

first lady who resembles Laura Bush in so many ways — from her modest only-child roots, to her car accident as a teenager that kills a popular classmate, to her rich, hell-raising husband who owns a baseball team before finding Jesus and becoming governor and then president — that it's not hard to imagine partisan outrage in response. Many Republicans will deplore this roman à clef as an invasion of privacy, while a lot of Democrats will abhor the tender portrayal.

Detractors from both sides of the

Marriage to Charlie is marriage to a dynasty, and he is the dutiful dolt of a son. When she asks whether his managerial job is full time, he responds without hesitation: "Alice, here's an insight I'll give you into who I am. Being a Blackwell is my full-time job."

Whoo-boy. Run, Alice, run.

But she doesn't, and he does, and over time she is a willing, if reticent, prop to his political aspirations.

At its core, this is a story of marriage, any marriage, and the compromises that chip away at dreamy love

an inspiration than a crutch, and one that Sittenfeld simply doesn't need.

Then again, would this story carry as much punch if we didn't think that maybe, just maybe, this is how Laura Bush really feels? There is that moment, after all, toward the end when she's riding alone in the back seat of the motorcade, headed back to the White House. Peering out the window, Alice silently chastises the citizens along the road: "All I did is marry him. You are the ones who gave him the power."

Student of the short story becomes a master

By **AMBER DERMONT**
For the **Journal-Constitution**

Whenever critics grumble about the demise of the golden age of short story writing and the rise of the conventional "MFA Workshop Story," it might do them well to consider that one of the greatest practitioners of the form, Flannery O'Connor, was a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. O'Connor's wildness and comic brilliance were surely her own, but her sense of craft, structure and precision owe a debt to her studies.

Since its founding in 1983, the University of Georgia Press' Flannery O'Connor Award has emerged as the premier prize for short story writers and their collections. Previous winners, including Antonia Nelson and Ha-

Jin, have gone on to long, celebrated careers. Andrew Porter, the winner of the 2008 Flannery O'Connor Award for his collection, "The Theory of Light and Matter," is a worthy heir to O'Connor's good name.

Like O'Connor, Porter is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. (In the interest of full disclosure, I am a graduate as well and overlapped with the author during his time there.) Porter's use of poetic yet plainspoken language and his thoughtful consideration of the fractured American family place his writing in direct dialogue with the work of John Cheever and Raymond Carver. But Porter is no mere student of these masters. As the 10 stories in this luminous collection demonstrate, Porter has his own compelling vision of human longing, loneliness and grief.

One of the most powerful stories, the Pushcart Prize-winning "Departure," explores a teenage boy's attempt to date an Amish girl. The author wrestles with religion, promiscuity and the insurmountable cultural chasm that separates the narrator from the object

of his desire. Porter wisely challenges readers' assumptions, as when the girl gets drunk and attempts to seduce the narrator. "She was gripping my body tightly then, and it surprised me. And it scared me, too — because it did not feel tender anymore, but angry almost."

Throughout the collection, Porter repeatedly tackles the question of human sexuality and desire. In "Connecticut," a son wonders about his mother's secret love affair with a woman, in "Azul," a childless married couple encourage a teenage exchange student to have a homosexual affair, and in "River Dog," a man labors to understand his brother's predatory past.

Unlike many younger male writers, the author does not shy away from constructing strong, complicated female characters. The title story, "The Theory of Light and Matter," is narrated by a woman who regrets that her greatest hope for happiness is not to be found in her current marriage but in the memory of a long ago, almost love affair with a physics professor. A profound sadness blankets much of the collection, yet the characters resist

their own melancholy and search out isolated moments of hope and tenderness.

There is a timeless quality to these stories. Porter does not rely on pop culture references or clever postmodern experiments. The writing is always straightforward, polished and in service to a human story. Just as an avid reader of fiction can tell a Carver narrative within a few sentences, Andrew Porter's writing is memorably stylized.

The early 21st century is proving to be a particularly promising time for short story writers. The success of recent collections by ZZ Packer, Julie Orringer, Nam Lee and Adam Haslett, all graduates of creative writing programs, suggests that the short story is not only alive and well, but that the study of writing can lead to wholly original and varied voices. Andrew Porter's "The Theory of Light and Matter" is a memorable debut that honors the history of the short story form while blazing a new trajectory all its own. Somewhere Flannery O'Connor is strolling among her pet peacocks smiling.

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SHORT STORIES

"The Theory of Light and Matter"

by Andrew Porter.
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