas a narrative may be of any length from a sentence to a series of novels and beyond.

Narratives in Daily Life

Narrative plays an important role in our lives beyond the telling of fictional stories. Consider the following:

- Today, sociologists and historians may collect personal narratives to present an account of society and everyday life in a certain time or place.
- Since the 1990s, the practice of narrative medicine has spread as an improved technique of diagnosis and treatment that takes into account the patient's point of view.
- There is a movement to encourage mediation rather than litigation in divorce cases. A mediator may collaborate with the couple in arriving at a shared perspective on the divorce; in a sense, they try to agree on the story of their marriage and how it ended.
- Some countries have attempted to recover from the trauma of genocidal ethnic conflict through official hearings of testimony by victims as well as defendants. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an example of this use of stories.

ORAL NARRATIVE AND TALES

We tend to think of stories in their written form, but many of the stories that we now regard as among the world’s greatest, such as Homer’s Iliad and the Old English epic Beowulf, were sung or recited by generations of storytellers before being written down. Just as rumors change shape as they circulate, oral stories tend to be more fluid than printed stories. Traditionally oral tales such as fairy tales or folktales may endure for a very long time yet take different forms in vari-
Final page of *More English Fairy Tales*, ed. Joseph Jacobs. Jacobs published volumes of popular tales that had been collected over several centuries from oral storytellers in the British countryside.

ous countries and eras. And it’s often difficult or impossible to trace such a story back to a single “author” or creator. In a sense, then, an oral story is the creation of a whole community or communities, just as oral storytelling tends to be a more communal event than reading.

Certain recognizable signals set a story or tale apart from common speech and encourage us to pay a different kind of attention. Children know that a story is beginning when they hear or read “Once upon a time . . . ,” and traditional oral storytellers have formal ways to set up a tale, such as *Su-num-twee* (“listen to me”), as Spokane storytellers say. “And they lived happily ever after,” or simply “The End,” may similarly indicate when the story is over. Such conventions have been adapted since the invention of printing and the spread of literacy.

**FICTION AND NONFICTION**

The word *fiction* comes from the Latin root *fingere*, to fashion or form. The earliest definitions concern the act of making something artificial to imitate something else. In the past two centuries, *fiction* has become more narrowly defined as “prose narrative about imaginary people and events,” the main meaning of the word as we use it in this anthology.
Genres of Prose Fiction by Length

A novel is a work of prose fiction of about 40,000 words or more. The form arose in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as prose romances and adventure tales began to adopt techniques of history and travel narrative as well as memoir, letters, and biography.

A novella is a work of prose fiction of about 17,000 to 40,000 words. The novella form was especially favored between about 1850 and 1950, largely because it can be more tightly controlled and concentrated than a long novel, while focusing on the inner workings of a character.

A short story is broadly defined as anywhere between 1,000 and 20,000 words. One expectation of a short story is that it may be read in a single sitting. The modern short story developed in the mid-nineteenth century, in part because of the growing popularity of magazines.

A short short story, sometimes called “flash fiction” or “micro-fiction,” is generally not much longer than 1,000 words and sometimes much shorter. There have always been very short fictions, including parables and fables, but the short short story is an invention of recent decades.

In contrast with fiction, nonfiction usually refers to factual prose narrative. Some major nonfiction genres are history, biography, and autobiography. In film, documentaries and “biopics,” or biographical feature films, similarly attempt to represent real people, places, and events. The boundary between fiction and nonfiction is often blurred today, as it was centuries ago. So-called true crime novels such as Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood (1966) and novelized biographies such as Colm Tóibín’s The Master (2004), about the life of the novelist Henry James, use the techniques of fiction writing to narrate actual events. Graphic novels, with a format derived from comic books, have become an increasingly popular medium for memoirs. (Two examples are Art Spiegelman’s Maus [1986, 1991] and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis.) Some Hollywood movies and TV shows dramatize real people in everyday situations or contexts, or real events such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In contrast, historical fiction, developed by Sir Walter Scott around 1815, comprises prose narratives that present history in imaginative ways. Such works of prose fiction adhere closely to the facts of history and actual lives, just as many “true” life stories are more or less fictionalized.

The fiction chapters in this volume present a collection of prose works—mostly short stories—almost all of which were printed within the author’s lifetime. Even as you read the short prose fiction in this book, bear in mind the many ways we encounter stories or narrative in everyday life, and consider the almost limitless variety of forms that fiction may take.
WRITING ABOUT FICTION

During your first reading of any story, you may want to read without stopping to address each of the questions on page 15. After you have read the whole piece once, re-read it carefully, using the questions as a guide. It's always interesting to compare your initial reactions with your later ones. In fact, a paper may focus on comparing the expectations of readers (and characters) at the beginning of a story to their later conclusions. Responses to fiction may come in unpredictable order, so feel free to address the questions as they arise. Looking at how the story is told and what happens to which characters may lead to observations on expectations or setting. Consideration of setting and style can help explain the personalities, actions, mood, and effect of the story, which can lead to well-informed ideas about the meaning of the whole. But any one of the questions, pursued further, can serve as the focus of more formal writing.

Following this chapter are three written responses to Raymond Carver’s short story “Cathedral.” First, read the story and make notes on any features that you find interesting, important, or confusing. Then look at the notes and response paper by Wesley Rupton and the essay by Bethany Qualis, which show two different ways of writing about “Cathedral.”

RAYMOND CARVER
(1938–88)

Cathedral

Born in the logging town of Clatskanie, Oregon, to a working-class family, Raymond Carver married at nineteen and had two children by the time he was twenty-one. Despite these early responsibilities and a life-long struggle with alcoholism, Carver published his first story in 1961 and graduated from Humboldt State College in 1963. He published his first book, *Near Klamath*, a collection of poems, in 1968 and thereafter supported himself with visiting lectureships at the University of California at Berkeley, Syracuse University, and the Iowa Writer's Workshop, among other institutions. Described by the *New York Times* as “surely the most influential writer of American short stories in the second half of the twentieth century”; credited by others with “reviving what was once thought of as a dying literary form”; and compared to such literary luminaries as Ernest Hemingway, Stephen Crane, and Anton Chekhov, Carver often portrays characters whom one reviewer describes as living, much as Carver long did, “on the edge: of poverty, alcoholic self-destruction, loneliness.” The author himself labeled them the sort of “good people,” “doing the best they could,” who “filled” America. Dubbed a “minimalist” due to his spare style and low-key plots, Carver himself suffered an early death, of lung cancer, at age 50. His major short-story collections include *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), *What We Talk about Love* (1983), and the posthumously published *Call If You Need Me* (2001).
Is it human nature or human culture? Is it hardwired in our brains, or inspired by our need to live with others in a community? Whatever the cause, people tell stories in every known society. Professional and amateur storytellers, as well as scholars in the humanities and sciences, have been paying more attention to the phenomenon of stories or narrative in recent decades. Online forums and organizations around the world are dedicated to a revival of oral storytelling, rather like the twentieth-century revival of folk music. Educators, religious leaders, therapists, and organizers of programs for the young or the needy have turned to various publications and programs for guidance on how the techniques of storytelling might benefit their clients.

Stories are part of our everyday lives, and everyone has stories to tell. Perhaps you have heard the life stories broadcast every week on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition in conjunction with the StoryCorps project, which allows ordinary Americans to record their own interviews with friends or family (often in a traveling “studio” van) and have their recordings archived in the Library of Congress. Most likely you are familiar with blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube videos, and other means of producing or sharing some version of yourself, some aspect of your experience or your life.

Authors of short fiction have often reflected on the irresistible appeal of stories by making storytelling part of the plot or action within their fiction. We gather here three stories that do just that. At least two of them might be called frame narratives: The main stories contain (and thus “frame”) another story or stories told by characters. As you read the stories, think about what each implies about how stories and storytelling work and what they can do for us. When and why do we both tell stories and listen to those of others? What do we derive from the act of telling or listening, as well as from the story itself? What makes a story compelling, worth listening to or even writing down? How and why might the shape of our stories differ depending on when and to whom we tell them? How might the sorts of choices we make in telling a story resemble those a fiction writer makes in writing one? As listeners or readers, how are our expectations of a story and our responses to it shaped by our knowledge of or assumptions about its teller? In what different ways might stories, whether oral or written, be "true"?