



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“In a way these ‘stories’ are true; they represent my style of living, my particular lot. The dominant feature of that lot is a profound solitude, a withdrawal from the cares of daily life. Solitude is the catalyst that brings reality to fermentation, to the precipitating out of figures and colors.”

-Bruno Schulz, 1892-1942,
from the introduction to
The Street of Crocodiles

I have been reading short stories lately. It started with my goal of at least reading one thing in my weekly *New Yorker*, since I never get all the way through and just looking at the cartoons didn't seem like quite enough. I used to read short stories all the time - in magazines, in collections, in classes. But they can be a formidable genre, at least for me, because although brief, one story can be so dense it leaves an impression for hours. For that reason, they don't always make good bedtime reading, which is sometimes the only free reading time I have.

Two of my favorite short stories are *Raising Demons* and *Life Among the Savages*, both by Shirley Jackson. These long and entertaining stories are about Jackson's life as she raised her children; and, no matter how often I read them, they make me laugh.

Lately, though, I've been reading a wide variety of stories. Like many public

libraries, the Albany Library has an extensive short story collection. Since it can seem overwhelming to choose from all those books, I have asked a few people for recommendations and this has provided me with a range of ideas, from the O. Henry award books to the stories by Edna O'Brien. I have also found some wonderful books on the new bookshelves, particularly stories by non-American writers. In fact, if you search for short stories in the Alameda County Library catalog, it is incredible how many different countries and languages are represented. There is everything from Chinese to Hebrew to Hindi to Japanese, Russian, Persian and many more.

One collection is Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, which is full of stories that are beautifully detailed and heavy with multiple emotions; they seem like the very essence of what a short story should be.

Speaking with the Angel, a

collection of original short stories edited by Nick Hornby, is also worth reading. In the introduction, Hornby explains that the book was designed as a fundraiser for the private school his autistic son attends. The writers include Colin Firth, Zadie Smith, Dave Eggers, Helen Fielding and several others. The first story, which is by Robert Harris, is called “PMQ” and it is about the nighttime adventures of a Prime Minister, after he crawls out the window of a gas station bathroom.

One of my daughters recommended *The Street of Crocodiles*, by Bruno Schulz, a Jewish teacher, writer and artist, who was murdered in 1942 when he ventured into the “Aryan” section of Drogobych. According to the book’s introduction, he found comfort in the works of his favorite poet, Rainier Maria Rilke, saying, “The existence of his

book is a pledge that the tangled, mute masses of things unformulated within us may yet emerge to the surface miraculously distilled.”

His writings reflect both that idea and his artist’s perception of the world, using descriptions that are so original and yet so apt that I sometimes need to stop and think about each one.

And finally, for children, I like the charming *Ellen’s Lion*, by Crockett Johnson, the author of *Barnaby*, one of my favorite childhood books. These twelve stories are about Ellen and her adventures with her stuffed lion, a creature who frequently seems much wiser than his owner.