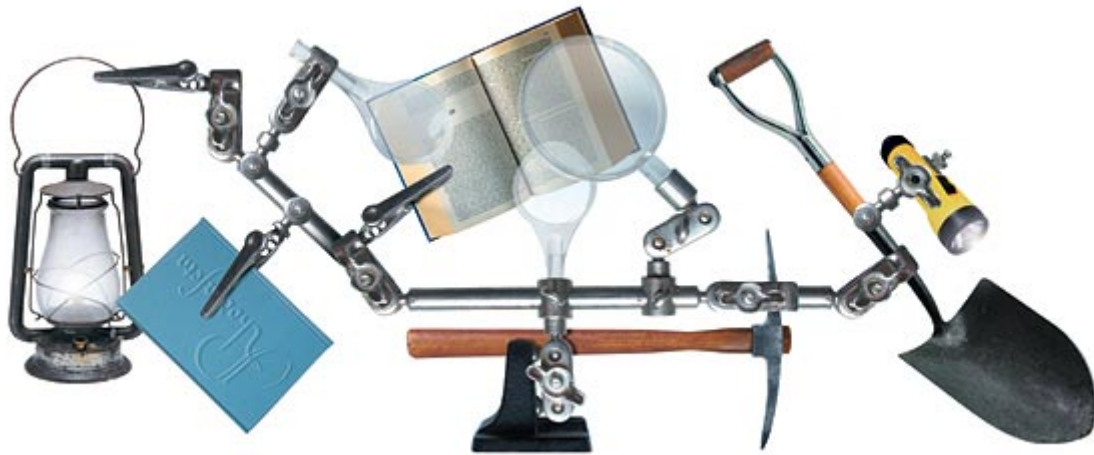


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ON THE WEB

CHRONICLE

Short Stories: Men and Women of Few Words



Viktor Koen

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This year's other Flannery O'Connor Award winner, Gary Fincke's **SORRY I WORRIED YOU** (University of Georgia, \$24.95), is remarkable because although nothing much happens in these stories (from one to the next, lots of people just stand around talking), each is so immediate and engaging that you're pushed straight through to the finish. Fincke's characters deal with some serious misfortunes (insanity in one story, cancer in another), but the collection's most memorable affliction, captured in "The History of Staying Awake," is unsettlingly mundane. Here Fincke details the emotional effects of a suburban father's

chronic insomnia and his obsession with scientific research into sleep deprivation.

'A hundred years ago,' Fincke's narrator tells us by way of introduction, "a scientist kept puppies awake to study the effects of sleeplessness. He had them poked and prodded to stay lively, and it took those puppies anywhere from four to six days to die."

Luckily, Fincke doesn't rely on dead puppies alone to catch our attention. Anything but: most of his characters are ordinary people -- newspaper vendors and bookstore clerks and janitors -- who, when shaken from their routines, are quietly forced to question their lives. These stories have none of the swirling pyrotechnic style of a David Foster Wallace or a Jim Shepard, two writers we may safely regard as the godfathers (or at least the eccentric uncles) of a generation of contemporary American short-story writers. Instead, they rely on simple humanity drawn in straight, indelible lines.