



The Best American Essays 2016

Jonathan Franzen (Editor) , Robert Atwan (Editor)

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A true essay is “something hazarded, not definitive, not authoritative; something ventured on the basis of the author’s personal experience and subjectivity,” writes guest editor Jonathan Franzen in his introduction. However, his main criterion for selecting *The Best American Essays 2016* was, in a word, risk. Whether the risks involved championing an unpopular opinion, the possibility of ruining a professional career, or irrevocably offending family, for Franzen, “the writer has to be like the firefighter, whose job, while everyone else is fleeing the flames, is to run straight into them.”

The Best American Essays 2016 includes ALEXANDER CHEE, PAUL CRENSHAW, JAQUIRA DÍAZ, LAURA KIPNIS, AMITAVA KUMAR, SEBASTIAN JUNGER, JOYCE CAROL OATES, OLIVER SACKS, THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS *and others*

JONATHAN FRANZEN, guest editor, is the author of five novels, most recently *Purity*, and five works of nonfiction and translation, including *Farther Away* and *The Kraus Project*. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the German Akademie der Künste, and the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

ROBERT ATWAN, the series editor of *The Best American Essays* since its inception in 1986, has published on a wide variety of subjects, from American advertising and early photography to ancient divination and Shakespeare. His criticism, essays, humor, poetry, and fiction have appeared in numerous periodicals nationwide.

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Abby says

This is a strange, strange collection of essays, at least from where I'm standing. It's always amusing to think about the logic people use when they interpret the word, "best." Franzen seems to have quite a simple metric, choosing voices and messages he thought people needed to hear. There is a lot of writing about trauma of various kinds, experiences that stick with us psychologically, from military service to car wrecks to poverty to sexual exploitation to murder to violence in visual media to illness to the social experience of race and gender...is there something you're trying to work through, Mr. Franzen?

I loved many of the works that he picked, which reflect the excellence and diversity of style that I'm sure he was going for, and were indeed interesting, compelling, important. They include some writers who promise to become old favorites, people I'll follow for years. But diversity also produced strange juxtapositions and, I would say, outliers. Like Laura Kipnis, who dismisses power dynamics in student-teacher relationships with when-I-was-your-age-it-was-uphill-both-ways. Or George Steiner, whose weird assertion that Jews are just naturally better at abstract thinking pairs oddly with Thomas Chatterton Williams' insightful observations about race and its social (not biological) construction. Franzen says in his intro (which I read last) that he chose essays based on their propensity for risk. It's not a bad metric, I suppose. But it does make for a strange, strange collection.

Kathryn Potter says

In my AP Language and Composition class, we have started to tackle The Best American Essays 2016, edited by John Franzen. To start off, we read, annotated, and discussed Bajadas, written by Francisco Cantú. In Bajadas, Cantú serves as a border agent for the United States Border Patrol. We observe from the beginning of the essay to the end how Cantú's behavior changes because of his job and how it affects him mentally and physically. The essay begins with him talking to his mother on Christmas Eve. She tells him she's worried about him, and that she thinks he's too qualified to be a border cop. He tells her he wants to understand the border, and that he wants to help people. This is evident throughout the whole essay. We study how different Cantú is from all the other agents- how he's kind and quiet. Whenever he catches someone he never fails to show at least some kindness and empathy. But towards the end of the essay, Cantú starts to have nightmares of the people he captures and it haunts him. By the end, he doesn't know what he's become. He realizes he can't help all the people that need it.

Reading Cat says

These books are always more about the editor than the best writing, I've found. They can be amazingly strong, as was last year's, or truly bad (one a few years ago was just incessant essays about death). This is...in the middle.

Many of the essays seem to be faux-edgy (lookit me, using 'fuck!' *yawn*) and the ones that are obviously

chosen to push the social justice agenda (disclaimer: I am pro-social justice but anti-shoving-stuff-down-my-throat) are plagued with weak writing. Last year's had a number of essays about race which managed to also combine lyrical writing, fascinating structure--things that made them best ESSAYS and not best polemics.

Most of the writing, to be honest, was disappointingly weak. If these truly are the best essays that America produced in the last year, we're in trouble. I expect beautiful writing in these collections, such as Solnit or Purpura or even Dillard. I expect meditative writing, deep dives on insight and thought, and a valuation of language. Instead, this collection veers to the confessional, the sloppy confessional, without the art or lyricism in words. "Thin Places" is possibly the best example of this--something with great potential, but gets mired in the author's soppy wrangling.

There are a few decent essays, with those limitations. As always, Sacks's essay stands out as exactly what I want in these collections...but here it serves the point as showing how deficient the others are. Kipnis's "Sexual Paranoia" was fascinating to me, as an educator (who, frankly, always felt that sort of dating to be repugnant), but I'm not sure if I were not invested in education, if I'd have liked it quite as much. Similarly, Junger's essay--a nice study of PTSD, but it gets a little too preachy toward the end.

I guess it's a good record of 2016, where we do seem invested in preaching and telling people what to do, rather than inviting them to think. Let's hope 2017 is better.

Scott Fishwick says

What we have here is virtue signaling and identity politics par excellence. Only a couple of these essays cross the line into the land of interesting. I can't believe these are the best American essays of 2016, but, if they are, we are in trouble.

N says

BAEs 2013-2016 have all been of similar high quality. Most of the selections are strong and thought-provoking, if not exactly ones I'd read again.

According to my checkmark system (1 for good essays, 2 for great, 3 for mindblowing), this volume contains 9 pieces I'd happily revisit:

1 Checkmark

Francisco Cantú's "Bajadas"
Alexander Chee's "Girl"
Ela Harrison's "My Heart Lies Between 'The Fleet' and 'All the Ships'"
Sebastian Junger's "The Bonds of Battle"
Lee Martin's "Bastards"
Lisa Nikolidakis's "Family Tradition"
Mason Stokes's "Namesake"

2 Checkmarks

Paul Crenshaw's "Names"

Crenshaw's essay is a fun, compact, evocative examination of what soldiers call each other and how these nicknames articulate affection and fear.

Overall, this BAE contains a well-chosen array of topics, tones, and styles. While Jonathan Franzen tends to be a polarizing literary figure, I have always respected his nonfiction. His intro identifies risk as one of the qualities he observed in all the essays, and I too felt this risk and seek it, with renewed energy, in my own writing.

Fiona says

Some good ones and some not good ones! Mostly good ones! Personal favorite was "Big Night" by Jill Sisson Quinn!

Beth says

My favorites were the stigma-busting *Sexual Paranoia* by Laura Kipnis and *Namesake* by Mason Stokes. I also liked *My Father and the Wine* by Irina Dumitrescu: "Now and then I click a link to find out what the hipsters are up to."

Avery Reynolds says

This year for my AP Language and Composition class, we are reading The Best American Essays 2016, and the first essay we read was Bajadas by Francisco Cantu. I enjoyed the journal essays that shed light on Cantu's time as a border patrol agent. His journal entries portray the toll the job takes on one's conscience. Throughout the story, Cantu had to battle the moral dilemmas and address? the issues of illegal immigrants. The essay was not your typical argumentative essay and did not have a definitive thesis statement. This made it difficult to recognize what Cantu was trying to argue. I want to know why Cantu chose to write the essay in the form of journal entries. Why did he start with, "Santiago quit the academy yesterday,"? How did he end up dealing with the moral issues associated with the job? Overall I really enjoyed this essay, and I am looking forward to reading the rest of the book. I would highly recommend this essay to anyone who is looking for a short single sitting read.

Zuska says

This read was like the very best smorgasbord. There were familiar dishes, challenging flavors, things you never would have thought to mix together but that served up an amazing creation (salamanders and adoption! you have to read it!), and even the desserts were nutritious.

The essays are presented alphabetically by author's last name which makes the ordering random, and yet wonderful juxtapositions can occur. The best is at the very end, with the one-two-three punch of George

Steiner's "The Eleventh Commandment", Mason Stokes's "Namesake", and Thomas Chatterton Williams's "Black and Blue and Blond". You can chew on the meaning of identity, belonging, love, exclusion, violence, and God for a long, long time with just those three. If you read nothing but these three essays, it would be worth the price of the volume, and that is saying something for a volume that contains Jill Quinn's "Big Night" (the aforementioned salamanders and adoption entry), Justin Reed's "Killing Like They Do in the Movies" and Marsha Pomerantz's "Right/Left: A Triptych".

I read the "Best of" essays at the end of every year, along with the "Best of" travel essays, and both volumes always make me regret that I don't make more time in my life throughout the year for the essay form. New year's resolution - read more essays?!? I will try!

Abby Boes says

For my AP Language and Composition course we just began The Best American Essays 2016 but have only read Bajadas thus far. Personally, I found the essay to be unique due to the various journal entries that were spaced out over a period of time. Francisco Cantú shows the internal fight with himself while pursuing a dangerous career. One thing that made me question his writing style in the essay was the lack of a purpose or thesis. Cantú does a good job telling his story, but he does not outright say what he is trying to prove by writing it. Even with the absence of a purpose I still want to know why he wrote this essay. Questions that arose: what was the context of the essay? Was it for a college application? Was it for an English professor? Was it for fun? What point is Cantú trying to get across? Was it a true story? Is any of it exaggerated?

Although I am only a couple of pages into the book, I have already seen an example of strong writing and I am excited to see what the rest of the book holds in store.

Kevin says

Not the best volume of this series I buy without miss every year, not the worst either but on the weaker side. Too much of Franzen's prissy tastes on display here, essays that are hard to read for no good reason and others that pronounce and bloviate their way through a story instead of tell it. In the plus column, a number of essays by writers who work non-academic day jobs (a border agent, a doctor, a sexologist). Do not miss any of those. And Sebastian Junger's piece about PTSD as well as the essay entitled "How They Kill in the Movies" about lynching are both platinum hits.

Stew Hutchinson says

I am currently reading The Best American Essays 2016, edited by Jonathan Franzen. As apart of my AP Language and Composition course we began by annotating and discussing Bajadas, where Francisco Cantú shares his experiences of being a border patrol officer on the Mexican border. I found Cantú's essay to be intriguing as his 20 detailed journal entries engaged the audience, giving us a real sense of what he had to battle both mentality and physically. I found his entries to be puzzling as it was interestingly written in diary format. From those entries I am curious to know if there was some type of symbolism in the way that he includes a full year of his duties. It seems to be strategic in the way that he expresses his feelings and

emotions toward the job through two passages of sharing Christmas with his mom before and after he had gotten into routine. From these notes I have come to question what the purpose of this essay might be. Why did editor Jonathan Franzen begin the book with this essay? While not all essays have to include a thesis or introduction, what type of audience did Cantú hope to reach?

Thus far I am impressed with the essays that Jonathan Franzen has included. I am excited to keep reading the essays in The Best Essays of 2016 as they offer complex questions to arise while reading, forcing the reader to infer purpose and understanding.

Josh Bliss says

During my AP Language and Composition course, my class was asked to read Bajadas and follow up with a review on it. I have read countless essays throughout my education time period but I have yet to read an essay as intriguing and different than this one. The main character, Francisco Cantú, embarks on a internal fight with himself serving as a border agent in a very dangerous field of work. The major difference with this essay was how he used his writing in a journal style format, with a large paragraph for each experience he has for that day. There are several pieces of this essay that are left in the dark and the readers are faced with imagining what point it is that Cantú is trying to get across. It seems as if he is fighting with himself over a bigger problem or conflict while continuing to carry out his everyday job. After reading the essay, it seems like its not even an essay and that makes me question why this piece was written. Was it written for personal use, or was it used as a an application essay like my classmates and I are in the process of doing.

Overall, I am glad I read Bajadas in The Best Essays of 2016 and i'm excited to find out what other treasures the book has to offer.

Lily says

Although I have only read the first essay of this book, Bajadas, for my AP Language and Composition class, I can tell I am going to enjoy this collection of essays. In this piece by Cantú, he describes his experience of being a border cop in the academy and once he has graduated, through a series of journal entries. The way in which he told this story had a great effect on its message. The journal entries made the story seem more personal and honest. Throughout this essay, Cantú's perspective and attitude toward his job fluctuates. In the beginning of the story, he convinces his mother that he enjoys his work because he gets to be outdoors and help people. However, after experiencing and creating a connection with some of those he would later deport, Cantú ponders whether he is helping or hurting. I don't believe this moral dilemma would have appeared as powerfully as it did if Cantú wrote this in a different format. After reading this essay, I am very excited to be able to explore the other essays within this book. The passion and conflict expressed in this one essay captivated me as a reading unlike many pieces I have read before. I highly recommend this great assortment of essays.

Chris says

Jonathan Franzen, much like Cheryl Strayed, has a vision of the essay as an expulsion of the 'I'.

I am telling a story about my family.

I am telling a story about my job.

I am telling a story about my sexuality or race.

Franzen further specifies he is looking for ‘intensity’ and ‘risk’, and indeed some of these essays are gripping in their intensity. But, like 2013, it gets repetitive. I like to see essays that explore little-known topics or examine some social phenomena or world events. There’s only so many essays you can read On My Shitty Parents before they all run together. The latter essays suffer this fate. There’s one in the last third where a woman is writing both about the mating habits of salamanders and her attempt to adopt a child. At that point, I was basically like “I don’t care about your familial drama, tell me about the salamanders!”

Anyway, here’s my favorites:

Girl by Alexander Chee: Chee details his application of makeup, wig, gown in preparation for the Castro Halloween parade. It’s the best description on the appeal of dressing in drag I’ve ever read. It’s beautiful. Also another reminder of how wondrous the Halloween Parade apparently was, making me further bitter about moving to San Francisco after it was canned.

My Heart Lies between “The Fleet” and “All the Ships” by Ella Harrison: Harrison is translating ancient Greek, a language no one speaks, into English, a massive undertaking that only a very few select specialists will even be able to interpret. Mostly, it’s a dazzling reflection on language. The disparate connotations and metaphors and etymological poetry that make one word very similar or different to another, each in a separate language and spoken thousands of years apart. While still centered around Harrison’s personal experience, this is one of the least “All about me” essays in the collection. The euphoria Harrison embraces while translating is merely dipping her toes into the greater human lingual ocean.

Sexual Paranoia by Laura Kipnis: This essay is the best example of Franzen’s point on writerly risk. Kipnis is a college professor protesting the overly harsh restrictions and punishments placed on college professors having affairs with students. Not exactly a popular opinion, especially when one is part of the establishment itself. My initial reaction to this was baffled skepticism — why defend behavior that is largely old married white men abusing their social status? Kipnis’ point is two fold. One: Adult relationships are messy and you’ll learn this sooner or later (this one isn’t entirely convincing). And two: by casting professors as potentially dangerous predators, you engineer a situation of infantilized, defenseless students and tyrannical, imposing professors. The narrative established behind the restrictions becomes real in a way that it wouldn’t without them. In other words: students are taught to fear their teachers.

Bastards by Lee Martin: Of the family drama essays, this one is the best. Martin’s father lost his hands in a farming accident and his inability to work dragged the family around Illinois. A father’s anger. A mother’s kindness. Sounds trite, but this is very well written. It took me right inside this shadowy, anger-ridden house. Oppressive.

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