from one another, give you a range of models. Isaac Babel’s dark and descriptive “Crossing the River Zbrucz” shows war at its grimmest. In sharp contrast, Donald Barthelme’s “The Baby” takes a potentially grim situation and turns it into comedy. Finally, Roberta Allen’s “Marzipan” is both wry and poignant.

Taken together, these three stories will provide material for a discussion of the elements of fiction. We will make frequent reference to the three stories, so it’s worth reading each one at least twice. If you’re still not ready to write after reading about the basics of fiction, you will want to turn to the “kick-starts” writing prompts in “Getting Started Writing the Short-Short Story.” And because reading is so often a trigger for writing, the mini-anthology of short-shorts that concludes this chapter is another potential source of inspiration.

Isaac Babel

Crossing the River Zbrucz

The Russian writer Isaac Babel (1894–1940) is considered by many as one of the greatest writers of short fiction of the twentieth century. Francine Prose praises the way Babel typically introduces “some element of unease” so that his paragraphs “make us catch our breath in the final sentence.” And Tom Teicholz writes: “He stands in the footsteps of the reader, alternately awed, impressed and horrified by [his] characters and their world.”

Babel was a war correspondent for the Soviets during World War I, so he had firsthand knowledge of the conflict between Russia and Poland described in this story, which was first published in his 1926 collection The Red Cavalry Stories. It is important to remember, however, that even though “Crossing the River Zbrucz” is written in the voice of a callous Russian army officer, Babel himself was Jewish, and his real sympathies are clearly with the Jewish family whose home has been invaded. Although Babel enjoyed considerable success while he was alive, and he is generally considered one of the masters of the short story, his life was cut tragically short. Never one to mute his condemnation when he saw injustice, Babel ran afoul of the Soviet authorities and was arrested by the secret police and “disappeared” in 1939. It was later learned that not long after the arrest he was executed and his body was thrown into a communal grave.

The commander of the Sixth Division reported that Novograd-Volynsk1 was taken at dawn today. The staff is now withdrawing from Krapivno2, and our

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1. A city in the border region between Russia and Poland.
2. A town in that same region.
cavalry transport stretches in a noisy rear guard along the high road that goes from Brest to Warsaw, a high road built on the bones of muzhiks3 by Czar Nicholas I.

Fields of purple poppies are blossoming around us, a noon breeze is frolicking in the yellowing rye, virginal buckwheat is standing on the horizon like the wall of a faraway monastery. Silent Volhynia4 is turning away, Volhynia is leaving, heading into the pearly white fog of the birch groves, creeping through the flowery hillocks, and with weakened arms entangling itself in the underbrush of hops. The orange sun is rolling across the sky like a severed head, gentle light glimmers in the ravines among the clouds, the banners of the sunset are fluttering above our heads. The stench of yesterday’s blood and slaughtered horses drips into the evening chill. The blackened Zbrucz roars and twists the foaming knots of its rapids. The bridges are destroyed, and we wade across the river. The majestic moon lies on the waves. The water comes up to the horses’ backs, purling streams trickle between hundreds of horses’ legs. Someone sinks, and loudly curses the Mother of God. The river is littered with the black squares of the carts and filled with humming, whistling, and singing that thunders above the glistening hollows and the snaking moon.

Late at night we arrive in Novograd. In the quarter to which I am assigned I find a pregnant woman and two red-haired Jews with thin necks, and a third Jew who is sleeping with his face to the wall and a blanket pulled over his head. In my room I find ransacked closets, torn pieces of women’s fur coats on the floor, human excrement, and fragments of the holy Seder plate that the Jews use once a year for Passover.

“Clean up this mess!” I tell the woman. “How can you live like this?”

The two Jews get up from their chairs. They hop around on their felt soles and pick up the broken pieces of porcelain from the floor. They hop around in silence, like monkeys, like Japanese acrobats in a circus, their necks welling and twisting. They spread a ripped eiderdown5 on the floor for me, and I lie down by the wall, next to the third, sleeping Jew. Timorous poverty descends over my bed.

Everything has been killed by the silence, and only the moon, clasping its round, shining, carefree head in its blue hands, loiters beneath my window.

I rub my numb feet, lie back on the ripped eiderdown, and fall asleep. I dream about the commander of the Sixth Division. He is chasing the brigade commander on his heavy stallion, and shoots two bullets into his eyes. The bullets pierce the brigade commander’s head, and his eyes fall to the ground. “Why did you turn back the brigade?” Savitsky, the commander of the Sixth Division, shouts at the wounded man, and I wake up because the pregnant woman is tapping me on the face.

“Sir,” she says to me, “you are shouting in your sleep, and tossing and turning. I’ll put your bed in another corner, because you are kicking my papa.”

3. Peasants.
4. The name of the area in which the story is set.
5. A comforter filled with the soft feathers of eider ducks.
She raises her thin legs and round belly from the floor and pulls the blanket off the sleeping man. An old man is lying there on his back, dead. His gullet has been ripped out, his face hacked in two, and dark blood is clinging to his beard like a clump of lead.

"Sir," the Jewess says, shaking out the eiderdown, "the Poles were hacking him to death and he kept begging them, 'Kill me in the backyard so my daughter won't see me die!' But they wouldn't inconvenience themselves. He died in this room, thinking of me.... And now I want you to tell me," the woman suddenly said with terrible force, "I want you to tell me where one could find another father like my father in all the world!"

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**Donald Barthelme**

**The Baby**

Donald Barthelme (1931–1989) was a founding member of the prestigious creative writing program at the University of Houston and one of the most widely respected writers of fiction in the twentieth century. Many of his stories appeared in The New Yorker, and Barthelme was partly responsible for bringing "postmodern" fiction into the mainstream. He is also a master of the short-short, as evidenced in collections such as *Sixty Stories* (1981) and *Flying to America* (2007).

Barthelme often wrote about family themes, though in wild and unlikely permutations, as in "The Baby," originally published as "The First Thing the Baby Did Wrong" in *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* (1983) and later reprinted with its current title in *Fifty Stories* (1987). Playful and experimental in his writing, Barthelme can veer from philosophy to parody in an instant. Above all, he is a writer with a pronounced sense of humor and irony. He locates the comic in the absurd and in the horrifying—as in this story about parents who take childhood discipline to ridiculous lengths. A consummate craftsman, Barthelme is particularly well suited to the short-short story, in which every sentence must be well made and every word matters.

The first thing the baby did wrong was to tear pages out of her books. So we made a rule that each time she tore a page out of a book she had to stay alone in her room for four hours, behind the closed door. She was tearing out about a page a day, in the beginning, and the rule worked fairly well, although the crying and screaming from behind the closed door were unnerving. We reasoned that that was the price you had to pay, or part of the price you had to pay. But then as her
grip improved she got to tearing out two pages at a time, which meant eight hours alone in her room, behind the closed door, which just doubled the annoyance for everybody. But she wouldn’t quit doing it. And then as time went on we began getting days when she tore out three or four pages, which put her alone in her room for as much as sixteen hours at a stretch, interfering with normal feeding and worrying my wife. But I felt that if you made a rule you had to stick to it, had to be consistent, otherwise they get the wrong idea. She was about fourteen months old or fifteen months old at that point. Often, of course, she’d go to sleep, after an hour or so of yelling, that was a mercy. Her room was very nice, with a nice wooden rocking horse and practically a hundred dolls and stuffed animals. Lots of things to do in that room if you used your time wisely, puzzles and things. Unfortunately sometimes when we opened the door we’d find that she’d torn more pages out of more books while she was inside, and these pages had to be added to the total, in fairness.

The baby’s name was Born Dancin’. We gave the baby some of our wine, red, whites and blue, and spoke seriously to her. But it didn’t do any good.

I must say she got real clever. You’d come up to her where she was playing on the floor, in those rare times when she was out of her room, and there’d be a book there, open beside her, and you’d inspect it and it would look perfectly all right. And then you’d look closely and you’d find a page that had one little corner torn, could easily pass for ordinary wear-and-tear but I knew what she’d done, she’d torn off this little corner and swallowed it. So that had to count and it did. They will go to any lengths to thwart you. My wife said that maybe we were being too rigid and that the baby was losing weight. But I pointed out to her that the baby had a long life to live and had to live in a world with others, had to live in a world where there were many, many rules, and if you couldn’t learn to play by the rules you were going to be left out in the cold with no character, shunned and ostracized by everyone. The longest we ever kept her in her room consecutive was eighty-eight hours, and that ended when my wife took the door off its hinges with a crowbar even though the baby still owed us twelve hours because she was working off twenty-five pages. I put the door back on its hinges and added a big lock, one that opened only if you put a magnetic card in a slot, and I kept the card.

But things didn’t improve. The baby would come out of her room like a bat out of hell and rush to the nearest book, Goodnight Moon or whatever, and begin tearing pages out of it hand over fist. I mean there’d be thirty-four pages of Goodnight Moon on the floor in ten seconds. Plus the covers. I began to get a little worried. When I added up her indebtedness, in terms of hours, I could see that she wasn’t going to get out of her room until 1992, if then. Also, she was looking pretty wan. She hadn’t been to the park in weeks. We had more or less of an ethical crisis on our hands.

I solved it by declaring that it was all right to tear pages out of books, and moreover, that it was all right to have torn pages out of books in the past. That
is one of the satisfying things about being a parent—you’ve got a lot of moves, each one good as gold. The baby and I sit happily on the floor, side by side, tearing pages out of books, and sometimes, just for fun, we go out on the street and smash a windshield together.

Roberta Allen

Marzipan

The New York Times Book Review calls Roberta Allen’s short-short stories “quicksilver dreams.” Writing in The Village Voice, Gary Indiana calls her fiction “a quick read full of lightning-like emotional illuminations.” And the American Book Review says her stories “exist somewhere between narrative fiction and prose poetry. Allen’s writings could be said to stretch the boundaries of both or bridge the narrowing gap between them.”

Clearly, Allen is a master of the short form, and, in fact, she is the author of a textbook on writing short-shorts, Fast Fiction: Creating Fiction in Five Minutes (1997). "Marzipan"—taken from her collection of short-shorts, Certain People (1997)—is perhaps the most traditional of our three model stories. Initially, it seems to be about nothing more than a tipsy and slightly egotistical young man hitting on a pretty young woman at a party, but his conversation grows increasingly strange, and the narrative takes a sharp and unexpected turn at the end.

At a crowded party, a pretty girl closes her eyes and bites into a marzipan pear, a look of rapture on her face. “I just love marzipan!” she says to the tipsy young Englishman beside her.

The haughty young man, who seems to be posing, says with a mocking smile, “Balzac loved marzipan too.” His bright blue eyes intrigue her. “There was once a rumor in Paris that he opened a candy store just to sell marzipan. But the truth was Balzac always bought marzipan from the same shop.” There is a mischievous gleam in his eye. “For a while crowds swarmed to this store to sample the sweet.”

“Did you just make that up?” asks the girl, her mouth full.

“It’s a true story,” the young man replies.

“What a silly story!” laughs the girl, taking another marzipan fruit from the dish on the table. She likes his curly hair, she wonders what’s behind his mocking smile. “How do you know such a silly story?” she asks.

“I’m a poet and a food lover,” the young man says, half-serious. “When I tire of poetry, I read the food encyclopedia just for fun.”
As the girl laughs, licks her sticky fingers, and chooses another marzipan morsel, the poet glances at the other guests. After quickly appraising the girls, he turns back to the one beside him.

“How do you stay so thin?” he asks, as she toys with a marzipan apple.

“Metabolism I guess. I never gain weight,” she lies. “What other silly stories can you tell me?” she says to change the subject.

He pauses for a moment, swaying slightly. His every move seems mannered, artificial; he plays a role, but knows he plays it well.

“I know so many stories,” he smiles. “During the blockade of Malta by the English and the Neapolitans, the people had nothing to eat but domestic animals like dogs, cats, rats, and donkeys. In time they came to prefer donkey meat over beef and veal.” He raises his brows and waits for her reaction.

“That’s an awful tale!” she laughs, as she munches on another piece of marzipan. “Tell me another.”

For a moment the poet seems to have lost his memory; his mind goes blank as he stares into the distance. His mocking smile disappears. Suddenly he blurts out, “My mother killed herself in 1978.” The girl looks at him, surprised. The man turns a deep shade of pink and lowers his eyes; he wonders what came over him.

“I’m so sorry,” says the girl, removing her hand from the candy dish.

“So am I,” says the man, who knows he’s ruined his performance; he feels the curtain falling on his stage. The scent of the almond-flavored sweet, however, stirs his memory; he suddenly recalls how much his mother loved marzipan. Angry at himself, he avoids the girl’s eyes as he thinks about his hours wasted in the library searching for stories to use at parties, where he feels shy, where he rarely meets girls, where he’s so afraid someone will see how much he’s been hurt. As he turns to walk away, he tosses a piece of marzipan into his mouth, but its taste gives him no pleasure.