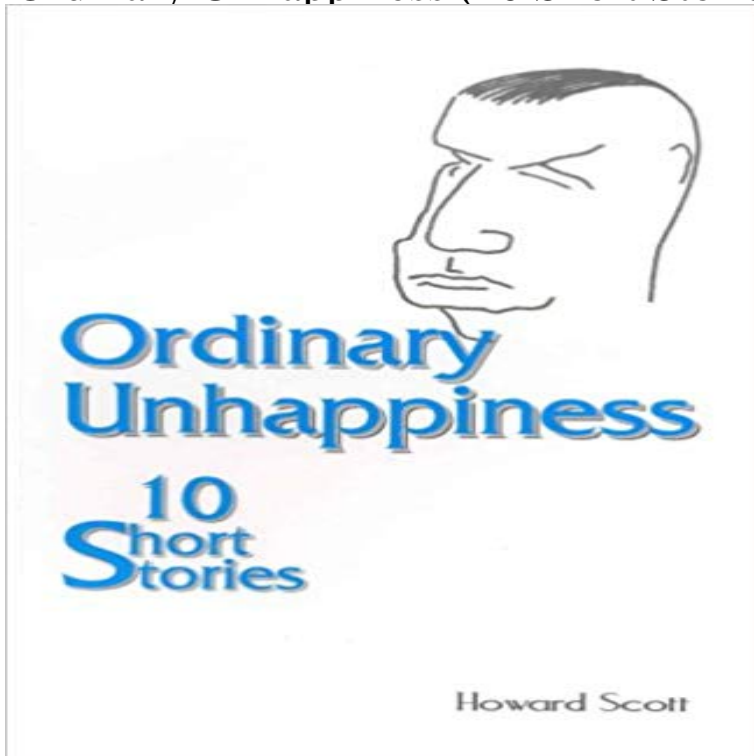


## Ordinary Unhappiness (10 Short Stories)



Writing stories is hard work. You sit by yourself all day. You try to keep a vision in your mind, but it fades and brightens as you push through the words. You learned by the dictum, every word must count, so you fuss endlessly over each phrase, every gesture, every said and answered and replied. Periodically, you lose confidence, so you toss the project in the hold file. You ask people to read the manuscript, and one person says good while the other says awful. Endlessly, you wonder if your intention is working. After you re through, after all the revisions, you have no idea whether you ve created something or not. It s a bitch. There s no other word for it. Each story comes from somewhere inside me. I don t really understand the process, but I call it a spark. Until that spark is lit, I can t push out words. Sometimes the fire dies halfway through, and I stop dead in my tracks. Occasionally, the piece sits in a box, and then I can tackle it two years later. Other times, it lies fallow. Once in a while, I push right through to the end. Whatever the process, it is that unnamable thing that drives me to completion. In *The Tirade*, I wanted to flesh out the ultimate cowardice of a certain type of person who has a receding hairline and who thinks a lot about his sense of verve and dash. In *Typewriter* the whole story came out of the sentence, *When the blizzard came, Mother stayed inside for three straight days.* In *The Site*, I wanted to portray the outer limits of extreme frustration of working men towards their ultimate employers. In *Kill Me*, I sought to investigate the middle-aged condition of tedium all of us feel from time to time. In *Why I Quit the Dairy Shack*, I wanted to experience a young girl s ambivalence towards sex and love. Thin strands of tenuous emotion do not give a writer much to work with. These stories have been twenty-five years in the making. At an average of 10 pages a story, that s about a

paragraph a month a month. You cannot get much slower than that. Of course, I've done other stuff in between. But still, when writers like Joyce Carol Oates push out a novel a year and Le Grand Old Man of Literature, John Updike, churns out novels, short stories, art commentary, poetry, and literary criticism with seasonal regularity, one might say, What a fool. Why bother, buddy? Perhaps, then, a fool is what a writer is. A writer offers up thin sheets of paper with words on them that don't add up to anything, don't help anyone, aren't sustenance for the hungry, and have no connection to reality. Oh, perhaps a writer touches someone briefly in his/her soul, or ten people, or 100 people, but then those individuals continue on with their lives. Nothing is changed. A week later, the moment is not even tangible enough for cocktail party chatter. Is that a constructive way to spend one's time? Can one compare this effort with a doctor who makes people healthy or to a merchant who sells needed goods or a teacher who fills the next generation's minds with knowledge and concepts? Can one say a writer is usefully employed? I don't really know the answer. All I can say that I retain my foolish fool's vision that writing is what matters to me. That vision has kept me at the writing desk for these 25 years, 40 hours a week, week-in and week-out. And will impel me to continue. Yes, even this pathetically miniscule output is worth the devotion.

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