

## INTRODUCTION

The 2014 Knickerbocker Prize



*David James Poissant*

### *WHAT'S A NOVELLA?*

I've been asking myself this question for a while. Last year, I got so interested in the form that I taught a class on the subject. Now, having read and taught over a dozen representations of the form, from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and John Hawkes' *The Lime Twig*, to Jane Smiley's *The Age of Grief* and David Leavitt's *The Term Paper Artist*, I still have no idea precisely what a novella is. Oh, sure, you can find any number of essays that purport to know. They'll tell you that it's not just a matter of page count, or else that it is simply a matter of page count. Some writers or critics propose that a novella is defined by its structure, others by the span of time the story covers. Some theorize that the heart of a novella is strung to matters of point of view, while still others argue that a novella's definition has something to do with pacing. A novella can be episodic or must never be episodic. A novella must take place in a compressed period of time, or not. Some say that, when

it comes to novellas, as with, say, bananas, you know one when you see one.

I don't know. I'm not going to pretend to know what a novella is. But I'd like to think that I know *good writing* when I see it. And, lucky for me, editor Heather Jacobs and the team at *Big Fiction* did the sorting, the deciding what was a novella and what wasn't, and all I had to do was read the top ten and pick my two faves. Here, I'll dispense with the part where I talk about the inherent subjectivity of writing contests and taste, and I'll take it as a given that you, dear reader, understand that my two picks represent not *the* best of the best so much as they represent *my* best of the best, selected from what were ten *really strong* stories, or novellas, or whatever you want to call them.

I don't want to spoil them for you, but I'll go as far as to say that they're both dynamite pieces of fiction, and what excites me most about these two pieces is how different they are. Alan Sincic's incantatory "The Babe" is voice-driven and manic and funny and dark and loud. It's fantastical. And, despite its length, the novella spans mere hours. Margaret Luongo's mesmerizing "Three Portraits of Elaine Shapiro" is episodic and searching and moving and melancholy and quiet. It's realist, and the story spans years. These novellas couldn't be more different, but both house everything I love in good fiction: well-drawn characters, an attention to line and voice, and the electric feeling you get when you recognize that the author's every word has been tortured over.

I'm so proud to be able to present these stories to you, and I'm thrilled to have played a small role in *Big Fiction's* admirable and necessary mission to give a great home to long-form fiction. Enjoy! ☺☺



DAVID JAMES POISSANT is the author of the story collection *The Heaven of Animals* (Simon & Schuster). His stories have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *One Story*, *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, and in the *Best New American Voices* and *New Stories from the South* anthologies.