



What's Next? Short Fiction in Time of Change

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The emotional, provocative stories collected in What's Next? concern the apprehension that accompanies change.

There is one echoing question in the throes of transformation—a question that can linger and settle in the bones, a question that editor Sharyn Skeeter posed to a diverse group of writers in the short story collection *What's Next?*

In these stories, change is inevitable; it also takes on many different forms. In Brenda Peynado's "The Touches," there's a changing sense of self in the wake of new sensations. In Tom Gammarino's "Future Studies," change is represented by mourning—for the dreams and concepts that were once a sustaining force.

Each story centers itself by asking how change should be responded to when it comes. The answers are wrapped up in experiences, emotions, and memories. Though each story approaches its themes from a separate angle (there are romantic, family, and collegial relationships represented), they all acknowledge a communal aspect of responding to

life's growing pains. This is never more obvious than in Toiya Kristen Finley's "Outer Rims" and Joseph Bruchac's "Visions." In the former, rising sea levels have redrawn the coastline, an unidentified new disease runs rampant, and still the impulse to lend aid to someone in need is strong enough to jeopardize a family's survival in the face of an impending storm. In the latter, the partnership between two hotshot firefighters and the impact their decisions will have on their families is at the forefront of the narrative.

There are stories here about new beginnings too: Amina Gautier's "A Whole New World" concerns a new job in a new city that feels like coming home; Sharyn Skeeter's "Office Break" is about releasing childhood trauma. In every case, there are unmistakable urges to either resist or predict that which happens after the dust settles.

The variable length of the stories enhances the overall complexity of the collection, adding nuance and depth to otherwise ordinary circumstances. The two shortest pieces—George Saunders's "Sticks" and Maurice Carlos Ruffin's "Elections"—leave lingering questions about the impact of grief, emotional abuse, and infidelity. A longer piece, Meng Jin's "In the Event," starts by exploring earthquake precautions and ends by stepping into the realities of what it means to be present in a relationship.

The thematic consistency allows for full and total immersion into the various landscapes of contributing authors, offering opportunities to explore new possibilities and configurations of what change can be. Skeeter's decision to include stories that were previously published showcases the timelessness of the subject and the timeliness of the collection.

The emotional, provocative stories collected in *What's Next?* concern the palpable sense of apprehension that accompanies change.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (June 15, 2023)

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