

ANALYSIS

The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford (1969)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Both in fiction and expository writing, Jean Stafford is noted for her fieriness and her severity and her continuity in good work for so many years. There is always great emotion in her mind but she restrains it, in order to portray realities distinctly and to express her judgment of them, beginning with a novel about a superior Boston society, *Boston Adventure* (1944). Jamesian in what was then a modern way, she has reduced, refined, shaped and sharpened her narration. Now the over-all effect of her *Collected Stories* is masterly."

Citation of election (May 1970)
American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters

"*The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford* appeared in March 1969. It was more widely reviewed than any of her previous books, and most of the notices were extremely favorable. By gathering the work of a quarter-century between the covers of a single volume, Farrar, Straus & Giroux had made manifest Stafford's standing as one of the best American short-story writers of her time. In a front-page essay in the *New York Times Book Review*, Guy Davenport hailed Stafford's 'awesome integrity' and declared the book 'an event in our literature.' Elizabeth Janeway, in a long *Atlantic Monthly* review, praised the dialogue: 'There is no one else writing today whose people speak more truly, and more surprisingly.'

If there was a thread of demurral running through the nearly universal praise for the collection, it had to do with what Joyce Carol Oates in *Book World* called 'an undertone of something brutal, something really alarming' in the stories. To read thirty of Stafford's tales at once was to be struck, as one was not in any single story, by 'the icy privacy' of her characters, by 'shattered dreams and people imprisoned,' by 'the trapped psyche, the captive mind.' Collectively the reviewers seemed uncertain of whether to praise or to shrink back from Stafford's 'obsessive themes and images' in stories that 'deal with the "warped" management of life.' Today it is easier to see that Stafford's relentless probing of unhappiness and loss--an act that, in her own life, sprang from an instinct for survival--forms one of her chief contributions to American fiction."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 371-72

"The appearance of this book turned out to be a major literary event... The book succeeded in attracting a good deal of favorable attention from the critics. A new generation of readers was largely unfamiliar with the fiction of Jean Stafford, but once again, after the book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year, Stafford became a literary celebrity. Her increased visibility no doubt also helped her to obtain two grants that year, an Ingram-Merrill grant and a Chapelbook grant. The fact that *The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford* was dedicated to *New Yorker* editor Katharine White immediately identified Stafford with the magazine in which most of the stories initially appeared. The illustration on the cover, too, linked Stafford with the *New Yorker*...

The laudatory reviews Stafford received for these stories to which she had devoted a substantial part of the preceding twenty-five years must have been gratifying indeed. Thomas Lask in the *New York Times* began his review by proclaiming: 'Everything that we desire from a collection of short stories, from the art of fiction, in fact, can be found in this gathering of Jean Stafford's work: a superior and controlled craftsmanship, human dilemmas uniquely individual, yet common to all of us, backgrounds and situations authentic in themselves and perfect for providing the skeletal structure of her tales, and those insights into human behavior and personality that we call wisdom.' At her best, Lask said 'she is flawless.' In *The New York Times Book Review* Guy Davenport also celebrated the publication of this volume of short stories,

calling its appearance 'an event in our literature.' The two aspects of Stafford's work that Davenport emphasized were her sense of place, which he said gave such authenticity to her work, and her portrayal of the American woman as both the builder and the inhabitant of the 'prison' of contemporary life....

Following the publication of her *Collected Stories*, Stafford not only received money but the honor of being elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.... Stafford had been turned down for membership once in 1959 and again in 1960; now at last her achievements were recognized by the academy as well as the critics. In May 1970 she was honored for her achievements as a novelist, short story writer, and essayist. Noting her outstanding accomplishments in each of these genres, the citation that was read at the inaugural ceremonies stated: 'Both in fiction and expository writing, Jean Stafford is noted for her fieriness and her severity and her continuity in good work for so many years. There is always great emotion in her mind but she restrains it, in order to portray realities distinctly and to express her judgment of them, beginning with a novel about a superior Boston society, *Boston Adventure* (1944). Jamesian in what was then a modern way, she has reduced, refined, shaped and sharpened her narration. Now the overall effect of her *Collected Short Stories* is masterly.'

The same month that Stafford was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, she also learned that she had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.... 'I find it awfully heartening that a writer as traditional as I can be recognized,' she told an interviewer, voicing the hope that giving the award to her might herald a turning away from the kind of bad experimental writing that recently had been in vogue. 'Do we really need a poem about a banana that is set in type to form the shape of a banana?' she asked. During the preceding decade she had been distressed to observe that a new kind of writer had begun to receive attention. When her *Collected Stories* was said to be old-fashioned by several reviewers, she had observed irately to Allen Tate: 'I'm now getting very snippy reviews--I'm not 'relevant,' I'm not involved with issues, I'm not a Jew and I'm not a Negro, I deal only with the human heart and that has been transplanted.' Once she had received the Pulitzer Prize, she was besieged by reporters from a number of local papers.... The success of her *Collected Stories* afforded Stafford the kind of visibility she had not enjoyed for a long time, and she was invited to give a number of guest lectures that year."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 296-99

"In February of 1969 her *Collected Stories* was published. Here, too, Stafford was obviously riding an old work: almost all of the stories had been published at least a decade earlier. It was a consolidation of her career that clearly meant a lot to her, though it was also a potentially difficult reemergence. She hadn't managed to produce much since those stories, and meanwhile literary tastes had moved significantly beyond the sensibilities and standards that informed much of her work. But Stafford betrayed no apprehension, in fact took the occasion to emphasize her nonconformist, out-of-date literary allegiances. Studiously resisting any 'relevant' packaging of her reentry into a literary scene that she disparaged as undecorous, she paid homage to Twain and James in the author's note, borrowed from those unfashionable mentors for the section titles of the collection, featured the elegant *New Yorker* in a cover collage of the magazine's pages, and dedicated the book to Katharine White.

Her confidence was well rewarded. However unenlightened she judged the times, she herself was judged very favorably. Enthusiastic reviews appeared promptly and prominently. The daily *New York Times* declared, 'Everything that we desire from a collection of short stories, from the art of fiction, in fact, can be found in this gathering of Jean Stafford's work'; Guy Davenport in the *Sunday Book Review* heralded it as 'an event in our literature,' and others followed suit. Early in 1970 Stafford was at last elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, after years of not quite making it.

When the most unexpected recognition of all, a Pulitzer Prize, was announced that spring, Stafford was taken by surprise, and so, apparently, was the *New York Times*. The newspaper's editorial about the awards--after saluting Seymour Hersh's prize for reporting on the My Lai massacre and noting that 'in the arts and letters section, the judges appeared to be aware of what's new'--was caught up short by the anachronistic air of the fiction prize winner. 'And if Jean Stafford's stories are more traditional than adventuresome,' the

editorialist rather lamely observed, 'they are surely among the best of their kind being written today.' Stafford herself commented in an interview on the incongruous timing of her elevation. 'I find it awfully heartening that a writer as traditional as I can be recognized,' she said--and then took the opportunity to vent her typical impatience with the prevailing aesthetic: 'Do we really need a poem about a banana that is set in type to form the shape of a banana?'

Stafford's sudden prominence pleased her, though true to her retiring rural-lady style, she liked to play down her success, treating the fanfare as a rude intrusion into her life. 'For a few days my privacy was outrageously invaded by telephone calls,' she wrote to Mary Lee, 'but now everything has quieted down.' In fact, the flurry over the award did subside relatively quickly, and if she was disappointed, Stafford could also claim she was not at all surprised. Before the Pulitzer she had written caustically to Allen Tate about the complaints of her less sympathetic readers: 'I'm now getting very snippy reviews--I'm not 'relevant,' I'm not involved with issues, I'm not a Jew and I'm not a Negro, I deal only with the human heart and that has been transplanted.'

After the prize, she was invited to be a writer-in-residence briefly at the University of Pennsylvania and was similarly under no illusion about her relevance: 'None of them [her students] had ever heard of me and certainly had not read me, but this was understandable enough since neither had their teachers.' As those declarations suggest, Stafford's sense of marginality inspired indignation and resignation, depending on her mood and depending on her audience. In the 1970s, in the journalism that now constituted her literary output, she mostly kept her disgruntlement within decorous bounds."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 355-56

"She continued to return to the West of her childhood in a series of brilliant short stories, some of which appear in the section titled 'Cowboys and Indians, and Magic Mountains' from her 1969 *Collected Stories*. Growing up female in the rugged West is also the subject of perhaps her best novel, *The Mountain Lion*.... Irony became the defensive posture Jean Stafford adopted in her fiction and in her life.... Critics...have distinguished between a male and a female West--the one stereotypically linked with space, adventure, and passion; the other with domestic spaces, nurturing, and creativity.... By the time she began writing neither of these two heroic Wests existed. In their place was a sanitized, tamed-down landscape full of dandies from the East and leftovers from the glory days.... The last geographic grouping of Jean Stafford's stories, and the last section of her *Collected Stories*, covers her most productive years in the genre of short fiction--1945-56--and contains three of her finest stories: 'Children Are Bored on Sunday,' 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story,' and 'The End of a Career'."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) xii, 31, 60

Michael Hollister (2020)