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COLLEGE

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ROBERT ATWAN

E D I T O R

The Best
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ESSAYS
College Edition

Edited and with an Introduction

by ROBERT ATWAN

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In Memory of
Randy Shilts
(1951–1994)

Lewis Thomas
(1913–1993)

Preface

Back in the 1970s Edward Hoagland wondered why no one compiled an annual collection of the year's best essays, especially since comparable short story volumes had been around for decades. I agreed with Hoagland, and after a few false starts (I thought at first of calling the series "The E. B. White Awards" and later "The Emerson Awards"), I founded *The Best American Essays* as a companion volume to Houghton Mifflin's *The Best American Short Stories*. The first volume was published in 1986. Since then, the series has grown in popularity; each year more and more readers seem drawn to the vitality and versatility of the contemporary American essay.

For readers unfamiliar with the series, a brief introduction may be useful. As the series editor, I screen hundreds of essays from an enormous variety of general, specialized, and literary magazines: I then turn over a large number of candidates to a guest editor, a prominent American writer, who makes the final selection of approximately twenty essays. To qualify for selection, the essays must be works of high literary quality intended as fully developed, independent essays on subjects of general interest, originally written in English for first appearance in an American periodical during a calendar year. In general, selections for the book are included on the basis of literary achievement: they must be admirably written and demonstrate an awareness of craft as well as a forcefulness of thought. Since each guest editor, of course, possesses a different idea about what comprises a fine essay, each book also represents a unique literary sensibility. This variety of literary taste and opinion (which can be sampled in the prologue, "On the Essay") keeps the series healthy and diverse.

This edition of *The Best American Essays* is designed for college students and classroom use. Essays have long been a staple of writing courses, so why not a collection of “the best” contemporary essays for today’s students? I believe that many writing instructors wish to expose their students to high-quality, relevant, and intellectually challenging prose. With this end in mind, I selected thirty-five essays from the first eight volumes in the series—1986–1993. From the pool of one hundred and sixty-two essays published during that period, I chose those essays that, for a variety of reasons (length, topicality, rhetorical and thematic diversity, etc.), would work best for writing instructors and their classes. Still, *The Best American Essays, College Edition* represents work from each of the annual volumes and contains many essays that have—if repeated publication is any indication—been among the most popular of the series.

To make this edition more suitable to writing courses, I arranged the essays within seven thematic chapters. The themes were not arbitrarily imposed on the essays; as I went through the eight volumes, I noticed a number of recurring themes which I used to organize this edition. The themes, I believe, not only reveal some of the contemporary essay’s major preoccupations (such as identity conflicts, cultural heritages, and self-recovery), but they also introduce readers to the dominant types of essay published in our time (personal, expository, and argumentative).

For instructors who prefer to teach essays along different lines, I’ve included three alternative arrangements: (a) a rhetorical table of contents that rearranges the essays into ten traditional modes or patterns; (b) a table of contents that focuses on salient literary and journalistic features; and (c) a topical organization that places the essays in a context of current issues. I’ve also drawn from the various “Forewords” I contribute to the annual volumes to develop an introduction to the literary and compositional features of the contemporary American essay. And, though space would not permit the inclusion of the eight guest-editor introductions, I orchestrated twenty incisive excerpts into a prologue that should stimulate critical discussion of the genre and lead to writing assignments.

In addition, to help orient student readers, the volume contains an informative “lead-in” to each essay and a brief biographical note. “Reflections and Responses,” a set of questions designed to

assist class discussion or to instigate ideas for papers follows each selection. The questions range from a consideration of compositional details to broader reflections on theme and issue. Instructors who wish to delve deeper into the literary and rhetorical features of the essays will appreciate the thorough and perceptive instructor's manual prepared by Elizabeth Huyck (Princeton University).

Although anthologies such as this one may appear simple to construct, they actually involve the professional efforts of many people. I wish to extend my thanks, first of all, to the distinguished guest editors I've worked with and whose presence is felt throughout this edition: Elizabeth Hardwick, Gay Talese, Annie Dillard, Geoffrey Wolff, Justin Kaplan, Joyce Carol Oates, Susan Sontag, and Joseph Epstein. Without them there would be no series. I appreciate the enthusiasm for the project and the help I've received from the Houghton Mifflin college staff: from my editors Kristin Watts Peri and Nandana Sen, and from Stefanie Jacobs, who saw the book through production, and Jeff Smith, who copyedited the manuscript and provided many helpful details. George Kane also offered many helpful suggestions. I'm especially grateful to Elizabeth Huyck for producing a superb instructor's manual. I'm much obliged to my assistant, Peter Krass, who managed to keep a thousand moving parts efficiently in place. I appreciate the suggestions of four good friends, Donald McQuade (University of California, Berkeley), Charles O'Neill and Jack Roberts (both of St. Thomas Aquinas College), and William Vesterman (Rutgers University). As always, I'm indebted to my wife, Hélène, for her indispensable support and advice.

—R.A.

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"My fantasy, taken up in early adolescence and not quite dropped to this day, is that I can roam freely from social class to social class, comfortable everywhere and everywhere welcome."

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"I was fifteen when I started my romance with Indians, and I only knew that I was in love with life outside the constricting white mainstream, and with all the energy that vibrates on the outer reaches of cultural stability."

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"The tools in my workbench are a double inheritance, for each hammer and level and saw is wrapped in a cloud of knowing."

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"He gave his testimony to me and I held it at first cautiously in my conscience like it was an heirloom too delicate to expose to strangers and anyone outside of the world Kubota made with his words."

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"Somewhere close behind me the outline of Thoreau's small cabin plods along, a ghost set on haunting. It even has the same rueful eyes Henry David had in the portrait in his book. A wealthy woman with a floral breakfast nook once told me I would 'get over him' but I have not — documented here, I have not."

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"Storytelling and make-believe, like war and agriculture, are among the arts of self-defense, and all of them are ways of enclosing otherness and claiming ownership."

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"Education doesn't end until life ends, because you never know when you're going to understand something you hadn't understood before."

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"The prisons I have visited are spirit killers: the inmates — no matter how smart, capable, or engaging — have little sense of their own inextinguishable worth, their own human possibility. And this is not by accident."

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"I have not the slightest notion what goes on in the mind of my cat Jeoffry, beyond the conviction that it is a genuine mind, with genuine thoughts and a strong tendency to chaos, but in all other respects a mind totally unlike mine."

4. EXPRESSION • 187

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"Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all — all the Englishes I grew up with."

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"Nothing on earth is more gladdening than knowing we must roll up our sleeves and move back the boundaries of the humanly possible once more."

Talking AIDS to Death. RANDY SHILTS • 209

"I had written a book to change the world, and here I was on talk shows throughout America, answering questions about mosquitoes and gay waiters."

Dressed to Thrill. ANNE HOLLANDER • 226

"Dramatically perverse sexual signals are always powerful elements in the modern fashionable vocabulary; and the most sensational component among present trends is something referred to as androgyny."

Shouting "Fire!" ALAN M. DERSHOWITZ • 240

"Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's classic example of unprotected speech — falsely shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded theater — has been invoked so often, by so many people, in such diverse contexts, that it has become part of our national folk language."

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"People with sunny natures do seem to live longer than people who are nervous wrecks; yet mankind didn't evolve out of the animal kingdom by being unduly sunny-minded."

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"For most of us, as people of crisis, it became clear that horror can last only a little while, and then it becomes commonplace."

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"My legs were lifeless, useless, but their loss had created a dancing image in whose shadowy gyrations I recognized a strange but potentially interesting new self. I would survive."

Spring. GRETEL EHRLICH • 304

"Last spring at this time I was coming out of a bout with pneumonia. I went to bed on January first and didn't get up until the end of February. Winter was a cocoon in which my gagging, basso cough shook the dark figures at the end of my bed."

The Killing Game. JOY WILLIAMS • 316

"To kill is to put to death, extinguish, nullify, cancel, destroy. But from the hunter's point of view, it's just a tiny part of the experience."

6. JOURNEYS • 332

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"When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said, 'This is England'—and she said it with authority, seriousness, and adoration, and we all sat up. It was as if she had said, 'This is Jerusalem, the place you will go to when you die but only if you have been good.'"

The Stone Horse. BARRY LOPEZ • 345

"I waited until I held his eye. I assured him I would not tell anyone else how to get there. He looked at me with stoical despair, like a man who had been robbed twice, whose belief in human beings was offered without conviction."

On the Pilgrim's Path to Lourdes. ELEANOR MUNRO • 357

"Among sacred pilgrimage sites of the world—far-off snowy peaks on which gods are thought to dance, thronged temples by the Ganges, gold-domed cathedrals or humble country altars—the French shrine of Lourdes in its gloomy mountain setting may be one of the most instructive."

Why Stop? MARY HOOD • 364

"Tourists are all children at history's knee, begging for some snatch of song or scrap of idea to play with. Though all the world's a stage, we prefer the sideshow."

Counters and Cable Cars. STEPHEN JAY GOULD • 374

"We also respect an authenticity of *place*. Genuine objects out of context and milieu may foster intrigue, but rarely inspiration. London Bridge dismantled and reassembled in America becomes a mere curiosity."

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The Mystery of Mickey Mouse. JOHN UPDIKE • 385

"Yet survival cannot be imposed through weight of publicity; Mickey's persistence springs from something unhyped, something timeless in the image that has allowed it to pass in status from a fad to an icon."

The Vicksburg Ghost. SUE HUBBELL • 394

"Promotion was what made Elvis Presley. In 1977, the year of his death, his likeness was more widely reproduced than any other save that of Mickey Mouse, and it has been reported that the news of his demise was greeted by one cynic with the words "Good career move!"

Life with Daughters: Watching the Miss America Pageant. GERALD EARLY • 411

"The Miss America pageant is the worst sort of 'Americanism,' the soft smile of sex and the hard sell of toothpaste and hair dye ads wrapped in the dreamy ideological gauze of 'making it through one's own effort.' "

Yes, Oswald Alone Killed Kennedy. JACOB COHEN • 430

"For nearly thirty years, platoons of conspiricists have concertedly scavenged the record, floating their appalling and thrilling might-have-beens, unfazed by the contradictions and absurdities in their own wantonly selective accounts, often consciously, cunningly deceitful."

What's Wrong with Animal Rights. VICKI HEARNE • 451

"Animal-rights publications are illustrated largely with photographs of two kinds of animals—"Helpless Fluff" and "Agonized Fluff," the two conditions in which some people seem to prefer their animals, because any other version of an animal is too complicated for propaganda."

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