

## First

### ANDREW PORTER'S PRIZEWINNING STORIES

AS ANDREW Porter was finishing college, he imagined that he could embark on a writing career in the same way his friends were pursuing business and law. The path seemed logical enough, and he set about following it to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where little dissuaded him from believing he was well on his way. In his first semester, his story "Hole" won a national contest sponsored by the prestigious, now-defunct *Story* magazine, where it was then published. Later that year he published another story and earned an impressive second-year fellowship. He secured an agent, had a list of New York City magazine editors and publishing houses reaching out to him, and upon leaving Iowa was awarded the James Michener–Paul Engle Fellowship, given to Iowa graduates to support the writing of their book. Porter moved to Houston, Texas, where he spent the year doing nothing but writing, often for six hours a day. He was energized, the work was going well, and by late spring he was polishing a nearly complete short story collection. "Everything was falling into place, so there was no reason for me not to believe that this was how it was done," Porter says. He was twenty-six years old; it was 1999.

Just last month, nearly a decade after Porter had been poised for big-time success, his debut collection, *The Theory of Light and Matter*, was published by the University of Georgia Press, as the winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, a prize for which he had submitted his manuscript himself. Although the O'Connor Award is a prestigious one, it wouldn't have been outlandish for the young author to think that his first book would be sold by an agent to a major house. And that it wouldn't have taken ten long years. What happened?

That part of the story is painful for him to tell even now. Toward the end of that postgraduate year in Houston, Porter went to a friend's house one night for a few beers. When he returned home, around one in the morning, his apartment had been ransacked. "Everything was gone," Porter remembers, "my stereo, my CDs, my clothes, my computer, my disks with all my backed-up stories, even the little briefcase where I kept all of my hard copies. In other words, everything I'd written that



**NICOLE PEZOLD** is a magazine writer and editor in New York City.

year, almost everything I'd ever written, was gone." A few days after the burglary, his checkbook was found in a Dumpster across town; otherwise there were no leads and little interest from the police.

The loss was almost unbearable. It tested him so deeply that, over the next few years, he came to question everything he thought he knew about being a writer; he almost gave it up altogether. But now he has come back stronger and—having watched friends struggle and publish their work in the intervening decade—altogether wiser. Several of the stories included in *The Theory of Light and Matter* have already garnered distinction in their own right. "Azùl," in which a childless couple tries to fix their sputtering marriage by hosting a foreign exchange student, received an honorable mention in the 2007 anthology *The Best American Short Stories*. And "Departure," which follows the life of a teenager in the hills where suburban Pennsylvania rubs shoulders with Amish country, won a Pushcart Prize and was broadcast last May on National Public Radio's *Selected Shorts*. His new collection also includes a couple of Porter's earliest published works, such as "Hole," which would have appeared in his lost collection ten years ago. Most of the stories, however, were written over the past six years as Porter clawed his way back into a literary life.

**I**MMEDIATELY following the burglary, Porter tried to reconstruct the stories from memory but they proved elusive; he failed to conjure the right tone or language. With his fellowship money spent, he moved to California, first to the Bay Area, then to Orange County, and scraped together a living by teaching writing at community colleges and continuing education programs. Mostly he taught classes in composition and rhetoric or English as a second language, and found that few of his students cared to be there. Drained emotionally and with his confidence

shaken, he wrote next to nothing for almost three years. He told his agent not to bother with him anymore. He bought a training guide for the LSATs as he considered other careers. "My first focus was just kind of surviving out there," he says in a thoughtful, even tone over the phone from his current home in San Antonio.

The turning point came in 2001, when he applied for a visiting writer position at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), and to his surprise was offered the post. "It was like someone had thrown me a life preserver," he says. Even though the new job promised nothing beyond one year of employment, the opportunity galvanized him. Finally he was teaching fiction writing to interested students, and for the first time since the theft he began to write seriously.

Porter typically starts a story by writing pages upon pages of raw con-

tent about the characters before going back and devising plot and structure. "I find that it's important for me to first discover who the characters are, to know them very well," he says. This attention lends his stories emotional truth, says fellow author and Iowa classmate Holiday Reinhorn. Porter also tends to work alone, without any feedback. "He really just does it," says Reinhorn, who, along with a pair of other Iowa graduates, is one of his closest friends. But even they rarely read early drafts. "He's a one-man band, kind of," Reinhorn says. The exception, however, is his girlfriend, Jennifer Rowe, whom he met in Los Angeles when they both taught summer school. Now a PhD candidate in American poetry of the 1950s and 1960s at the University of Maryland, College Park, Rowe is Porter's "number one reader," he says. And she also, along with his circle of graduate

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EXCERPT

### The Theory of Light and Matter

It's naive to assume that another person can fulfill you, or save you, if the two things are, in fact, different, and I have never felt that way with Colin. I simply believe that he fulfills a part of me, an important part of me, and that Robert fulfilled another equally important part of me. The part of me Robert fulfilled is a part which I imagine Colin, even now, doesn't know exists. It is the part of me that can destroy as easily as it loves. It is the part of me that feels safest and most at home behind closed doors, in a dark bedroom, that believes that the only truth lies in the secrets we keep from each other. Robert is the secret that I have kept from Colin for almost ten years. I have imagined telling him sometimes. It has been ten years, and in that time we have lasted through a miscarriage, near bankruptcy, and both of his parents dying, and I feel at this point that there is almost nothing we can't weather together. But it's not that I'm afraid of how he will react. I know him well enough to know that he will internalize it. He may hate me for it, but he would never show me. His whole life, it seems, he has gone out of his way to spare me pain and I know that even as I told him of my feelings for Robert, he would be thinking how not to hurt me. Guilt is the reason we tell our lovers these secrets, these truths. It is a selfish act, after all, and implicit in it is the assumption that we are doing the right thing, that bringing the truth out into the open will somehow alleviate some of the guilt. But it doesn't. The guilt, like any self-inflicted injury, becomes a permanent thing, as real as the act itself. Bringing it out into the open simply makes it everyone's injury. And that is why I never told him. I never told him because I knew he would have never told me.

From "The Theory of Light and Matter" by Andrew Porter, reprinted from *Prairie Schooner*, 80, no. 2 (Summer 2006) by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright © 2006 by the University of Nebraska Press.

school friends, helped him through the darkest years. “I had the support system from Iowa of people who are out there just like me, struggling, trying to write, facing a lot of setbacks, and persevering,” Porter says.

**A**FTER his stint as a visiting writer, Porter floated between teaching creative writing part-time at UMBC and Johns Hopkins University and began submitting his growing number of new stories to magazines and journals. In 2003, after “Coyotes,” a story about a boy and his itinerant, failed-filmmaker father that was included in the new collection, appeared in the *Antioch Review*, a new agent approached him. It felt like a breakthrough, even though, Porter says, all his publishing achievements came about through his own efforts. “There’s this anxiety writers feel when they don’t have an agent, that it says something about them as a writer, that it makes them somehow less legitimate,” he says. “But an agent can’t do anything unless you have something they want to sell.”

By the time Porter had enough material for a new collection, it was not the type of book most agents wanted to—or even could—sell. In the decade since he had last reached the cusp of publication for his book, the market had completely changed. In order to sell a short story collection, he needed a novel as well. Reinhorn had encountered similar problems when trying to publish her own short story collection. “A lot of times you hear, ‘Well, you need to write a novel first because collections don’t sell, or you should write

this short story as a novel,’” she says. (In the end, she landed a two-book deal and is following up her 2005 debut, *Big Cats: Stories*, published by Free Press, with, of course, a novel.) At the urging of his agent, and with his gradu-

time. “The novel was coming along fine, but years were passing,” he says. Not wanting to wait any longer, he decided to submit the collection for contests himself, and last fall he learned he had won the O’Connor Award.

He received one thousand dollars and a standard publishing contract. *The Theory of Light and Matter*, which takes its name from a story about the unlikely and physically unconsummated affair between a student and her much older physics professor, was published mostly as Porter had submitted it. He decided to omit one story that contest reviewers had deemed tonally distant from the others, and the manuscript was subjected to a rigorous round of copyediting.

**I**N PORTER’S debut story collection, he casts an unflinching, psychological eye on modern suburban life, its failed or revised dreams, and the madness and illnesses that can chip away at families and relationships. Like several of his characters, Porter (the youngest of three children and the son of a pulmonary physician) grew up in the suburbs of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It was a setting the author eschewed when, as a college student, he first began writing stories.

“I would set stories in places where I wished I’d grown up, so I had a character who lived in a loft in SoHo and had really sophisticated friends who talked about art,” he says. “And of course I didn’t know that world, so those stories ultimately didn’t quite ring true.” Eventually he realized that suburbia offered plenty of the universal conflicts.



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ate school peers as examples, Porter set his finished short story collection aside in 2004 and began tackling the longer form.

Around the same time, however, he became a full-time assistant professor of creative writing at Trinity University in San Antonio. The tenure-track position offered stability, but his duties as a professor also constrained his

Most of the stories are recounted by a first-person narrator who is looking back at his or her life and taking stock of events that were not comprehensible when they first happened. In some instances, one cannot help but read Porter's own tale between the lines, albeit in wry form. In "Departure," the young protagonist flirts with an impossible relationship as well as the danger of racing across an abandoned wooden bridge. Porter writes: "If you slipped once, if your timing was just slightly off, your foot would slide into an empty space and you might snap a shin bone, or worse, if you were unfortunate and slipped through, you might fall thirty feet into the water. And of course we were young and confident and so we never slipped, or fell, or even stumbled."

**G**ETTING his collection published—as difficult as that was—was really only the beginning. The first printing for the book is small, about two thousand hardback copies, but Porter hopes to sell the paperback

I'd expected I would," he admits. "I've been able to benefit from listening to them talk about their mistakes, listening to them recount the things they'd wished they'd done in the weeks and months before and after their books came out."

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rights for a larger release. While he says that embracing the public side of the writing life doesn't come easily to him, he's not missing any opportunities to promote his book. "I've spent a lot of time talking with friends from Iowa who had books come out during that decade when I was just puttering along, and that's actually been one of the blessings of publishing a book so long after

So far Porter has organized readings in Baltimore, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, all cities where he'd have a "built-in audience of friends," he says. Several friends from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, which he attended in the summer of 2005 as a Tennessee Williams Scholar, also offered to help. Fiction writer Adam Scott, for example, set up a handful of readings in Illinois, which will dovetail with other appearances Porter intends to make in Iowa. The result is a mini-Midwest book tour scheduled for February. At the urging

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of yet another friend, Porter contacted an old acquaintance from Houston, Susan Davis, who now works for NPR in South Carolina. She put him in touch with the producers of *All Things Considered*, who invited him to participate in the *Three Books...* series, where he recommended books on NPR's Web site this past August. "I would've never done that at age twenty-five," he says. "I would've just sat back and expected things to happen."

It's questionable whether sitting back and quietly watching a book rollout has ever worked well. But in today's market, being proactive in the publishing process is important. According to Reinhorn, it is essential and means being assertive with an agent or publisher, monitoring book-jacket designs, and taking an interest in marketing as well as publicity. She credits her own education in these nonwriting skills to her husband, the actor Rainn Wilson, who faced his own struggles before landing the role of Dwight on the much-loved

NBC comedy series *The Office*. As soon as Reinhorn learned about Porter's book, she began organizing a reading for him at the Knitting Factory in Los Angeles with professional actors, which is scheduled to take place this month.

Porter will continue to devote this academic year to promoting *The Theory of Light and Matter*, along with full-time teaching, even as he's busy at work on not one, but two novels. Since the burglary, he has never quite written with the same ease or at the same pace. He questions the direction of his stories far more often. And with the novels, he also has to consider more carefully how to sustain a reader's interest through three or four hundred pages. Though the first novel is near completion, he no longer feels pressure to finish it in a whirlwind, or to focus solely on novel writing when he's struck by a new idea for a short story. He knows he has enjoyed a string of good fortune recently, but he is also aware that it is in large part the fruit of years of tedious labor. Porter often

tells his students: "A writing career is not completely rooted in talent. Nor is it based on what success is happening right now. It's whether you can make yourself work through those darker periods when you're not getting a lot of recognition or interest. That ability to keep persevering ultimately separates writers who publish books from those who don't."

Porter also warns his students to safeguard their work. He now does so compulsively, backing up his writing at least once a month on three key-chain hard drives, which he stuffs in different locations around the house, and frequently sending drafts of stories as attachments to his own e-mail account, so that, even in the worst-case scenario, they'll always exist in cyberspace. Last year he bought a house, and he is considering installing an alarm system. "I still occasionally feel a tinge of anxiety about losing everything again," he says, "but now that the book actually exists I think some of that has gone away." ∞

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