

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

The Art of the Essay

THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 2004.

Edited by Louis Menand. Series editor, Robert Atwan. Houghton Mifflin.

323 pp. \$27.50 cloth, \$14 paper

Reviewed by Phyllis Rose

This is the 19th appearance of a volume that I look forward to every year—*The Best American Essays*. A guest editor makes the final selection of about 20 essays from hundreds of pieces sifted by series editor Robert Atwan. It's an elegant system that has produced collections of consistently high quality, and this year's selection, by Louis Menand, the author of *The Metaphysical Club* (2001) and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, maintains the tradition. The series offers heartening evidence that there are people in America who like to hear other people's thoughts on any subject, from blindness to taxidermy, Yiddish to yarn, the envy of a boyfriend's success to survival in the Arctic, so long as the thinking is fresh and the writing expressive. I would want nothing changed about this series except the size of its audience, which should be even bigger.

The term *essay* comes trailing clouds of apathy. It's a turn-on to few people other than essayists and their nearest and dearest. Atwan initially considered calling the volume *Best American Nonfiction*, and perhaps that would have been better after all. Readers might then expect something urgent, central, hard hitting, which the best essays are, whether their topics are personal or public.

People say that books of essays don't sell, but that's not necessarily so when there is a unifying, powerful subject. Barbara Ehrenreich's dazzling *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), a first-person account of stints in various low-wage jobs, became a *New York Times* bestseller. Ehrenreich considers herself an essayist, but her larger purpose, to show the injustice of contemporary American capitalism, informs each of the essays that make up *Nickel and Dimed*. I would suggest that a similar single-mindedness is evident in the work of every great essayist, from Montaigne, whose project was himself, to George Orwell, whose work Ehrenreich's closely recalls in spirit and impact. The individual pieces, the essays, in some way or other are in the service of an overarching project.

A volume can also become a classic when it collects in one place many examples of a powerful outlook and sensibility, allied to however loosely defined a focus, as in Joan Didion's *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (1968) or Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), the latter less obviously, but no less, an essay collection than the former. Other writers who have been able to yoke an essayist's sensibilities to the larger purpose needed for a book include two whose work appears in *Best American Essays*: Wayne Koestenbaum, the author of *The Queen's Throat* (1993), and Anne Fad-



Michel de Montaigne, the first essayist

man, the author of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997). Indeed, a lot of what we call nonfiction is the work of essayists. In an introductory note to her magical volume *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982), Dillard explains that “this is not a collection of occasional pieces, such as a writer brings out to supplement his real work; instead this is my real work, such as it is.”

Dillard is a novelist as well as an essayist, and so are Didion, Susan Sontag, V. S. Naipaul, and W. G. Sebald. One of my favorite essays in Menand’s collection is “Caught,” by Jonathan Franzen, the author of the novel *The Corrections* (2001). Consider the opening sentence of Franzen’s essay: “Kortenhof had heard of a high school where pranksters had put an automobile tire over the top of a 30-foot flagpole, like a ring on a finger, and this seemed to him an impressive and elegant and beautiful feat that we at our high school ought to try to duplicate.” I read this sentence three times before I could convince myself that I hadn’t read it in *The Corrections*. The passage is perfectly novelistic. It plunges us into someone else’s experience.

Later in Franzen’s piece come expository passages more typical of essays classically conceived: “Adolescence is best enjoyed without self-consciousness, but self-consciousness, unfor-

tunately, is its leading symptom. Even when something important happens to you, even when your heart’s getting crushed or exalted . . . there come these moments when you’re aware that what’s happening is not the real story. Unless you actually die, the real story is still ahead of you. This alone, this cruel mixture of consciousness and irrelevance, this built-in hollowness, is enough to account for how pissed off you are.”

Franzen opens with an example that comes across as felt experience and then follows it with the mental leap to a more abstract consideration of the example—that’s what makes this a wonderful essay. But it is also, if I remember correctly, the texture of *The Corrections*. And of other great novels besides. We don’t have to invoke the interstitial essays by Tolstoy in *War and Peace* or Melville in *Moby Dick* to make the point. I think it’s better made by re-reading Philip Roth and paying attention to how much of the impulse, as well as the technique, of his novels is essayistic. *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) and *The Human Stain* (2000), to take examples from the two ends of his career, are powered by pages-long monologues on subjects of passionate interest to the author, assigned to one character or another. (“Jews have always spoken essays,” writes Leonard Michaels in the current collection.) And, to take this one step further, the qualities of Roth’s best nonfiction, such as *Patrimony* (1991), an account of his father’s death, are exactly the qualities of his great novels.

The observation has been made for decades that good nonfiction employs techniques of fiction, especially narrative. When we encounter a terrific nonfiction writer, such as Laura Hillenbrand, who can make even a racehorse interesting, we say she’s a great storyteller. But it’s equally a gift, the gift of the essayist, to see stories as examples of a larger idea. An astute reader of *Seabiscuit* (2001) wouldn’t need to read “A Sudden Illness,” Hillenbrand’s account in *Best American Essays* of her experience of chronic fatigue syndrome, to know what a marvelous essayist she is. Nonfiction as artful as *Seabiscuit* doesn’t get written without the essayistic gift of marrying instance to abstraction.

The same is true of Susan Orlean's irresistible *The Orchid Thief* (1998). Orlean is represented in this collection by a piece on a taxidermists' convention, which, like *The Orchid Thief*, is about the obsessions people rely on to give life meaning.

Whether the result is nonfiction or fiction, certain writers move up and down the abstraction scale at a unique pace and with a unique pitch. Voice, a quality much prized by writers and connoisseurs of writing, as Menand points out in his astute introduction, is hard to define and impossible to create on demand. Nevertheless, we respond to it. Susan Sontag sounds like Susan Sontag whether we read the essayistic *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) or the novel *The Volcano Lover* (1992).

Where essayists who want to write novels can go wrong is in believing that, in fiction, they have to leave the expository part of themselves behind, just showing, not telling. In doing so, they silence part of their literary uniqueness. George Eliot made the transition from critic to novelist—a transition she wasn't at all sure she could make—because she found herself able to imagine dramatically. But the transition worked as well as it did because she felt free to bring into the novels the same expository voice she had used in criticism. In *The Quick and the Dead* (2000), one of the best novels of recent years, Joy Williams assigns to one of her characters the intemperate, partisan spirit—and some of the opinions—she herself expressed in controversial essays about the environment for *Harper's* and *Esquire*. Williams has the technical and spiritual flexibility to keep the political passion from taking over the whole book.

Editors are the unsung heroes of such collections as *The Best American Essays*. All the essays were originally published in magazines; I'd be surprised if many weren't assignments, or, at the least, encouragements. A good editor who loves essays encourages them in others. *The New Yorker* must have many such editors, because seven out of the 22 essays in this collection, almost a third of them, originally appeared there. The magazine hasn't always been as favored: The 1986 and 1987 *Best American Essays* each had only one *New Yorker* selection, perhaps because previous editors made it a point to look beyond *The New York-*

er. But Menand's partiality to his own magazine is merited. Orlean's deadpan essay on the taxidermists' convention, Hillenbrand's and Franzen's memoiristic essays, and Adam Gopnik's cultural investigations (a brilliant one on *The Matrix* is in this collection) clearly represent a new style and a new generational voice, which *The New Yorker* in recent years has powerfully expressed. For in addition to a personal voice, essays reflect—they cannot help it—the values and stylistic preferences of their time and country.

In all things relating to the essay, you especially have to admire the first essayist. Montaigne was his own editor. He assigned himself the subjects and had to provide his own encouragement. A good editor can say “That doesn't sound like you” or “This part is thin.” Montaigne did this for himself. He went back over his essays in the years after he'd written them, demanding of himself another example here, another quotation there. In a good edition, you can follow the process, because the various layers are chronologically labeled. Montaigne's essays, the brilliant samples that defined the form, have little overall narrative or logical argument, yet they are filled with wonderful stories. How generals react to the bravery of their enemies, for instance, prompts five examples, each one riveting. The women of a defeated city are exempted from the planned mass execution and allowed to leave with whatever they can carry on their backs before the city is razed. They manage to carry all of their men, and the conquering general is so moved by their gallantry that he spares the city.

Montaigne knows hundreds of these stories, and one reads him looking forward to the next, as well as to what he has to say about it. Perfect unions of example and generalization, his essays have fascinated centuries of readers. It's the same combination of thinking small and thinking big, of incident and rumination, that makes people like me love essays as much as fiction, and for many of the same reasons.

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