

Book Reviews

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an excerpt of

*Essential Themes, Eloquent Variations**

Although some short-story collections are mere assemblages of an author's recent work, most often there is a central theme that either recurs or develops through a given volume. Ever since the origins of the short story, in fact, practitioners of the genre have favored cycles of stories linked either by common theme, shared setting, or recurrent symbolic motif. However fond writers may be of the "single effect" Edgar Allan Poe famously prescribed as the aim of shorter fiction, they have also sought what might be called the "symphonic effect" of groupings or linked stories that enable them to convey a larger and more complex meaning than a single story might encompass.

Poe's own *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) is one of the earliest examples of this kind of unified collection; in that book, the stories have no common setting or characters but are related to one another by the stylistic and thematic concerns announced in the title. Since Poe's time, collections of linked stories have almost become the norm. Often the common unifying element is setting, as in such otherwise disparate volumes as Kate Chopin's *Bayou Folk* (1894), Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899), James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), John Updike's *Olinger Stories* (1964), and Annie Proulx's *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999). In other cases, an author may feature recurrent characters as well as settings, as in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* (1949), while still other

*An essay-review of

DROWNING LESSONS. By Peter Selgin. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. 237 pages. \$24.95.

WATER: NINE STORIES. By Alyce Miller. Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2008. 217 pages. \$15.95, paper.

BROCCOLI AND OTHER TALES OF FOOD AND LOVE. By Lara Vapnyar. New York: Pantheon, 2008. 148 pages. \$20.00.

DOWNRIVER. By Jeanne M. Leiby. Durham, NC: Carolina Wren Press, 2008. 161 pages. \$14.95, paper.

THE POETRY LIFE: TEN STORIES. By Baron Wormser. Fort Lee, NJ: CavanKerry Press, 2008. 196 pages. \$18.00, paper.

collections attempt a kind of loosely connected novel-in-stories, as do the Nick Adams tales of Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1924) and the Annie Quirt stories in Joyce Carol Oates's *All the Good People I've Left Behind* (1979). All these books are known not only for individual pieces that have often become anthology selections, but also for attempting the sweeping design and narrative arc that have normally been the province of the novel.

In the five new collections reviewed here, present-day authors seem as eager as ever to make similar attempts. Peter Selgin, Alyce Miller, and Lara Vapnyar all assay a single symbolic motif that they develop through their various stories, Jeanne M. Leiby writes of people bound by a specific locale, and Baron Wormser presents a group of diverse characters who have an experience in common: their lives have been changed by their obsessive reading of a favorite poet. In all these books, the symphonic effect is attempted and achieved, each writer pursuing an essential theme but working variations on the theme that make for collections both eloquent and engaging.