Daniel Curley
(4 October 1918 – 30 December 1988)

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BOOKS: *Prose Piece* (New York: Archangel, 1948);
 That Marriage Bed of Procrustes, and Other Stories (Boston: Beacon, 1957); republished as *The Marriage Bed and Other Stories* (London: Joseph, 1961);
 *How Many Angels?* (Boston: Beacon, 1958);
 *A Stone Man, Yes: A Novel* (New York: Viking, 1964; London: Joseph, 1966);
 *In the Hands of Our Enemies: Stories* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971);
 *Love in the Winter: Stories* (Urbana & London: University of Illinois Press, 1976);
 *Ann’s Spring*, illustrated by Donna Diamond (New York: Crowell, 1977);
 *Billy Beg and the Bull* (New York: Crowell, 1978);
 *Hilariun* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979);
 *Living with Snakes: Stories* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985);
 *The Perfect London Walk*, by Curley and Roger Ebert (Kansas City, Mo.: Andrews, McMeel & Parker, 1986; London: Catto, 1988);
 *Mummy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987);


 *Accent: An Anthology, 1940–60*, edited by Curley, George Scouffas, and Charles Shattuck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973);


Daniel Curley’s short stories were his best work. He wrote during the mid twentieth century when short-story writing did not command preeminent attention, at
least in America. Curley's achievement is to have written his greatest stories without the same supportive attention that his predecessors had received. Curley worked hard to make his short stories seem implacable and right-specific to the narrative perspectives of his characters; yet, these stories are later appropriated in his novels to some other character's story. This uneasy recurrence—an author's willingness to experiment—gives his stories their tone and gives Curley's answer to the historical moment that no longer favored short stories as a dominant genre.

Daniel Curley was born in East Bridgewater, Massachusetts, on 4 October 1918, sole sibling to his older sister, Grace, who was born in 1913. His parents, William P. and Ida Curley, were both born in Massachusetts. Patrick Curley, Daniel's paternal grandfather, had emigrated from Ireland to the United States in 1870. Patrick worked in a foundry all his life while he lived in East Bridgewater, but his son, William, was listed as a pharmacist in the 1920 United States census, when Daniel was less than two years old. Their history is the same as that of Michael Pegnam's father and grandfather in *How Many Angels?* (1958), Curley's first novel. By 1930, according to the census, Daniel's mother had died; his father was now a teacher in a public school; and his aunt, also a public-school teacher, was living with them. The 1930 census also shows that Daniel's Curley grandparents were both still alive, living with their daughter, Mary, in East Bridgewater.

Curley himself spent all but a few years of his writing life teaching for a living, although he knew about welding and factory work firsthand, and several stories involve a factory or a foundry. His central characters are often academics, and he used personal experience and the places he had lived as material for his fiction.

Curley attended college at the University of Alabama, where he received both B.A. and M.A. degrees. During World War II he was a shipyard welder in New Orleans and then Boston. He taught at Syracuse University from 1945 through 1952, and he was an assistant professor from 1952 through 1955 in the New York State university system at Plattsburgh. *Accent*, one of the most influential literary reviews in the 1940s, published his first short story, "The Ship," in 1947. He joined the University of Illinois Department of English (the home of *Accent*) in 1955 and became one of the editors of *Accent* until it ceased publication in 1960.

"Saccovanzetti," the first story from *That Marriage Bed of Procrustes* (1957), his first collection, is already written in the effective and sufficient style of his later works. The title names a game several boys play, hunting each other across a countryside in 1927. Instead of cowboys and Indians or cops and robbers, one boy must play two roles as hunted criminal—Saccovanzetti. This name is an amalgam-
propelled by the baby boom, Accent, the literary journal
ingaugurated by Kerker Quinn—which published the
first work of Flannery O’Connor, J. F. Powers, and
William Gass, as well as the work of already well-known
writers such as Katherine Anne Porter, Wallace Stevens,
E. E. Cummings, and Conrad Aiken—published several
of Curley’s early stories.

In a story about trying to write a story, “Who, What,
When, Where, Why?” first published in New
Letters in 1972, and collected in Love in the Winter (1976),
Curley suggests a reason for the repetition of key per-
sonal stories in his fiction: “I need a lot of credit I
haven’t learned to balance my losses on stories like this,
stories that never come out with all my planning, all my
imagination, insight, even fragments of those mysteri-
ous outcroppings of forgotten dreams we call—some-
times—inspiration.”

He was on the editorial board of Accent long enough
(1955–1960) to edit with George Souffias its requiem
anthology published afterward (1973); he included “Sacco-
vanzetti” in that volume. Curley was a faculty member at
the Breadloaf Writers’ Conference in 1958, the year that
his first novel, How Many Angels?, was published. He was
also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction for
1958; he spent the 1958–1959 academic year in Spain
(Palma de Mallorca) and England (primarily at Oxford).
He was promoted to full professor of English at the
University of Illinois in 1962. His second novel, A Stone Man,
Yes, was published in 1964.

“To Ask the Hard Question Is Easy,” the second
story in That Marriage Bed of Procrustes, begins one of
Curley’s signature topics: academics unhappy and
unsuccessful at home as well as at school. George Fuller
is at odds with his wife, but they commit themselves to
a fresh start by moving for the summer to a rural house
without radio or telephone. An unexpected visit from
another academic couple, announced by telegram (the
only way to notify them), goes badly.

After the couple leaves, George returns to the
honesty of uncomplicated labor to renew his life. As he
finishes digging the garbage pit, his dark thoughts
about his marriage disappear. He recognizes at once
that the hole is grave size and that he is not someone
who would fill it with his wife. She appears above him,
and he passes up the shovel. She says what he has
thought, that it looks like a grave, and he thinks that he
sees in her expressionless face and the way she hefts the
shovel that she could do what he could not: fill the
grate with her spouse. “Instead she tossed the shovel
aside and reached down to give him a hand. ‘Come on,’
she said. ‘I baked you a pie.’ He was deeply moved but
whether because she baked him a pie or because she
hadn’t bashed in his head he couldn’t say.” This story
and several others from That Marriage Bed of Procrustes
reappear as episodes in the lives of Michael Pegnam, in
How Many Angels?, and George, in A Stone Man, Yes.

As a university professor whose teaching assign-
ments were fiction writing and lecturing on American
fiction, Curley had constantly before him such exam-
les as William Faulkner’s “The Bear” and other stories
published and anthologized separately that also are
parts of novels. But Curley’s retellings are not republi-
cations. The new context creates a new story. His novels
gather stories, but the stories are not submerged in the
master narrative of a novel. Curley had perfected this
special kind of short story with the resonance of a novel
by the time of A Stone Man, Yes.

This first collection includes a story whose
themes of racial and cultural misunderstanding reap-
pear later in Curley’s career. “A House Called Magnolia” in That Marriage Bed of Procrustes is about trying to
show the narrator’s mother what she expects that is
really there: relics of the antebellum South. They visit a
plantation house where he knows the territory like a
tour guide. Someone tells the story of the South, show-
ing them the house without ever asking for money. The
young man knows the custom is to offer whiskey, not
money. A version of the same story in How Many Angels?
has a fuller itinerary and is broader and more idiomatic,
beginning “Jesus what a time that was for me.” There
are no such confessions of anxiety in the short story,
but the reader cannot regard the visit as a success.

The novel A Stone Man, Yes gathers several of Cur-
ley’s stories about university life. That the central char-
acter, George Scott, a literature professor in a small
school, finds out his wife is cheating on him with a jun-
or colleague named Pratt is a well-worn convention of
university novels. The narrator finds this out by read-
ing the novel written by his betrayer—he reads the story
Pratt has been composing as George lives it, reading
about himself in someone else’s story. He both sees
himself in a different light and sees another story crossing
the path of his own life story.

Part of Pratt’s story is about a bout of drunken-
ness that caused him to miss the visit of a famous
writer, Robert Hatcher, whom he had promised to take
to out to lunch. Pratt’s story was first told in “The
Appointed Hour” in That Marriage Bed of Procrustes as
spoken by Robert Hatcher, a famous author telling stor-
ies to his audience at a writers’ conference. (The epi-
sode with Hatcher at the writers’ camp also appears in
“A View of the Mountains” in Love in the Winter.)

Curley received the O. Henry Award in 1965 for
“Love in the Winter,” originally published in the Colorado
Quarterly in 1964. He was appointed as an associate at the
Center for Advanced Study at the University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign in 1968 and 1982. In the Hands of Our
Enemies (1971), his second collection of short fiction, won the National Council of the Arts Award.

Several stories from In the Hands of Our Enemies cut across his previous novels. This time, "A Ride in the Snow" details one of the most haunting events of Curley's fiction. In A Stone Man, Yes, George, battered by years of domestic warfare with his wife, timidly arranges to drive an attractive dean of women to the train station on his way to an academic conference. As impossible as it seems to him, she is cooperating with his erotic scheming. A scenic winter drive ends in a snowbank, several cars having skidded off the road just short of the New York border. Four University of Alabama students attempt to dig everyone out; one is hurt, perhaps seriously, pinned by the car. The dean of women acts publicly as if she is George's wife, but they are delayed so that she can only just make her train.

They quarrel, out of sheer frustration; for George, their enactment of a warm domestic bond is heartbreaking. She tries to console his frustration, saying that they will laugh about it in years to come. Almost in tears, he tells her that he wishes that they had been married for a long time. His only remaining wish is that his tears not come. "They didn't not then and not on the long detour through a corner of Vermont and down to the Albany station and not even at the station, where she caught last night's train coming through six hours late and that at least was something."

"A Ride in the Snow" is told by the young college student who seems seriously hurt. He is recognizably Curley's typically recurring character, based on his own life, of a young Massachusetts boy who has gone south to school. He is driving the car his friend has rented and feels responsible for damaging it. He and his college friends disparage the middle-aged "married" couple as useless; to free one of the cars they break up an orange crate taken from an elderly man's Model A. (He, too, is stuck.) As the story ends, the boy is in the back of the couple's car, hurting and frozen, delirious, smelling the money that the dean of students has given him in gratitude for his help.

A reader who knew A Stone Man, Yes from 1964 and "A Ride in Winter" from 1970 would recognize the couple and the situation in the title story "Love in the Winter," from the 1976 collection. "Love in the Winter" is essentially the same story as that included within A Stone Man, Yes except for this last line: "He thought about that day on every New Year's for the rest of his life and at strange moments in between, but he never once laughed about it." To regard this line as a necessary shortening of a longer story would be to disregard the characteristic metareflection of Curley's fiction.

Although Curley is properly understood as an American writer in both style and setting, several international stories, set in England and Mallorca, evidently draw on his experiences or at least the locations of his Guggenheim year. "Station: You Are Here," collected in In the Hands of Our Enemies, follows the less-traveled reaches of the canal, which serves Little Venice and the London Zoo. The title story of the volume introduces a new character, George Mason. Mason is dutifully exploring Highgate Cemetery when he twists his ankle, making him the unwilling subject of a young couple's first aid and their incomprehension of an older generation.

Other stories set in England from Love in the Winter include "Why I Play Rugby" and "In Northumberland Once," which interleave the short dialogues that George Mason shares as a hostel-staying, ride-hitching tour guidebook with the guidebook annotations and the memories of painful comments his wife has made to him for "guidance" in italics, as sidebars. In particular, his conversation with an overaccommodating driver soon leads to a parting of the ways. Mason tells him that he thinks he understands the point of his ride's friendliness:
“And it’s no go. No offense.”

“Oh, no. But if it’s all the same to you, I’d just as soon you got out here. No offense. Holidays, you know.”

“None at all,” Mason said. He reached around for his pack and was ready when the car stopped. The driver whipped it around and headed back to Wexam very fast.

George Mason is also the main character in “The Gingerbread Man,” set in Mallorca. He is living alone, watching a new building arise behind him as often as he gazes at the expensive view into the bay out his front window. As he takes an interest in the island, George has flashbacks to the experiences he shares with some of Curley’s other characters: school in the South, working at a restaurant in Boston. George attempts to go to the races, but his meager Spanish delivers him to a cemetery instead. Wandering, he comes upon an amphitheater, where his solitude is quickly ended by a tourist family. Mason does not shrink from their vulgarity; hiding, he watches the children present their play, “The Gingerbread Man,” for their parents, and leaves them a note with small change for his admission.

Likely the preparation for the Acent anthology encouraged Curley to inaugurate the journal Acent in 1974. An Acent memorial issue devoted to Curley in 1990 tells the story of its founding. Roger Ebert, former student of Curley and co-author with him of The Perfect London Walk (1986), introduced him to a Chicago millionaire named Alcibiades who promised to fund the new journal, to provide the press and all editorial assistance. When the issue was ready, the millionaire disappeared. Curley eventually got the funding from the University of Illinois and the Illinois Arts Council, although he did most of the work, from editing to labeling.

Curley remarried in 1980. Living with Snakes: Stories (1985) won the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction in 1985. Curley’s travels along the north-south axis, not the transatlantic, generate his most interesting fiction in the 1980s. His own “Southern fiction” begins this development. One of his early recurring settings is in the South, based on his scholarly interests—publishing about Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter—as well as his experience at college in Alabama and during World War II living in New Orleans. His first published story was set in New Orleans, as was “The Score Keeps Changing” and “That Marriage Bed of Procrustes” in his first book of stories. In his Southern stories, Curley often presents a narrator who attempts to mediate, to display for Northern guests the difference between the two cultures along the north-south axis, but these attempts to prove his knowledge invariably go wrong. In “A Spring” (perhaps set in Alabama) the narrator takes friends to a chicken shack for lunch, and they are chastened by a chilling race-baiting episode, in which a diner humiliates a black man.

The clumsy attempt to guide fellow Northerners through the South is echoed in stories of Americans who are out of place in culture and understanding when they visit other countries. “Revenge,” in Living with Snakes, is a comic story about a traveler whose pocket is picked and who seeks revenge for more than twenty years. The traveler tries to attract pickpockets by planting, for easy picking, an almost-empty pocketbook on himself; the purse contains only an obscene message in his rudimentary Spanish. “The Rustler,” collected in The Curandero: Eight Stories (1991), also develops the hazards of being an American in Mexico. The protagonist, Don Harriss, is accused of a series of highly unlikely crimes: first he is accused of rustling; then, preposterously, he is accused of killing himself.

The title story of the posthumous collection The Curandero points to a motive larger than humorously enumerating the tribulations of la turista, however. In “The Curandero,” Porter is sick, beset and troubled by a recurrent dream. The hotel doctor prescribes antibiotics, but Porter pushes on, anxious to return home. Having driven all day, he gets out of the car and falls. When he wakes up, he is under the care of the curandero, who is able to reshape the events of Porter’s repetitious dream. The metaphysical intervention of the curandero works to cure Porter’s ailment, which is itself a metaphysical one: Porter needs to have his soul reattached. The tone of the story is playful but not skeptical or condescending: the curandero heals Porter’s soul.

The episode of snowbound cars that runs throughout Curley’s fiction recurs for the last time in “The Struldburg: January 1, 1938” in The Curandero. The reader is finally given the specific new year in the title, and what “George” thought was impossible, laughter. The story is now told from the point of view of the old man in the Model A. The title alludes to Jonathan Swift’s characters, who are immortal, but not blessed: immortality in both narratives means not eternal youth, but an eternity of aging.

In Curley’s story, Dorn, the old man in the Model A, is eighty-two, but he has outlived his wife, children, and several grandchildren. He is sitting out the snowstorm comfortably in his Model A, scorning the fussed anxiety of the other drivers. Dorn plans the same rerouting, once he is free, that George followed: through Vermont, down to Albany, taking a small pleasure in his (Dorn’s) sense that he alone knows this alternate route. In his reverie, Dorn thinks that two women who approach his Model A are his dead wife and his mother. He talks to them, but they get “paler and thin-
ner, and suddenly, puf!" they are gone. Finally, the four college students dig him free of the snow. There is no mention of anyone getting hurt. "In his mirror he
caught one last look at them, swirling and dimming in
the snow. And then puf."

The last line of the story suggests that both Dorn
and everyone else disappear. It stands, like Joseph
Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" (Curley published an essay
on Conrad's story in 1967), as an allomorph or version
of a narrative retold several times throughout the
author's career, which finally achieves its success and
needs no further retelling.

"To Have and to Hold" in The Curandero is Cur-
ley's most heartening marriage story, the last in a long
series. Like many of Curley's protagonists, Curtin is a
serious birder who always carries his Peterson
guidebook (Roger Tory Peterson's A Field Guide to West-
ern Birds). He and his wife are both remarried. He
prepares himself carefully against the insects before setting
off on a bird-watching expedition, but he can only
make do for his bad back with a cane and mentally
rehearsing a prepared series of maneuvers for getting
up again if he falls.

Curtin first believes that he has sighted a rarity in
the marsh, but his satisfaction is achieved on more
modest lines. The peculiar markings of the bird he has
spotted are accounted for in the explanation in the
guidebook of a blue heron's plumage changing from
white to blue toward maturity. What pleases Curtin is a
description come alive to him, a real truth now that he
has seen it. He remembers this episode as the real sat-
isfaction of his lifetime of bird-watching, the confirm-
atation of ordinary observation as written up in the manual,
even the apparent folklore confirmed by once seeing
a baby cowbird being fed by a male cardinal. "At once
the myth was more real and more mysterious, more thor-
oughly his and even more thoroughly alien." He medi-
tates upon his experience:

"For a life that offers such moments," he thought,
"death is not too great a price to pay." Under all the
heat he felt himself flush. He was afraid he was slip-
ing, growing really old, but he took comfort in the fact
that no one would ever know he had been, if only for a
moment, so fatuous. He couldn't bear to tell even
Catherine, who would surely understand."

Over Curley's long fictional oeuvre, his married heroes
remind themselves to keep their mouths shut so that their
wives cannot punish them where it hurts. Confession is
always greeted with scorn. This marriage is different. Curt-
in's sentiment is not disqualified by his shyness, his self-
denial. Catherine would understand if he told her; she will
just as surely understand that he does not.

On 30 December 1988 Curley was killed in a traffic
accident while he and his wife, Audrey, were crossing a
street in Tallahassee, Florida. Audrey Curley and his four
daughters from his first marriage (Sean, Deirdre, Cairence,
and Ailinn) inaugurated the annual Daniel Curley Award
for Short Fiction. Curley's poems have never been col-
lected; his plays also remain unpublished.

Reviews of Curley throughout his long career were
customarily both complimentary and regretful. They
praised his craft, noted the weakness of his characters (not
his characterization), and regretted the lack of a larger
audience for his work. Reviewing The Curandero for The
New York Times (26 May 1991), Cary Kimmel noted that
the book was "acutely sad" because Curley at seventy was "a
writer of exceptional polish who never achieved com-
mercial success." Kimmel ended his review by confusing
the character with the author: "Daniel Curley has returned
home, and his final book paints this image: a man alone
with himself, for better or worse, fighting off indifference
and his own moral and physical decay." Curley's current
reputation as a writer's writer will expand when critics
learn to separate his tragic death from the rejuvenation,
the curandero effect of his late fiction.

Interview:

"Daniel Curley," New Letters on the Air (radio program),
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References:

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Helmbrecht Breining, "Inter-American Internationality:
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Armin Paul Frank and Helga Essmann (Göttingen,
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Dean Flower, "Daniel Curley, Mona Simpson, Peter
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Martha Meek, "Daniel Curley, Living with Snakes," North

Papers:

Daniel Curley's papers are held at the library of the
University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign. There are
eighty boxes of correspondence on writing, editing,
teaching, and personal correspondence; the material
also includes drafts and teaching notes.