Ann Beattie

A PROFILE

by Lacy Crawford

Ann Beattie's home in York, Maine, is a constant work in progress. Across the nearly twenty years she and her husband have summered here, they have replaced every beam and surface, painting the outside rich autumnal colors—sage, maize, red—and hanging the interior with original art and prints, the most recent of which is a beautiful black-and-white Curt Richter photograph of a woman's forearm. The elbow rests on a table, and the hand is poised with folded wrist and delicate fingers, holding a songbird upside down by its tail feathers. The bird's wings are folded; its eyes are half-closed. "What I love is that you don't know," Beattie says. "The bird could be dead. Or maybe we're just seeing an instant when it was still."

The ambiguity of the moment fascinates Beattie. For three decades her fiction has explored her generation's complex relationship to time. In the mid-1970s, Beattie's debut short stories mirrored the impatience and ambivalence of former hippies both enticed and stymied by adulthood. Her characters' often charming refusal to face the music of their lives made them instantly recognizable and irresistible to baby-boomer

readers. Beattie instinctively understood the quantum sensibility of the 1960s—its deceptive promise of unending possibility—and her work formed itself around the costly illusion of immortality. In seven novels and eight story collections, Beattie has tracked the romance of American culture as it falters and gives way to the unpredictable landscape of experience.

Beattie's career has also spanned a period of upheaval in the publishing industry, and although she would never articulate the point, literary publishing owes a good deal of its potential to Beattie. Her work, alongside that of a few peers, most notably Raymond Carver, attracted a new audience to fiction, and in large part the popularity of story collections and the central place of the short story in writing workshops and in young writers' efforts can be traced to the sheer pleasure of Beattie's stories.

In the early 1980s, *New York Times* book critic Anatole Broyard began a review this way:

> It has always been a mystery to me that collections of short stories are hard to sell. Unless it's by a Cheever, Updike, Barthelme, or Ann Beattie, the chances are that even a good collection will barely break even.

Broyard's comment placed Beattie in the ranks of great contemporary short story writers and also, in what might have been an unconscious tic, illustrated the gender disparity of that era. While he assumed that readers would recognize which of the Barthelme brothers was being named, he perhaps didn't feel that Beattie's surname alone would identify her among the male authors, though Beattie's readership was already so widespread and devoted that she had the aura of celebrity. She resisted fanfare, however, and kept to herself and a circle of friends who were not writers. Among observers who didn't know her well, she developed a reputation for being reserved, even prickly. For a time in the 1980s, she was the most published fiction writer in *The New Yorker*, and she lived in Manhattan, but, as she relates, "never once went to a *Paris Review* party. Book reviewers were always asking me out to lunch, and I always said no. I lived in a fourth-floor walk-up in Chelsea, before Chelsea was swish. I didn't have anything to do with the scene."

Beattie is recalling the past over a cup of tea on the screened porch of her house in York. The afternoon light is moving up the lawn, and though we're just off a major suburban road, we seem to be deep in the country on this quiet Indian summer day. The porch is hung with potted geraniums and a string of miniature pink pig lights. Beattie has a sense of whimsy and an eye for detail. On the lawn there's a baby willow staked upright, and the trunk of a mature pine tree wears the plastic features of a giant Mr. Potato Head.

All afternoon, and indeed every day, the house is busy. Workmen are on the roof fixing something, the phone rings, people drop by, Beattie's husband trundles through on his way somewhere. She attends to every interruption. As a rule, she

doesn't talk about herself, and she hasn't given many interviews in the last decade or so. "Very rarely does something in my life cause me to reflect on the fact that I am a writer," she says.

As Beattie tells it, she became a writer almost by accident. The only child of "very conservative" parents, neither of whom went to college, she grew up timid: "So shy, that when I was in grade school, I could hardly make eye contact with anyone," she says. "I've never totally gotten over that. But now I realize that I'm a listener, rather than a talker."

Her childhood in Washington, D.C., was marked by solitude and holds little interest for her. Her father, who worked for the government, "didn't laugh much" but had "a very weird sense of humor, a perverse glee in causing a bit of trouble and then going on as if it hadn't happened." Her mother quit work after Beattie was born, but unhappily; Beattie suspects her father, "a very old-fashioned thinker," would have "encouraged, if not insisted" that his wife stay at home with their daughter, though he himself would sometimes leave for days at a time, unannounced. (Before her father died, in 2002, he had read an occasional piece of Beattie's in *The New Yorker*, but, she says, "he had little idea what to make of it.") The small family kept to itself: "My parents never once," she recalls, "ever, had friends over for dinner." The extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins—"might have been a million miles away. I didn't know them then, and I still don't know them, and there're not many of them."

She was bored at home and bored at school. "I was not a precocious child writing and illustrating short stories when I was ten years old. You hear accounts of writers'

childhoods and you think, Oh, of course that child was made to be a writer. No. I read books, and loved books, but that's not to be confused with displaying talent. I was an utterly average child."

Beattie graduated from American University in 1969 as an English major with vague ambitions and went on to graduate school in English at the University of Connecticut, planning to become a teacher. A middling grad student ("B-plus all the way"), she began writing stories as a hobby. "I had no idea what I was up against, which was very helpful," she says. "It was so much fun to involve myself in writing stories. It seemed so vital. And I could do it at night, when I should have been writing a paper on D. H. Lawrence instead. But scholarship didn't hold the allure of the thoughts and characters spinning in my head. It was play."

While Beattie was developing her work, she wasn't in conversation with other writers. "If I'd been working ten years later," she says, "I'd have known to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a lot would probably have become clearer to me sooner." As it was, her work grew without workshop advice or marketplace considerations. Instead, she found a benevolent editor in the poet and critic J. D. O'Hara, who taught at Connecticut. "He stopped me in the hall one day and said, 'I understand you write. I'd be happy to look at anything you've written, I'd be quite curious to see it, you could leave it in my mailbox.' " So she did. "I had no idea that would be the beginning of line editing the likes of which I would be blessed to receive today."

O'Hara took the liberty of sending her stories out, but he didn't pull any strings to get the young writer started. "He had no contacts," Beattie explains. "When he sent my stories to *The New Yorker*, it wasn't to anyone's door. Fran Kiernan pulled one from the slush pile, and I got what I now know to be a very gracious note from Roger Angell saying, 'Your work is of interest and please feel free to address submissions directly to me in the future.' I didn't know what a big door had been opened."

In the year that followed, Beattie sent *The New Yorker* twenty-two short stories. ("I was very prolific then," she says.) The first twenty-one were rejected. The twenty-second was accepted. Angell took over from O'Hara as Beattie's editor. She was twenty-five years old.

For the next few years, from 1973 to 1976, Beattie remained in the graduate program at Connecticut, where there was "a sort of hiatus in which I pretended I was going to get a PhD, and they pretended I was going to get a PhD." They paid her to teach freshman comp, and she settled in a house with friends in small-town Eastford, Connecticut, to write.

She wrote about the people she knew, people her age and a little older, who had ridden the wave of counterculture in the 1960s, only to find themselves beached on the low, dull shores of the 1970s, facing career choices, marriage, and children. In her early stories, collected in *Distortions* (1976) and *Secrets and Surprises* (1978),

characters come up against the corruption of experience in an increasingly youth-obsessed society, where feeling is overwhelmed by the seductions of advertising. In "A Vintage Thunderbird," a lonely young man stops on the sidewalk to look at a poster for Bermuda tourism:

> Standing there, looking at the poster, Nick began a mental game that he had sometimes played in college. He invented a cartoon about Bermuda. It was a split-frame drawing. Half of it showed a beautiful girl, in the arms of her lover, on the pink sandy beach of Bermuda, with the caption: "It's glorious to be here in Bermuda." The other half of the frame showed a tall tired man looking in the window of a travel agency at a picture of the lady and her lover. He would have no lines, but in a balloon above his head he would be wondering if, when he went home, it was the right time to urge an abortion to the friend who had moved into his apartment.

Nick might be thinking on behalf of most of Beattie's early characters, who are saddled with fantasies, both their own and those projected onto them. The plots of their lives offer her characters little relief: the ugly realities drop into the ends of paragraphs, without preamble, as if everything leading up has been but the whistling of a bomb coming in to land; the friend, whom Nick knows well, is not even named, so distant does Nick feel from his circumstances. In her early work, Beattie was not in the business of giving solace. "Nothing ever ends at the moment of dramatic revelation," she says. "Just think of Shakespeare."

Beattie's stories work instead by illumination: she brings the lights up on her characters' lives and on a world entire. "The thing that interests me about fiction," she says, "is looking at something in the present and extrapolating the future." Her distinctive narrative reserve gives the impression that rather than spinning a tale, she is reporting a story; she eschews the evaluative in favor of the singular detail, weighting the demotic as heavily as the dramatic. "In the beginning, I wanted as smooth a surface as I could possibly create," she says. In this way her prose evokes that of Joan Didion, whom Beattie recalls reading when she was writing her earliest stories.

Other influences included Pinter, Ionesco, and Beckett; the latter she "particularly came to love." The influence of the theater, and particularly of the theater of the absurd, shows in Beattie's use of dialogue as a primary force in her stories and also in the inanimate objects that assume sentient presence in her characters' lives. In the absence of human connection, objects become the containers for desire: lonely Nick is bereft that the girl who does not love him anymore has sold the vintage Thunderbird they used to drive; a man whose wife and daughter have just died in a car accident intends to return to France, where he plans to "buy a leather jacket . . . at a store where he almost bought a leather jacket two years ago," as if by restoring the object, life will be restored. The characters in her early stories hold fast to their faith in what Beattie calls the "negotiability" of life, the belief that choices can be unmade and mistakes undone, and that time will be forgiving.

This misplaced fantasy results in a fierce nostalgia, which is a favorite form of self-deception for Beattie characters. Another form is cleverness: her characters are quick and often very funny.

A few things Beattie's early characters seldom do: fall in love, get married, have babies, die. A few things they often do: discover they are being cuckolded, worry about not having had children, suffer divorce, learn of someone's death. Of these, infidelity is the most common complication, because there is perhaps no scenario better suited to willful unknowing.

And although her characters are smart, they tend to take their hits poorly, commenting on their lives and addressing one another in a Beattiesque combination of fear and guile. Turn to any page in any of her books, and you will find characters engaged in Beattie speak. The first line of the story "Dwarf House," for instance, is a bit of dialogue between a man and his brother. The brother is about to be married. He is also a dwarf.

" 'Are you happy?' MacDonald says. 'Because if you're happy I'll leave you alone.' "

Their tone is one of ironic awareness, a jaded sensibility that has since come to define much of young adult discourse in movies, television, and fiction but that emerged with Beattie's stories. One hears in it the minimalist wit of the theater of the absurd meeting the cadences of 1970s posthippie life in suburban America; think of the children of John Cheever's Swimmer, all grown up and having just discovered *Waiting for Godot*. For her part, Beattie shrugs off the achievement. "I think I was simply a camera eye that didn't exist before," she says.

She recalls going in search of characters at just that moment when they thought change was possible, when the future was open for interpretation: "I often went into New York City on the commuter train," she explains. "As research, I started deliberately riding the last train that left New York, because that's when everybody on board was deciding something: Maybe I can save the marriage, or maybe I'm not so drunk that I can't find my way home." Beattie listened especially to the men.

"More than once, I drove somebody home at night, to the wife who refused to meet him at the station. You hear a lot of things when you're giving those rides."

The fantasy of life's negotiability is a hallmark of youth, and particularly of Beattie's time and place. "Those early stories are about where I was living at the time," she says, "in Eastford and in other drying-up factory towns. My readership was around my age, and they were happy somebody was writing about off-the-track places because the hippies were by then living in off-the-track places. Before Woodstock happened, Woodstock was just one of those anonymous places. And I was in one of those places."

In 1976, the year she was twenty-nine, Beattie published simultaneously her first story collection, *Distortions*, and a novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*. She left Connecticut to teach for two years at the University of Virginia and then returned to New England for a year at Harvard; it was to be her last full-time teaching job for twenty-three years. "I decided that whatever it took," she explains, "I was going to see if I could support myself by writing. And I did. I look back now and think, well, that was a charmed life! I didn't quite know it then."

While in graduate school, Beattie had married her first husband. They returned together from Harvard to Connecticut, where the marriage broke up; in 1980, Beattie moved to New York City alone.

During her time in New York, she published another novel, *Falling in Place* (1980), and a collection, *The Burning House* (1982). Her stories appeared in *The New Yorker* and in other literary magazines. Throughout her career, she has published widely and valued smaller literary periodicals as a source of quality work. "I couldn't afford subscriptions," she says, "but for a story by Joy Williams or Ray Carver, I would go out and buy the magazine, absolutely. That's where some of the best work first turned up." She gave the occasional reading or talk but maintained a low profile. "I didn't confuse my personality with my writing. I didn't write book reviews. I did go to the Algonquin for lunch with Roger Angell, but we weren't there to discuss a story or literary life. Roger was a friend." In her work, Beattie continued to track the lives of her ex-hippie subjects, some of whom migrated to New York with her, while others remained in their suburban enclaves. A few broke out for California or fled to Europe. While for many, the failings of their twenties became the addictions, depressions, or breakdowns of their thirties, a new sort of Beattie character, who was learning to transcend defeat, emerged. One woman in the 1980 story "Learning to Fall" gives voice to this nascent maturity. "What will happen can't be stopped," she says. "Aim for grace."

After four years in the city, Beattie returned to Charlottesville, where she met and married Lincoln Perry, a painter who was then teaching at the University of Virginia. She and Perry tell the story of their courtship over lunch at York Harbor's Stage Neck

Inn, in a fusty dining room overlooking a cabled beach. They've arrived in a red convertible, Lincoln steering with one arm, the other firmly around Beattie's shoulders.

"I'm so glad Lincoln is here," Beattie says, scanning the room. It's unclear whether the other diners recognize her, but they have all turned to look. Beattie is remarkably youthful, and except for her formerly long blond hair, which is now brunette and held with a small plastic barrette, she looks almost unchanged from her author photos of thirty years ago: the high cheekbones and slate eyes, her smile slightly rabbit-toothed and full. She's in jeans and suede loafers; there are cartoon dogs printed on her socks. Perry towers over her, looking windblown. "He can tell you which beach this is," she continues. "I never know."

Perry rolls his eyes extravagantly.

Before their first date, a casual meeting arranged by a mutual friend twenty years ago in Charlottesville, Perry went to the library to look at her books. ("The *library*!" Beattie whispers. "He didn't even *buy* one!") He flipped through the stories and took note of her author photo, which was fortunate, Perry explains, because when he arrived at Beattie's home for tea, she received him seated in front of a lamp. "I couldn't see her face," he says. Beattie protests that she wasn't intending to be mysterious, but, Perry continues, "when we were deciding what kind of tea to have, Ann said, 'It doesn't matter. It doesn't even really matter what words we say to each other.' "

"I do deeply distrust talk in general," Beattie agrees, and later she will explain that Perry was "unprecedented." Perry, meanwhile, professes finding her "endlessly fascinating." Much more than their work, which is closely held, they are each other's favorite subjects for conversation. They touch hands across the table. "You realize we're getting away with something here," Beattie says.

The couple was clear from the beginning that neither wanted children: "Even if I hadn't been a writer," Beattie explains, "I didn't want the responsibility." They began to split their time between semesters in Charlottesville, summers in Maine, and winters in Key West, Florida. From the mid-1980s through the '90s, Beattie published four more story collections and four novels, including the 1991 triptych portrait of a boy's childhood, *Picturing Will*, which sold more than 100,000 copies and is her greatest commercial success to date. Beattie is mindful of the way that she and Perry were able for two decades to construct a life that allowed them to focus on their work. "It's like the grown-ups have left us alone," she says. "I can be wandering around the house at three o'clock in my pajamas. We're pretty highly functional, but we haven't exactly joined the workaday world."

During the summer, Perry paints outside or up in his third-floor studio, while Beattie writes in her office a floor below. At times he'll call her—they have separate lines—to ask her to come up and look at a canvas. The interruptions don't bother her, but being reminded that someone else is getting his work done does. "There

have been times when Lincoln has set to work," she says, "and I have been so astonished by what he has done in the course of one day that I have actually said out loud, Oh my God, and then gone and sat down and immediately started writing."

Beattie drafts swiftly and intuitively. When she was younger, she sometimes wrote a story in an afternoon; now stories take three or four days to coalesce. ("It sounds like she's taking dictation," Perry says, "she's typing so fast.") As new work develops, she's ruthless. "I have always thrown away the majority of everything I've attempted, including entire novels. More than once," she says flatly. "You put it in the little trash bin on your computer and you press delete."

Beattie relies on spontaneity and surprise, avoiding all thought of formal elements. "If I did give it a moment's thought," she says, "I couldn't write the story. I don't like to know in advance what I'm writing. It can be like going into a darkened room and not turning the light on. You guess what the shapes are, you think you've stumbled into the pantry, not the bedroom, but you don't want to put the light on because for a minute it's ambiguous in a very interesting way. In those seconds that elapse, you've already integrated a lot of things, maybe some of them incorrectly, but you already know the large shapes, where things are vis-à-vis each other."

She begins with a character and a feeling, and then from the objects that appear in her mind's eye she discovers the story's setting and trajectory. "You're chasing one or two characters that you've put down on the page because for whatever reason, they became apparent to you. You may not have a context for them, yet they seem real. You might be wrong: One of them might vanish, or the minor character might become the major character as you go from the first paragraph to the second. But you hope that something will happen, something will appear, some emotion displaced onto a physical entity, some tree in paragraph five that suddenly is telling you it's autumn. Something intrudes that is loaded in some way and causes you to suspect that the thing, or the person, contains the essential mystery of the story."

Often a visual cue is the trigger: "Once I can see the central thing," she says, "I can make the rest cohere. I distrust ideas. I'm a great believer in things finding their own form."

Beattie's second novel, *Falling in Place*, opens with a young boy high up in a tree in his backyard. Beneath him, his teenage sister is walking home from school through a field of poison ivy and flowers. By the end of the novel, the boy will have shot his sister from that tree branch, but in the beginning, in Beattie's mind, there were only the tree and the field. "The tree was right in front of me, out the window," Beattie explains. "I was living in a rented house in Reading, Connecticut, and I knew the tree in its context. It need not have been right in front of me—I'm able to conjure up a tree—but I don't think I would have. Things in my work that have a literary neutrality also have evocative personal connotations. I don't know the plot,

but by the time I finish the first page, I more than half-know where the emotion of the story resides."

In drafting, Beattie experiences her characters as if they were real people, puzzling and unknown. "I generally am surprised by the drift of conversation," she says. Her characters make her laugh. ("This is what Beattie knows best," wrote Lorrie Moore in the *New York Times*, "that when you put people in a room together they will always be funny.") "And some characters," Beattie continues, "much to my surprise, turn out to be monsters."

What surprises her most of all is that her characters often end up saying things to each other that have been said to Beattie in real life. When this happens, it seems the entire story has been written from an unconscious urge to understand the comment and the relationship that spawned it, even though most of the time, it's a comment Beattie has long forgotten. But as the story nears the revelatory moment, she recoils. "Some lines you just don't want to have to write," she says. "I have to write the sentence before I'm really hit in the face. Then the question is whether I can go on, whether I can switch sides and see the other side of the problem, whether I can imagine it differently from the way I saw it in real life."

She gives an example from "The Burning House," a story about a man deciding to leave his wife and little boy for his lover. The affair is not mentioned until the end of the story, when the wife forces a confrontation. "When I was writing 'Burning House,' " Beattie says, "I had no idea that the subtext would ever be spoken, but when I moved the couple to the bedroom I sensed that I was near the end. The wife says to her husband, 'I want to know if you're staying or going,' and that was the moment of shock for me—that she would articulate that. I thought, Well, it's possible that she would say that, but what on earth could I have him say? I immediately flipped and started empathizing with the husband. I had written the whole story to corner him with that question, but when someone had the nerve to speak it so bluntly, when even I didn't, writing the story, I thought, That poor guy! I'm going to scurry over to his side to hear what he's going to say. And that's where I was helped, as I often am, by things that are sort of an amalgam of real things and things made up."

In the story, the husband, invoking their friends and their son, tells his wife, "Everything you've done is commendable. . . . But your whole life, you've made one mistake—you've surrounded yourself with men. Let me tell you something. All men—if they're crazy . . . if they're gay . . . even if they're just six years old. . . . Men think they're Spider-Man and Buck Rogers and Superman. You know what we all feel inside that you don't feel? That we're going to the stars."

Then he takes his wife's hand and says, "I'm looking down on all of this from space. I'm already gone."

About a year before Beattie wrote the story, she was walking along Madison Avenue with a friend. She recalls his saying something "very unprovoked, in terms

of what I was grousing about: he said, 'Can I tell you something? You're making a mistake by hanging out with too many men.' The man who said it to me didn't appear as a character, but his words coming back to me made me realize that the story wasn't at as much of a remove as I had thought when I started writing it. I felt exposed when the husband started talking, though the words weren't mine and had never been mine, but as the writer, I was taking part in the roles of both characters. I was horrified. The weight the lines achieve comes in part from the shock I felt."

The recurrence of things said in life comes as a gift. "When I run out of steam with lying," she says, "with fictionalizing, with being Ann the writer and with all the everything of the whole story, those lines really sock me in the gut." Often, this experience comes right at the end of a story. "It's almost like a moment of desperation when a religious person reaches for exactly the right psalm to console themselves. Except with me, it's the opposite: I go back in time toward something problematic that was said to me, something chilly said to me point blank.

"When I'm drafting," she concludes, "I have an emotional awareness that there's a worm in the rose. But I don't know what the worminess is because I don't know what the rose is. And stories disappear if it doesn't just seem to discover itself."

In 2001 Beattie accepted the Edgar Allan Poe Chair in the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of Virginia. She had not been looking for a teaching position, but the offer was excellent. Then, a month into class, Beattie's parents had massive strokes within ten days of each other. Her father survived for another year. Her mother fell into a coma from which she awoke, but she has not been able to care for herself since. After her father's death, Beattie brought her mother to a nursing facility in Charlottesville. Each year during the long spring semester when Beattie teaches, she is caring for her mother. "She had a bad stroke," Beattie explains, "but she knows who I am. She's got long-term memory, she's got a sense of humor, she's got an enormous vocabulary. Being delusional doesn't change the fact that she likes to go out to a restaurant for lunch." During the rest of the year, when Beattie is away from Charlottesville, the touch-and-go reality of her mother's health means she could be called back at any moment. "You want to know how to press my buttons?" Beattie asks. "Forget to leave my mother's bed rail up at night. She ended up in the emergency room."

When Beattie teaches, writing is out of the question. She gives classes for undergraduate English majors and for graduate creative writing students. Among her favorite subjects to discuss in class are objects used as thematic, geographical, and cultural signifiers in the contemporary American short story. Cars, for example: "If not for cars, it would be very hard for characters to move through the American short story. Cars are so convenient a symbol for displacement as to be almost not a symbol anymore." Other objects include fluorescent lights and refrigerators

("I call them refrigerator stories. So prevalent as to be ridiculous, really.") Then there are gun stories, dog stories, and a lot of snow stories. Beattie, who once wrote a story called "Snow," does not teach her own work but admits to partaking in the object trends. One of her recent stories, "That Last Odd Day in L.A.," features a deer that emerges from the woods to move the central character in a certain way. "I didn't think I was coming up with a radical image," she says. "But later I was amazed to discover how many people that year were writing about deer." Her intuitive connection to the collective unconscious is part of what inscribes her stories in the popular imagination. At times her work is so plugged in, it's prescient. In her 1976 novel *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, a character named Charles dwells on the then-teenaged John F. Kennedy Jr. "The kid will probably be a lawyer or a senator. Like the rest of them, he'll have car accidents."

In spite of the popular appeal of her stories and the continuing influence of her work on contemporary fiction, Beattie says, "I've disappeared." Her books don't sell as many copies as they did in the early 1980s, and fiction today is generally much less in vogue with publishers and readers than it was even a decade ago.

It's another day, a cooler afternoon on the porch, and Beattie is less lively. A dog belonging to two old friends has just died; she and Perry used to watch him for a month every summer, and he'd become so much a part of their lives that Beattie is pictured with him on the back of her most recent collection, *Follies*. "He was sixteen," she says resignedly. "But I'm still depressed."

The mood invites conversation about Beattie's frustration with the waning popularity of literary fiction and with the resultant competitive culture within the ranks of writers and publishers. She points out that the current state of publishing too often depends on letters of recommendation, which determine whether one will be admitted to a writing program, receive a fellowship, find an agent or publisher, or generate book sales. It takes up too much of her time, and it's a faulty system. "It's an abdication of the decision-makers' responsibility," she says. "There is too rarely the sense that the quality of the work will speak for itself. I do think there's a great deal of talent, and that is very hopeful. But I don't like to see talent swept up in an old system in which only Ann Beattie's or some other established writer's endorsement can help writer X, who may in some cases already be working beyond the level of the recommender. It just doesn't make sense. The system has to reimagine itself."

Beattie has long been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and other writers have cited her as responsible for their winning of Guggenheim Fellowships and Pulitzer Prizes. "People have serious misperceptions about the power I wield," she says. "When you give your opinion about work you believe in, you hope that your voice will prevail, but it's only one voice."

Her own work has received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction, and the Rea Award for the Short Story. "Of course, they're welcome," she says. "But you won't find anything framed on the walls in my house. The writing of the book is what matters. The stories are what matters. I like writing, and I like short stories. I like them physically. I like them in manuscript form. I like to hold them."

Beattie's house is populated with artwork rather than books, though her fiction is echoed in several pieces on her walls, such as the print of Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano*, which figures in her story "Going Home with Uccello." A stack of *New Yorkers* can be found in a basket by the loo. And though York is not far from Middlebury, Vermont, site of the annual summertime Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, in twenty years Beattie has gone only twice: once, to give a reading when her good friend Devon Parini took over as administrative director, and again to take Devon and her husband Jay's niece to a cocktail party. Beattie recalls, "She was thirteen, and she really wanted to go. So I surprised them all—I said I'd take her. I had a pair of pink high heels that summer that were exactly half a size too big for her. I stuffed the toes with cotton balls, and she wore my pink high heels, and she and I went to a cocktail party at Bread Loaf. She was so proud. People looked at me like they were seeing a ghost."

Beattie steers clear of literary events, holding instead to the work itself as her touchstone. Beyond the work, she says, "the frantic disappointment in the literary world is just so palpable. It's awful, awful." In part, she laments, there are just too

many books being published. “Do we really need so much chick lit?” she asks. “It seems a kind of hysteria, as if in volume alone, the publishers think they’re bound to get a good writer out there.

“Literary publishing is closing down,” she says, “and the publishers won’t stand up for excellence and help revive it.” Her voice trails off. “Publishers are not the bad guys,” she finally says. “But everybody is going around with the feeling that there’s a problem, and no one has the power to change it. Everyone’s stunned, standing in the headlights, and the headlights aren’t going away.”

Despite her discouragement, Beattie continues to develop the form of her work. The stories in her latest collection, *Follies* (2005), take a different shape to accommodate the passage of time. Her characters have typically been drawn from the people around her, so her earlier characters’ beloved fantasy of the negotiability of life is, for the most part, no longer present. She and her contemporaries are approaching sixty. “A lot of my friends already see how their lives have turned out,” she says. “They’re dealing with terrifying things—aging parents and other mortal things over which no one has much control. The discussions are not quite as speculative as they used to be and don’t set me imagining the way they used to. I used to hear people talking about how they might disembark for a place they had never been. You can look at that in retrospect and laugh, but there was a lot of talk then as though people had free movement. And partly they did; they were not encumbered by families or mortgages or all those things of adult life, but it wasn’t just that. It was a spirit of the ’60s. Now,” Beattie adds, “my friends and I are at an age where the jury’s in.”

The new stories are longer than most of her earlier works—the title story, “Fléchette Follies,” is almost a novella—and they pursue a structure that emerges from her characters’ wrestling with experience, in which the story steps in to reveal what is not said or is inaccessible to the characters. Information is presented to the reader in keeping with the character’s experience, resulting in an organic structure that sometimes feels not unlike a dream.

For example, the 2001 story “That Last Odd Day in L.A.,” concerns Keller, whose near-paranoid fear of intimacy is evident in that everyone calls him by his last name, though he can’t understand why. He is divorced and unable to decide whether he wants to romance his next-door neighbor. As the story opens, his adult daughter calls to invite him for Thanksgiving. Keller’s mind drifts to a previous summer’s trip to visit his niece and nephew in Los Angeles. Not much happened there, except that on the last day he fished a baby possum out of a swimming pool. Keller experiences a surfeit of emotion that he can’t understand—“What the hell!” he thinks, finding himself crying while he rinses the bucket he used to save the animal—and then he sees a deer in the hills not far from the house.

> The second their eyes met, the deer was gone, but in that second it had come clear to him—on this day of endless revelations—that the deer had been casting a beneficent look, as if in thanks. He had felt that: that a deer was acknowledging and thanking him. He was flabbergasted at the odd workings of his brain . . . how could such a man feel unequivocally that a deer had appeared to bless him?

Neither Keller nor Beattie asks anything more of the moment; Keller himself acknowledges that the blessing "hadn't exactly changed his life." Why, then, is it in the story at all? Keller doesn't know why he thinks of the deer—part of his happiness after the encounter stems from the simple fact that he so rarely knows what he feels—but he will think of it again, at the end of the story, when the teenage son of the woman next door accosts him with a gun. Keller tries to help the troubled boy; the gun goes off, and Keller is wounded. In the hospital, weakened and ashamed, facing again a surfeit of emotion he can't understand, he remembers the deer. Again, Beattie holds the moment lightly. The memory offers Keller a chance to understand what he feels. Keller misses it; the reader doesn't. The story turns on Keller's emotional experience, which relates not to the gun or the boy or to his daughter, there in the hospital with him, but to the deer from the summer before. In this and other recent portrayals, Beattie mines her characters' unconscious by dramatizing the array of memories, thoughts, and fantasies that flicker constantly through their minds.

In contrast to Keller, some of Beattie's newest characters are learning to understand loss. "The Rabbit Hole as Likely Explanation" depicts a woman who's a kind of clarified iteration of the classic early Beattie character who resists acknowledging mortality. She's had a stroke and has fallen under a delusion that her deceased husband had another, secret family, with much younger children. This causes her daughter, the protagonist, terrible frustration. As she struggles to engage her mother, she grows increasingly distraught by her inability to break her mother's delusion. Acknowledging that her mother is beyond reasoning would concede the irrevocability of her demise.

The daughter and her brother make a difficult decision to move their mother to a nursing home, and they drive her there together. While the mother chatters away in the front seat, the daughter's mind wanders erratically. "My thoughts drift: the Gucci sunglasses I lost in London; the time I dressed as a skeleton for Halloween. In childhood, I appeared on Halloween as Felix the Cat, as Jiminy Cricket . . . and as a tomato." As her mother goes on, announcing yet again that their father "had an entire family before he met us," the daughter puzzles over her choice of Halloween costumes. "What was wrong with me that I wanted to be a tomato?"

By cutting back and forth between dialogue and the daughter's seemingly unrelated thoughts, Beattie parallels the illogic of the two characters. Both women are at the mercy of their feelings. In her mother's new room at the nursing home, the daughter puts two and two together, telling her mother:

> "Maybe we confused you by growing up so fast or something. I don't want to make you mad by mentioning my age, but maybe all those years that we were a family, so long ago, were like one long Halloween: we were costumed as children, and then we outgrew the costumes and we were grown. . . . Maybe you couldn't understand how we'd all aged, so you invented us again as young people."

The explanation catches her mother in a lucid moment, and mother and daughter share a response to the doctor, who comes into the room with a crazy explanation for why he's soaking wet (a freak accident forced his car into a pond).

> "Maybe it's just raining out, but it feels like he was in a pond," my mother says, winking at me.
>
> "You understand!" I say.

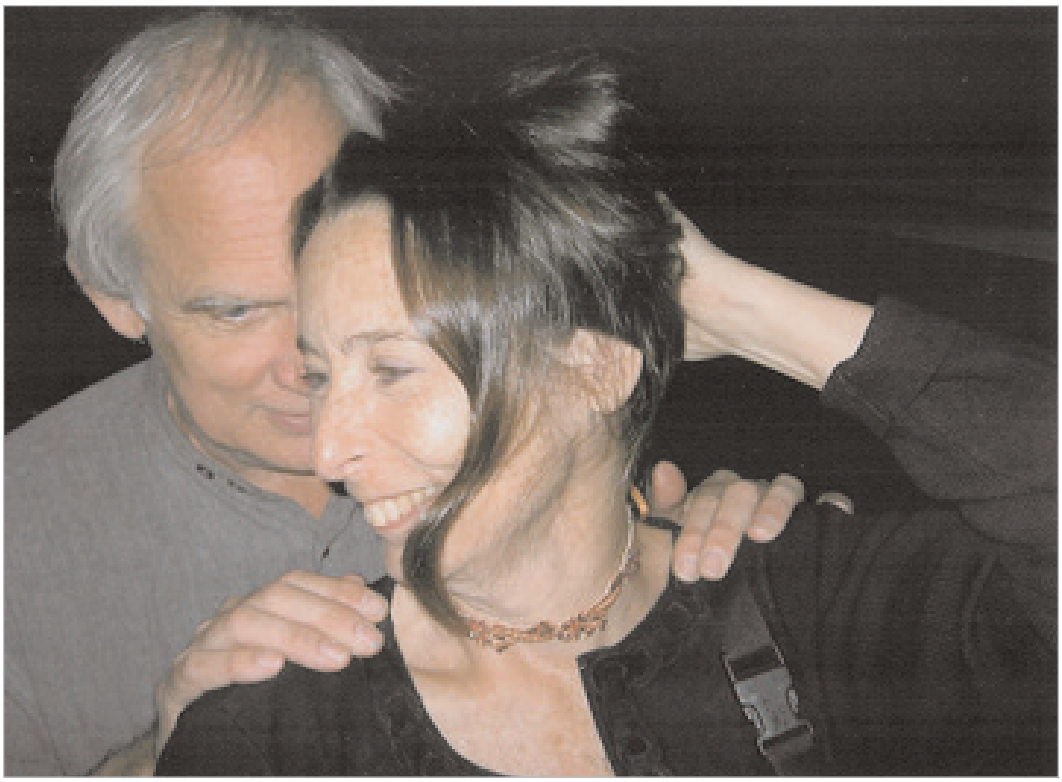
The force of time suddenly seems no less alarming than any of the other crazy things that happen. The daughter grasps that for her mother as well as for herself, the world is organized more by experience than by what actually happens, and this truth, very simply, makes them laugh.

Beattie is forever allowing herself to be surprised by the world. It's a necessary condition. "I tell you," she says, "every day of my life is nothing but acknowledging my severe limitations. I really mean that."

These limitations mostly concern the quotidian. She can't read maps. She touches her computer's On switch "as if the thing is about to blow up." She refuses to carry a cell phone, and hates using email, sending brief, e. e. cummings messages lacking punctuation or capitalization. Her resistance to the pseudoknowingness of adult life provides both safety and strategy: accident as a quickening force is part of her creative process. Taped to her refrigerator door is a photocopied novelty image of a fox's face surrounded by a sea of hounds. The caption reads, "When you're in deep trouble, say nothing, and try to act like you belong." The fox, of course, is the wily one. In the midst of clamor, the author's eye takes its fill.

If the house in York has a motif, it is play. There is no doorbell but a round knob centered low on the big front door; when turned, it chimes. "It's an old kind of doorbell," Beattie explains. "We didn't know what it was for years, until a kid came and figured it out."

The dinner table is set for a late summer meal with candelabras, all lit, of aqua, peach, and lavender tapers; the salt and pepper shakers are in the shape of ballerina cows. The glass-fronted corner cabinet in the dining room showcases a ceramic creamer in the image of the Queen of England, whose head serves as a spout. Overhead hangs a beautiful art deco chandelier, a central lamp with side bulbs and a single crystal tassel, which was sent to Beattie by a friend in San Francisco, where it had been removed from a demolished hotel. "He just sent it to me COD," she



explains, "and promised that I'd love it. I had just enough in my checkbook the day it arrived."

Beattie sets out hors d'oeuvres and considers that it's been thirty years since her first two books were published to great acclaim and she was thrust into the publishing limelight. She's recently been reminded of time passing by a man who recovered recordings of readings and talks delivered at a summer writing conference in the late 1970s; he's sent transcripts to all the participants for their edits and approval. Beattie is editing her younger self and marvels at how naive she was: "I was too young to know that you don't answer questions from the audience about how much you got for your latest advance, about what you think about X's book or Y's book. I was too young to know anything."

What she regrets, however, is the demand on her writing time. In a week she and Perry will head to Virginia to visit her mother, en route to Florida through early winter. Perry has spent the morning painting and the afternoon building crates for canvases, and Beattie is anxious about everything that must get done before they close up the house. "Place is not the problem," she explains. "I can write anywhere. It's just all the rest of it."

This summer has been quieter than the last, though Beattie and Perry entertained a constant stream of friends and houseguests. "The first year, there were three days when we were alone," she says. The dining room table has an air of long evenings of conversation—there are little piles of pastel wax remaining from spent candles—and tonight will be no different. Perry is a great raconteur, and Beattie joins him to

tell a story about a dinner party she hosted many years ago for members of their extended family.

"Someone was graduating from college," she recalls, "just starting out. We threw a dinner party, and I cooked. It was too much for them; they were seated too close to each other, this family that rarely gathered together. I got up and went into the kitchen to make whipped cream. A husband and wife ran into each other there in the kitchen, and I heard her say to him, only half-joking, 'Soon, this will all be over. Soon, we'll all be dead.' "

Beattie's eyes grow wide, and Perry starts to laugh, which sets her to laughing too. "I was standing there with my bowl of whipped cream, just stunned."

The story recalls Beattie's fiction, its warmth and entertaining value, and also the way Beattie as author seems to join the reader in observing her characters. Her surprise at the words they speak belies an innocence that persists alongside her mastery, and that explains the light in her work. "I am curious about people," she says, "but I don't have to be. I learn it all anyway."

Earlier in the day, Beattie explained that Perry could be relied on to discuss two pet subjects: global warming and overpopulation. ("If he and I were alone on a desert island," she says, "Lincoln would bring up the problem of overpopulation.") Now, as he uncorks the wine, Perry laments global warming, and Beattie smiles to herself. It's a mild night in early October, the harvest moon almost full over the lawn. Beattie is preparing a salad, and in her arms she holds up a big bowl of emerald lettuces; they're beautiful.

"Aren't they, though?" she replies. She explains that she just bought them at the York Farmers' Market, from a man she calls "Lettuceman." "He told me what kind they are, all different kinds. I told him, Lettuceman, you have the best lettuces. His son was there. He turned to him, so proud, said, 'D'ya hear that? D'ya hear that?'

"I think he'll have to find his way into one of the stories," she says.

Lately she has a new story in production at *The New Yorker*, and a novel is taking shape at the edges of her consciousness. "I'm superstitious," she says, and won't discuss it; but it's there. "I've been reading some books. Doing some research." She allows another smile. "I'll get down to Florida for the winter, and I'll see." N

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