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The Best American Essays 2002

Stephen Jay Gould (Editor), Robert Atwan (Series Editor)

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From Reader Review The Best American Essays 2002 for online ebook

Rebecca says

There was little art to these essays. Mostly factual stuff. One of the essays was a series of choppy sentences, written by a nobody, published only because it was a firsthand account of 9/11.

Patrick McCoy says

The Best American Essays 2002 was edited by science writer Stephen Jay Gould. He insults many of the writers in the introduction where he voices his displeasure with confessional writing. Again this volume has several essays by authors I like (Jonathan Franzen, David Halberstam, Christopher Hitchens, Sebastian Junger, Louis Menand, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gore Vidal, Gary Willis, etc.) The first essay by Jacques Bazun is about culture and is called "The Tenth Muse." Rudolph Chelminski's "Turning Point" discusses Phillip Petit's historic walk between the Twin Towers on a cable in 1974 in the year of the 9/11 where the towers were brought down. Then Bernard Cooper gives an example of the confessional essay that irks Gould so, when he addresses his strange relationship with his father in "Winner Take Nothing." Nicholas Delblanco looks at the long tradition of producing and restoring classical instruments in "The Countess of Stanlein Restored." Halfway through Barbara Ehrenreich's deft essay on the kitsch associated with breast cancer, "Welcome to Cancerland"- I realized I've read it before. Jonathan Franzen also writes a confessional essay about his father's struggles with Alzheimer's in "My Father's Brain." The case for having more autopsy is put forth by Atul Gawande in "Final Cut." 9/11 emerges next with David Halberstam's rousing "Who We Are," Christopher Hitchens' "For Patriot Dreams" (read before), and Sebastian Junger's inside look at the war between the Taliban and those who opposed them, Ahmad Shah Massoud, in the Middle East- "The Lion in Winter." Amy Kolen researches her family's connection with the famous "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire" in her essay "Fire." In Andrew Levy's fascinating essay, he rediscovers "The Anti-Jefferson"-would-be founding father Robert Carter who freed his many slaves before his death in the late 18th century in Virginia. This is followed by another 9/11 inspired essay by a survivor, Adam Mayblum's "The Price We Pay." Louis Menand looks at the recent history of universities in America in "College: The End of the Golden Age." I skipped Cullen Murphy's essay on mundane studies, "Out of the Ordinary." The following essay, "Merced," by Danielle Ofri was a fascinating look at a beguiling medical case. In "Busted in New York," Darryl Pickney muses on being picked up for smoking pot in public in New York. Author Richard Price and his daughter Anne Hudson-Price report about post 9/11 New York in "Word on the Street." Then Joe Queenan discusses parent's obsessions with getting into the the "right" college in his essay "Matriculation Fixation." Holocaust deniers are the subject of John Sack's essay "Inside the Bunker." Mario Vargas Llosa defend literature in "Why Literature?" Then Gore Vidal has an insightful piece about Timothy McVeigh and his execution in "The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh." Fittingly Gary Wills follows that with an essay on capital punishment in "The Dramaturgy of Death." The final essay is "Moonrise," a confessional essay by Penny Wolfson which describes life as a mother with a child with MS. I think this collection had a lot of interesting essays and I skipped fewer than usual in these anthologies.

Gauchoholandes says

Very thoughtful essays, Why literature? by Mario Vargas Llosa is one of a couple that stands out. Reading this 16 years later brings back the events of the day: 9/11 and the execution of Timothy McVeigh. I remain a fan of the annual anthologies.

Jeff Lacy says

The better Best American Essays anthologies I have read. The essays I found of quality and interest were the following: Chelminski, Rudolph. "Turning Point," about Philippe Petit, the high wire artist who walked between the World Trade Center towers in 1974; Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Welcome to Cancerland"; Gawande, Atul. "Final Cut" (dealing with autopsies turning up major misdiagnosis in causes of death); Levy, Andrew. "The Anti-Jefferson" (Robert Carter III, contemporary of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, one of largest landowners in Virginia, who released all of his 500 slaves); Llosa, Mario Vargas, "Why Literature" (Nice essay about the gender divide in reading literature); Menand, Louis. "College: The End of the Golden Age" (the divide as to what contemporary students are studying as opposed to past generations: educate v. train); Murphy, Cullen. "Out of the Ordinary." (An interesting essay about the new genre of "mundane studies") Ofri, Danielle. "Merced" (Outstanding personal essay from a physician about mysterious cause of patient's death and personal involvement in case); Vidal, Gore. "The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh"; and, Wills, Garry. "The Dramaturgy of Death." (The death penalty; compare with Camus' essay on the death penalty, "Reflections on the Guillotine.").

N says

While I respect Stephen Jay Gould, I've never read an essay of his that I enjoyed. So I didn't expect to enjoy this BAE volume, especially given his bad introduction that manages to insult the very essays he selected. But this collection is surprisingly lovely.

Since an anthology is rarely, perhaps never, 100% great, I consider it a win when I like 25% or more of the selections in a BAE. In this case, I liked 10 of the 24 essays (over 40%, which is very unusual for me). I've been reading the BAE series chronologically, and only 1996 (Geoffrey C. Ward, ed.) and 2000 (Alan Lightman, ed.) have rivaled this. To date, I'd rank 2000 the best, this volume the second best, and 1996 third best.

Following my penchant for order and method, I also have a ranking system for individual essays--1 check mark for ones I liked, 2 for the really powerful, and 3 for the stupendous. In this year's collection,

6 received 1 check mark:

Bernard Cooper's "Winner Takes Nothing"

Nicholas Delbanco's "The Countess of Stanlein Restored"

Barbara Ehrenreich's "Welcome to Cancerland"

Amy Kolen's "Fire"

Andrew Levy's "The Anti-Jefferson"

Penny Wolfson's "Moonrise"

3 received 2 check marks:

Rudolph Chelminski's "Turning Point"

Atul Gawande's "Final Cut"

Mario Vargas Llosa's "Why Literature?"

1 received 3 check marks:

Jonathan Franzen's "My Father's Brain" (it's great every time I read it, and I've read it several times)

While the volume's content was influenced by the events of 2001, Gould still chose an overall diverse group of thinkers and wordsmiths, and they are worth the reader's attention.

Tammy says

Best American Essays – 2004 Highlights

"Turning Point" – Philippe Petit walks across a cable between the two newly completed Twin Towers in Manhattan and poignantly reminds us of what once was.

Barbara Ehrenreich's essay "Welcome to Cancerland" is a hard-nosed look at her journey dealing with breast cancer. She writes with a jaundiced eye towards the use of the term "survivor" – she feels it somehow denigrates the dead and dying. She refuses to see her cancer as a type of membership into some sort of sisterhood. "For me at least, my cancer will never be a source of identity and pride."

"The Final Cut" is an essay about the disappearing practice of autopsies. Atul Gawande contends that autopsies are important even with modern technology and know-how. He writes, "From what I've learned looking inside of people, I've decided human beings are somewhere between a hurricane and an ice cube: in some respects, permanently mysterious, but in others – with enough science and careful probing – entirely scrutable."

In contrast one finds the essay, *Merced*, by Danielle Ofri who writes of an incident in her residency at Bellevue. A seemingly simple diagnosis turns into a nightmare, and Ofri cries "for the death of my belief that intellect conquers all."

Amy Kolen writes of the Triangle Factory fire – probing the tragedy from the viewpoint of her grandmother, who might be said to hold the "management" view. Her cousin was Isaac Harris, co-owner of the factory, and her job and livelihood as a new immigrant rested on his generosity. The piece is a study in the vitality of retrospective sensemaking from the point of view of those generally held culpable for the tragic and needless loss of life.

"The Anti-Jefferson" by Andrew Levy is a truly fascinating story of Robert Carter who freed his slaves during the same era when Jefferson lived. This essay is worth a read just to ponder the reasons why few, if any, have heard of an educated, wealthy man who found a way to do what none of the founding fathers could or would do.

"The Price We Pay" is an unpolished, raw piece of writing. Told from the first person point of view, it is a journey down 87 flights of stairs in the South Tower on that fateful September 11. Gripping.

What would it be like to speak at a convention of people who believe the Holocaust is the hoax of the century? What if that invitee were Jewish? This is the tale, “Inside the Bunker,” told by John Sack. With surprising insight into the mindset of those who believe completely opposite of himself, Sack’s message is simple, but profound: “I understand and we all understand that love is a paradoxical thing, that the more we send out, the more we’ve got. So why don’t we understand that about hate? If we hate, and we act on that hate, then we hate even more later on... We can destroy the people we hate, maybe, but we surely destroy ourselves.”

“Why Literature?” is an essay I’ll be photocopying for my students who are reading the likes of Plato and Sophocles and Ovid and Homer. Mario Vargas Llosa articulates what I want to say when faced with the same question.

The volume ends with “Moonrise,” written from the viewpoint of a mother following the trajectory of Duchenne’s disease in her son. There is no sugarcoating here, but there is love.

There are many more essays, but these stood out to me, spoke to me, resonated with me on some level. What a privilege to experience such a plethora of fully realized writing – a concert of words.

Barbara says

A bit dated and heavy on the 9/11 theme.

Vince Darcangelo says

Faves:

Rudolph Chelminski: Turning Point

David Halberstam: Who We Are

Christopher Hitchens: For Patriot Dreams

Sebastian Junger: The Lion in Winter

Andrew Levy: The Anti-Jefferson

Adam Mayblum: The Price We Pay

John Sack: Inside the Bunker

Mario Vargas Llosa: Why Literature?

Wendy says

Though I love Stephen J. Gould's work, it seems that his tastes run utterly counter to mine -- tending toward the ponderous and crusty. One of the more boring volumes of this annual anthology.

Laura says

some essays are more interesting than others... there was a lull around the middle of the book that slowed me down a bit, but it's really fun and interesting to read passages on such diverse topics as etymology, civil rights, etc.

Ke says

For an essay collection, I liked an unusual large number of the editor's selections. Maybe because I felt that I could learn something in each piece, and that the pieces were not just opinionated diatribes.

James says

I've read a few of these collections, and this is probably my favorite so far, if only for Rudolph Chelminski's essay on Philippe Petit, the tightrope artist who walked between the Twin Towers in the '70s. This is one of 5 essays on 9/11 in the collection, and all the flag-waving can get a little tiresome. Even so, there are some really challenging views represented to balance it out. Gore Vidal's essay portrays Timothy McVeigh as a very stoic, intelligent, and (yes) courageous man, and John Sack's essay takes the unenviable position of sympathizing with (if not defending) the Holocaust deniers. Both are well-argued, interesting essays.

In a collection like this, there's bound to be at least one entry I don't like; the only two that stood out in this bunch were the ultra-boring piece on cello restoration near the beginning and "Why Literature?", the essay-equivalent of one of those "READ" posters in your middle school English classroom. The rest are great, though.
