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The Best
AMERICAN
ESSAYS®
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Edited and with an Introduction
by Stephen Jay Gould

Robert Atwan, Series Editor



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Foreword

“UNFORTUNATELY, there’s some very bad news,” Stephen Jay Gould announced at the end of last March while leaving a message on my answering machine to say that he had completed making all the final selections for this year’s book. He added that he would be checking into the hospital the following Monday for what he fully expected would be “a quite serious procedure.” Less than two months later, this truly amazing person would be gone. He promised to finish the introduction before undergoing the surgery. And he did.

A native New Yorker, who at the time lived within a mile of Ground Zero, Gould had been emotionally devastated by the terrorist assault of September 11, 2001 — which as he notes in his introduction came one hundred years to the day after his grandfather landed at Ellis Island. Gould had planned to commemorate his family’s centennial on that day by visiting his grandfather’s site of entry. Almost immediately after the attacks, he wrote four short, reflective essays on 9/11 that he managed to include in his last collection, *I Have Landed*, which appeared shortly before his death. Although he saw the attacks as an instance of “spectacularly destructive evil,” he optimistically believed that the terrorist “vision of inspired fear” would never prevail over the “overwhelming weight of human decency” we find everywhere around us.

As he read through the one hundred or so essays I’d sent him, Gould at one point observed how everything seemed “shaped by 9/11,” regardless of whether an essay was written before or after. Later, I realized how every few years, ever since I launched this an-

nual essay series in 1985, some pivotal event dominates the national attention and dramatically narrows our literary scope. In 1995 it seemed that half the essays I read dealt either directly or tangentially with the O. J. Simpson trial. The nation couldn't stop talking about it, and many distinguished writers weighed in with insightful and sometimes brilliant commentary. Something similar occurred toward the end of 2000, when the American political process was put on hold during the most bizarre presidential election in our history. Yet coverage of these events — as influential and absorbing as they still are — did not necessarily find their way into the volumes that featured the best essays of those years.

But the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath were altogether another story. The written response was overwhelming, and not merely because of the massive news coverage that instantly went into operation. The coverage, commentary, and reportage one could expect; what was unexpected was their astonishingly high quality. I had assumed that thoughtful essays would take months of reflection and deliberation, that the "literature of 9/11" was several years away. I was surprised to see it taking shape before my eyes. As Stephen Jay Gould mentions in his introduction, we could have assembled an entire volume of 9/11 essays. Perhaps two or three volumes, I should add.

And yet, when I consider the responses to 9/11 more carefully, I realize that I should have expected an abundance of fine essays. The essay always seems to revitalize in times of war and conflict — and it's usually with the return of peace and prosperity that fiction and poetry renew their literary stature. The First World War resulted in an eruption of essays and introduced the work of some of our finest nonfiction writers, many of whom, like Randolph Bourne, took up the pacifist cause. Then the postwar years saw the flourishing of some of our most celebrated poets and novelists, those members of the "lost generation." This was true too in the Second World War (E. B. White published his greatest essay collection in 1942), and it was especially true during Vietnam. It seems to me no coincidence that the Vietnam years saw the emergence of the New Journalism, an exciting and innovative brand of nonfiction pioneered by one of the writers included in this volume, John Sack.

I can't prove this theory about essays in time of war. The idea oc-

curred to me while reading Czeslaw Milosz's brilliant long poem *A Treatise on Poetry*, which arrived in the mail just a day or so before the 9/11 carnage. Though he promotes the value of poetry in difficult times, Milosz prefaces his "treatise" with the recognition that in our time "serious combat, where life is at stake, / is fought in prose." Even if that's accurate — at least in a general sense — I'm not sure why. Perhaps in times of conflict and crisis people want to be in the presence of less mediated voices — we need more debate and directives, we desire more public discourse. We instinctively turn to writing that displays a greater sense of immediacy and urgency. "These are the times that try men's souls," Thomas Paine memorably wrote in 1776, in what would be the first essay of *The American Crisis*. At that moment in history, radicalism and nationalism could go hand in hand.

A few weeks after the attacks of 9/11, I hosted a reading of essays from the newly published 2001 volume at Wordsworth bookstore in Cambridge, just a block away, incidentally, from the hotel where, earlier in September, my son and I (we had just moved a sofa into his freshman dorm) stepped out of the garage elevator into the lobby and exchanged uneasy glances with two unfashionably dressed Middle Eastern men who three days later would fly their suicide mission into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. I was apprehensive about the reading, thinking that anything written before 9/11 might now appear irrelevant, naïve, or just hopelessly dated to an audience saturated with minute-by-minute coverage of wreckage and terrorism.

Milosz's words, however, had stayed with me, and I cited them, suggesting that in these times the essay was perhaps the most suitable and effective mode of response. Here is what I said: "Whatever other consequences they entail, there can be little doubt that the attacks of September 11 will have enormous cultural repercussions, and among these will be a reemergence of the essay as a broadly relevant, even indispensable, genre — a vital source of voices, ideas, and personal histories that the public will turn to with perhaps greater attention than ever before."

A few months later, I found my observations about the essay independently corroborated by Peter Beinart in *The New Republic*, who pointed out that an increasing seriousness in the press after 9/11 has resulted in the reemergence of the "non-reported, non-

narrative, political or historical” analytical essay, a genre that in his opinion had gone “deeply out of fashion in the 1990’s.” The “new gravity” that Beinart now sees in the magazine world is evidenced in this volume, not only by his own magazine’s contribution (Mario Vargas Llosa’s “Why Literature?”) but by the large number of serious and informed essays on education, culture, history, music, and vital contemporary issues. Even the personal essays, with their prevailing medical topics, are grounded in matters of life and death, issues that we now know represented something more to Gould at the time than age-old literary themes.

The Best American Essays features a selection of the year’s outstanding essays, essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and forcefulness of thought. Hundreds of essays are gathered annually from a wide variety of national and regional publications. These essays are then screened, and approximately one hundred are turned over to a distinguished guest editor, who may add a few personal discoveries and who makes the final selections.

To qualify for selection, the essay must be a work of respectable literary quality, intended as a fully developed, independent essay on a subject of general interest (not specialized scholarship), originally written in English (or translated by the author) for publication in an American periodical during the calendar year. Magazine editors who want to be sure their contributors will be considered each year should include the series on their complimentary subscription list (Robert Atwan, Series Editor, *The Best American Essays*, P.O. Box 220, Readville, MA 02137). Writers, editors, and readers interested in the essay series can also contact me by writing to: Robert Atwan, Director, The Blue Hills Writing Institute, Curry College, 1071 Blue Hill Avenue, Milton, MA 02186-2395, or by visiting www.curry.edu and looking for the writing institute under “Continuing Education.” Writers and editors are welcome to submit published essays from any American periodical for consideration; unpublished work does not qualify for the series and cannot be reviewed or evaluated.

I appreciate the assistance I received on this book from Matthew Howard and Ellen Thibault. As always, I’m grateful for the help and guidance I receive from various people at Houghton Mifflin, especially Erin Edmison, Larry Cooper, Liz Duvall, Eric

Chinski, and Janet Silver. All of us were saddened to hear of Stephen Jay Gould's serious illness, and then so very soon after we were all grieved to learn of his death. We join in dedicating this seventeenth volume in the series to the memory of this brilliant scientist, thrilling thinker, incomparable essayist, and steadfast humanist.

R.A.

Introduction: *To Open a Millennium*

ACCORDING TO calendrical conventions, the third millennium of our era began on January 1, 2000, or on January 1, 2001, by equally defensible modes of reckoning. Either way, we all acknowledge that our favored decimal mode of numeration reflects nothing more than a convention, however sensible, based on our evolutionary complement of digits. Thus, although we count time by decades and centuries, the beginnings of such units cannot transcend the arbitrary and often bear no interesting relationship to the press of actual history.

Many commentators have stated — quite correctly in my view — that the twentieth century did not truly begin in 1900 or 1901, by any standard of historical continuity, but rather at the end of World War I, the great shatterer of illusions about progress and human betterment. We now face a similar problem for the inception of this millennium, one that must be addressed before proceeding with any collection of essays to honor a year for its inception. Forget the old argument about January 1, 2000 or 2001 (and I even devoted an entire book, albeit short, to this subject). To our great misfortune (that is, provided we can assure that events of similar magnitude do not dog the rest of our days), I suspect that future chroniclers will date the inception of the third millennium from September 11, 2001. Any collector of essays for this fateful year must therefore, up front and first of all, address this issue.

I was tempted to make a collection solely of 9/11 pieces (so

many good ones already, and so many more yet to come), but neither decency nor common morality permitted such a course. We simply cannot allow evil madmen to define history in this way. Moreover, the event occurred late enough in the year to preclude the kind of pervasiveness that might summon such a temptation. But 9/11 stories must be here, and you will find some of the first of the best.

As another point about the need to focus on 9/11, no other event of my life so immediately became part of everyone's experience. (I think we may finally be able to retire that old question, Where were you the moment JFK was shot?) So we all have personal stories as well, and we need to share them, if only to keep the mantra of "never again" as active as we possibly can. For myself, and in briefest epitome, I live less than a mile from Ground Zero, and if the towers had fallen due north instead of downward, my home would have been flattened. I spent my sixtieth birthday in Italy, on September 10, the day before the attack. Flying back to New York on the day itself, I ended up spending an unplanned five days in Halifax, where my plane was diverted, among some of the kindest people I have ever encountered. Finally, in the weirdest coincidence of my life (the kind of event that makes the religious believe, although I remain a confirmed skeptic), I remembered that the history of my family in America had begun with the arrival of my grandfather. I own the grammar book that he purchased for a nickel soon after his immigration at age thirteen, and I have affirmed the correct date (for I have a copy of the ship's manifest for his arrival at Ellis Island) of the minimally elegant inscription that he wrote on the title page: "I have landed. September 11, 1901."

One truly final point and then I promise to move on. History's verdict remains to be assigned, but we tend to designate our important days by the events they commemorate, not simply by the date itself. Only one exception to this pattern now exists, the one date that must stand by and for itself: July 4. I can't help wondering (as seems to be the case so far, but we cannot yet tell) if this beginning of our millennium will enter American history as the second example, known either as September 11 or 9/11. I don't know how to root about this matter, for or against. As a devoted baseball fan, I do believe in the necessity of rooting. Several years ago, I promised Bob Atwan that I would take on one of the yearly "best" volumes as

soon as I finished my magnum opus, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (published in March 2002 by Harvard University Press, 1,433 pages, at the unbeatable hardback price of \$39.95). I cringed when he sent me about one hundred essays for my selection, and exploded in premonitory fear for an odd reason that I rarely confess: I am a committed intellectual, and I like to read, but in a funny sense the last book that truly inspired me was probably *The Little Engine That Could*, first encountered more than half a century ago. Still, a promise is a promise, and so I proceeded. And, thank goodness for affirmations of prior hope, I actually enjoyed the task.

My overall impressions are scarcely worth the length of the following sentence, and I will surely not detail the reasons for most of my individual choices herein. But — and I guess because I primarily write, rather than read, essays — I was astonished by the single most salient character of the choices considered together. I knew that “confessional writing” now enjoys quite a vogue, but I had no idea how pervasive the practice of personal storytelling has become among our finest writers. I can’t help asking myself (although all lives are, by definition, interesting, for what else do we have?): why in heaven’s name should I care about the travails of X or Y unless some clear generality about human life and nature emerges thereby? I’m glad that trout fishing defined someone’s boyhood, and I’m sad that parental dementia now dominates someone’s midlife, but what can we do in life but play the hand we have been dealt? (And if I may be confessional for a moment, the line that most moved me in all these essays came from the pen of an author who stated, so truly, for I live this life every day, that nothing can be harder than the undesired responsibility for raising a child with severe handicaps). Still, I hope that the current popularity of confessional writing soon begins to abate.

I have made no attempt to gather my choices into subgroupings, but I offer a few comments in three categories to close this introduction. First, among the confessional writings, the number of medical pieces rather stunned me — as if we have come to the point where everyone with a serious illness (meaning all of us, at some point in our lives) feels some compunction to share the load. I particularly appreciated Barbara Ehrenreich’s cancer tale for its wonderfully appropriate cynicism and honesty in the face of what

nonprofessionals can and cannot do — for, contrary to hope and wishes turning into horses, we cannot will ourselves into betterment, and dreams of such mental control ultimately do not help. I also loved Atul Gawande's essay on the decline of autopsies (a truly scholarly piece within the more confessional genre) and the number of mistakes made by doctors that autopsies reveal.

In a second, political category, I did not know of Gore Vidal's odd relationship with the late Mr. McVeigh, and I found the tale fascinating. I struggled with John Sack's account of his contacts with Holocaust deniers and finally included it because, while I disagree with his decision to speak at their meetings, the deniers do remain (unlike the actual perpetrators) within the category of human beings, and I supposed that we therefore need to understand them as well as we can. Amy Kolen's essay on the Triangle fire, although entirely meritorious in se, did get a nod for personal reasons too. My grandmother was a shirtwaist worker, on the job at a different sweatshop on the day of the fire. My current office, in the very same building now owned by NYU, occupies a corner of one of the floors that burned on that fateful day. And — how can one possibly avoid so saying — the horrific image of young women jumping to their deaths resonated with every sentient person on 9/11, as history repeated itself when many trapped people decided (consciously or not, we can never know) to make their end with the same final gesture of freedom.

The 9/11 essays, of course, also fall into this political category. Rudolph Chelminski may win no literary prizes, but no New Yorker can forget the day that the Blondin of our times walked between the towers. Adam Mayblum may not be a professional writer, but his on-the-scene account touched me, as did Richard Price and Anne Hudson-Price's record of street voices in the aftermath of the tragedy. I loved the juxtaposition of David Halberstam's and Christopher Hitchens's essays, the first from a longtime New Yorker who used 9/11 to make some kind of peace that he had not found with his life, the second from an Englishman who used the same event to come to terms after decades of struggle.

In a third, more scholarly category, I struggled with Andrew Levy's "The Anti-Jefferson," for it runs longer, and more seriously, than the conventional essay. But in the end I decided that it had to win entry for a primary historical principle too rarely stated. It tells

the story of the most extensive voluntary manumission of slaves ever achieved in Virginia, and few people have heard of the hero, nor do we really know why he acted as he did. We need to define and understand the unasked questions if we ever hope to grasp the pains and realities of our past. A reader would have to be tone deaf not to be fascinated by Nicholas Delbanco's detailed story of the renovation of one of the world's great Strad cellos. Among the more academic pieces, Louis Menand's reminder that liberal arts colleges never really enjoyed a Golden Age strikes home, for Golden Age myths exist for everything we like, and hardly anything can be more pernicious. I appreciated Mario Vargas Llosa on the continuity of books, and I sure hope he's right. Jacques Barzun has never been one of my heroes, but anyone still writing so well in his mid-nineties deserves a place here, and someone has to stick up for the three R's, hickory stick or no.

STEPHEN JAY GOULD

Contents

Foreword by Robert Atwan	viii
Introduction: To Open a Millennium by Stephen Jay Gould	xiii
JACQUES BARZUN. <i>The Tenth Muse</i>	1
<i>from Harper's Magazine</i>	
RUDOLPH CHELMINSKI. <i>Turning Point</i>	13
<i>from Smithsonian</i>	
BERNARD COOPER. <i>Winner Take Nothing</i>	22
<i>from GQ</i>	
NICHOLAS DELBANCO. <i>The Countess of Stanlein Restored</i>	35
<i>from Harper's Magazine</i>	
BARBARA EHRENREICH. <i>Welcome to Cancerland</i>	66
<i>from Harper's Magazine</i>	
JONATHAN FRANZEN. <i>My Father's Brain</i>	88
<i>from The New Yorker</i>	
ATUL GAWANDE. <i>Final Cut</i>	111
<i>from The New Yorker</i>	
DAVID HALBERSTAM. <i>Who We Are</i>	124
<i>from Vanity Fair</i>	
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS. <i>For Patriot Dreams</i>	137
<i>from Vanity Fair</i>	
SEBASTIAN JUNGER. <i>The Lion in Winter</i>	144
<i>from National Geographic Adventure</i>	

AMY KOLEN. <i>Fire</i>	165
<i>from The Massachusetts Review</i>	
ANDREW LEVY. <i>The Anti-Jefferson</i>	188
<i>from The American Scholar</i>	
ADAM MAYBLUM. <i>The Price We Pay</i>	213
<i>from DoubleTake</i>	
LOUIS MENAND. <i>College: The End of the Golden Age</i>	219
<i>from The New York Review of Books</i>	
CULLEN MURPHY. <i>Out of the Ordinary</i>	232
<i>from The Atlantic Monthly</i>	
DANIELLE OFRI. <i>Merced</i>	237
<i>from The Missouri Review</i>	
DARRYL PINCKNEY. <i>Busted in New York</i>	253
<i>from The New Yorker</i>	
RICHARD PRICE AND ANNE HUDSON-PRICE. <i>Word on the Street</i>	267
<i>from The New York Times Magazine</i>	
JOE QUEENAN. <i>Matriculation Fixation</i>	276
<i>from The New York Times Education Life</i>	
JOHN SACK. <i>Inside the Bunker</i>	280
<i>from Esquire</i>	
MARIO VARGAS LLOSA. <i>Why Literature?</i>	295
<i>from The New Republic</i>	
GORE VIDAL. <i>The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh</i>	309
<i>from Vanity Fair</i>	
GARRY WILLS. <i>The Dramaturgy of Death</i>	331
<i>from The New York Review of Books</i>	
PENNY WOLFSON. <i>Moonrise</i>	344
<i>from The Atlantic Monthly</i>	
Biographical Notes	367
Notable Essays of 2001	372

JACQUES BARZUN

The Tenth Muse

FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE

SHE IS THE MUSE of popular culture, the tenth muse, the muse who inspires the poems and tales and tunes that express the hearts and minds of the people. Reliable reports say that she has disappeared, and this worries a good many observers. Their concerns point in various directions, but together they confirm the impression that in the modern world there is no popular culture. Listen to some of these complaints. The *New York Times* says that the whole country argues about taste and concludes that "when it comes to enforcing it, it's best to tread lightly, if at all." A book by Thomas S. Hibbs entitled *Shows About Nothing* has the subtitle *Nihilism in Popular Culture from "The Exorcist" to "Seinfeld."* Another, *Crowd Culture*, by Bernard I. Bell, points out that although the culture that offers "escape . . . into a dream world of carnality and brutality" is conspicuous, it is far from being acceptable as culture at all. The columnist Leonard Pitts deplores the "insidious" message that gangsta rap sends to the young. "You struggle to make [black youth] hear you over the beat of a song" that rewards death by drugs and gunshot, but it is difficult. On a broader plane, Joseph P. Lawrence asks "What Is Culture?" in order to discuss whether popular culture is the contradiction of high culture or its foundation. To decide, one must first make sure which of innumerable things that flourish under the name is *the* popular culture of the times.

The issue is not confined to the United States. In England the director of the Barbican Arts Centre in London sees a dangerous conflict: "Populism versus Elitism in the Arts," which is something new and alarming because of its effect on where the money for art

goes. To save themselves, the high arts must engage in “outreach” and “educating” the public. Meanwhile, the warden of Goldsmiths College wonders “Should the Arts Be Popular?” He means, Should the distinction be erased by a merger of styles and genres?

In France the same topic has received attention, but the only extended treatment, in Mona Ozouf’s book *La Muse démocratique*, treats the popular with disdain and invokes the works of Henry James as a shield against “the gray, dull, and vulgar world.” His novels serve this purpose because they show up and condemn vulgarity while steadfastly upholding the true democratic ideal.

Ozouf’s sheer avoidance could be labeled sheer elitism, but it also suggests the absence in the popular genres of those qualities that in the past “elitist” minds enjoyed and respected. If, to return to this country, one goes to the *Journal of Popular Culture*, one is likewise disappointed to find it silent on its declared subject. It deals with such topics as “Fairy Tale Elements in Jane Eyre,” H. L. Mencken and Methodism, and Sir Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. That Georges Simenon’s Maigret novels and Maurice Sendak’s books for children are also discussed does not conceal the remoteness of all such considerations from the reality on the streets.

Let us take a quick look at the popular. In music, it includes cowboy and country, rock and rap, and other offshoots of early-twentieth-century ragtime and jazz. These have subdivided endlessly, each with a special name, fine-drawn characteristics, and clannish devotees. In storytelling, the popular ranges from tough crime to pornography; in graphics, from the comic strip to pop art; and in magazines, from the supermarket level to the group-interest form that rises out of bodybuilding and housekeeping to the dizzy literary heights of *The New Yorker* and the *Paris Review*. The television screen features soap operas, legal or other dramatic episodes, and moneyed competitions, while the Internet offers games and pseudo-culture — a congeries of pastimes that, with some overlapping, cater to diverse publics. The newspapers record the diversity in review articles by different experts.

Can it be said that any of these entertainments expresses the hearts and minds of the people? Some think that rap lyrics echo a prevailing disgust with life and society at the end of an era. Sentimental balladry under various names depicts the world that simple