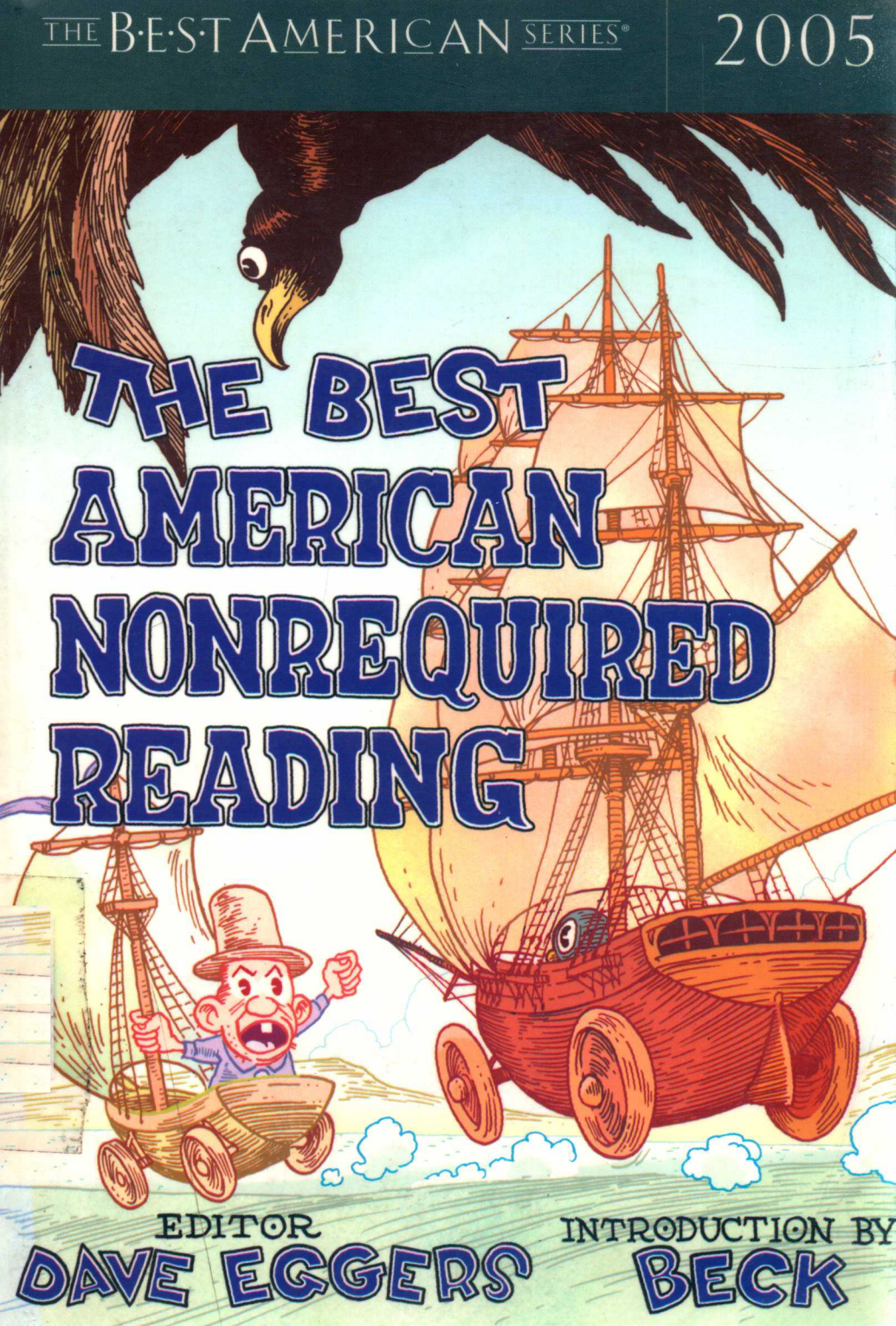


THE BEST AMERICAN SERIES®

2005

The background of the cover features a stylized illustration. At the top, a large eagle with dark brown feathers and a yellow beak is shown from the chest up, looking down. Below the eagle, a large, multi-masted sailing ship with orange sails is depicted. In the foreground, a man with a large nose, wearing a blue shirt and a tall top hat, is shown in a small wooden boat that has four large wooden wheels. He is holding a steering wheel and has a surprised or excited expression. The entire scene is set against a light blue sky and a green ground with some white clouds.

# THE BEST AMERICAN NONREQUIRED READING

EDITOR

DAVE EGGERS

INTRODUCTION BY

BECK

THE BEST AMERICAN

NONREQUIRED  
READING

2005

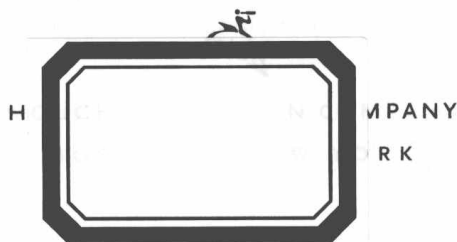


EDITED BY

DAVE EGGERS

INTRODUCTION BY

BECK



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## FOREWORD

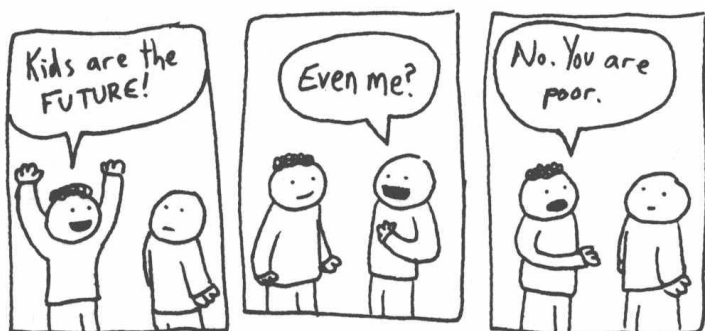
THIS COLLECTION, as has been the case in past years, was selected in large part by a group of high school students from the Bay Area, which is in California and near San Francisco. As always, the committee — this year comprising twelve members, including one named Todd — met once a week over the course of a year. During those meetings and on their own time, they pored over pretty much every weekly, monthly, and quarterly magazine, every self-published chapbook, every comic book and poorly stapled zine published and findable in the United States. In these periodicals, the students looked for things they liked, and their parameters were, as always, wide; this collection, unlike the other Best Americans — which Todd insists are never as Best as this one — can draw from any medium or genre: fiction, journalism, essay, cartoon, or any combination thereof. The only requirements are that the selections be engaging, somewhat direct in approach, have something to say about the world at the moment, and that they not be too long or about the relationship problems of wealthy people in Manhattan. With that in mind, we try to focus on lesser-known writers and periodicals, and mix them with some of the better-known examples in each category. The process, such as it is, usually works out very well.

But this year we had some problems. We had, actually, one problem, which was that a few things everyone liked a great deal, and which we felt added something very good to the mix, did not look right in alphabetical order amid all the other works of prose. We felt that we were dressing up certain pieces in clothes they would not normally wear. We were sending the Andorra to the G-8.

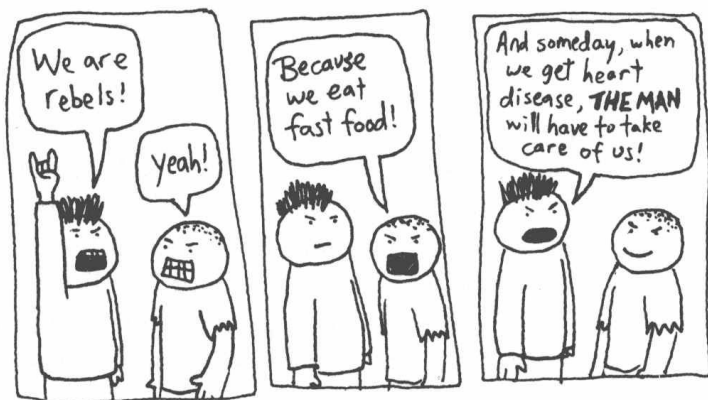


Case in point: There is a man named Joe Sayers who self-publishes chapbooks of his cartoons. One day Felicia, one of the committee members, brought in one of these booklets, called "Passing Periods." It was one of the funniest things we'd ever seen, we thought. We chose a bunch of the cartoons for the collection, and then, when we saw them all laid out — two three-panel cartoons per page! — they were no longer funny. The pressure put on these cartoons, which we'd seen in a booklet the size of a thumb, was too great.

It's a strange thing. Context always, always plays a part in how something is read, and until we find a solution to this problem — and we have some top people working on it — we have to deal with it in sneaky ways. One such sneaky way is by slipping such things in unexpectedly, and without great fanfare.



See? You loved that cartoon more than your mother, and why? Because we snuck up on you with it. Here's another:



You are in love with Joe Sayers. You are Googling Joe Sayers. But if you had seen these cartoons in the body of this book, you might have been very angry with Joe Sayers and with the makers of this book. There was another such cartoon, by Anders Nilsen:

## the mediocrity principle

SO, I'VE DECIDED FROM NOW ON I'M GOING TO TRY TO BE MEDIOCRE AT EVERYTHING I DO.

I FEEL LIKE I'LL JUST GET MORE DONE THAT WAY ALSO THAT WAY I DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND I'M SOMETHING I'M NOT

I DON'T HAVE TO CARE WHAT ANYONE THINKS ABOUT ME. I DON'T HAVE TO ROW-TOW TO ANYONE.



THAT PRESSURE TO ENGAGE, TO BREAK OUT OF ONE'S HABITS...

I LIKE MY HABITS. I DON'T NEED TO CHALLENGE ANYONE, LEAST OF ALL MYSELF. I'M FINE JUST THE WAY I AM.

AND IF I NEED TO I'LL START SUCKING. IF IT COMES TO THAT, FINE. THAT'S HOW FAR I'M WILLING TO GO WITH THIS!

NO LIMITS!



ALL THAT PRESSURE TO BE PROFOUND - GONE!

ALL THAT PRESSURE TO HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY - POOF! TO BE RELEVANT, TO BE THE VOICE OF GENERATION, TO MAKE A LOT OF MONEY, TO DRIVE A FANCY CAR, TO HAVE AN ENTOURAGE...

...OR EVEN JUST TO "MAKE A DIFFERENCE" AS THEY SAY. FUCK ALL THAT STUFF. GET OUT THE GIANT METAPHORICAL VACUUM CLEANER AND JUST ~~SUCK~~ SUCK IT UP, DUMP IT OUT, WIPE IT AWAY, HOSE IT OFF

I'M GOING TO STAY EXACTLY THE SAME TILL I DIE, SO MOVE OVER, WORLD. MOVE OVER AND SHUT UP!



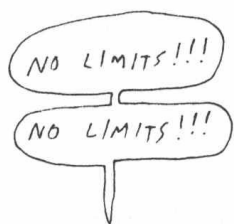
NO LIMITS !!

NO LIMITS !!

YOU HEAR ME?!







See? We got you again. We caught you unawares, and now you are nominating Mr. Nilsen for NEA grants, which, if you are reading this after 2005, do not, effectively, exist.

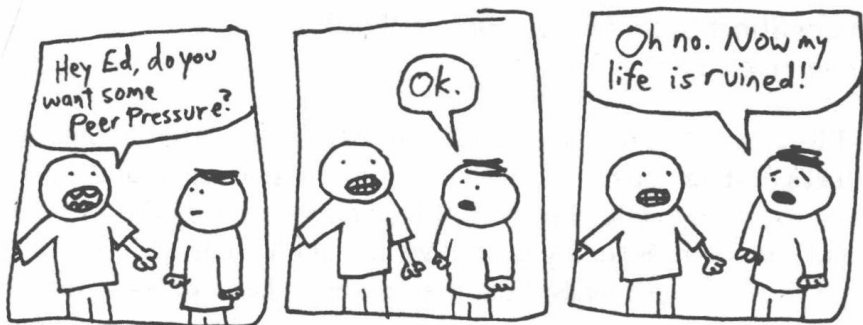
For the rest of these introductory pages, let's follow this plan:

— We'll have some more Joe Sayers

— Then we'll have some of the short-short stories I've been adding to these introductions as space-fillers and to satisfy the Republicans and the Swedes

— After that, we'll have some information about 826 Valencia, followed by six pages about Captain Rick, who is a menace and we'll explain why

— Finally, we'll have bios of the students who selected the works in this book and bear no responsibility for this introduction. When it was written, they were on summer vacation.



## Very Short Story No. 1: *Also He Was Wearing a Fila Sweatsuit*

"I'll say goodbye before I leave," Jim said. "No need," said Marcus. "Let's just say goodbye now. You're leaving so early, and I'll be asleep." "That's OK," Jim said. "I'll just nudge you awake for a second and say bye. No big deal." "Well," said Marcus, "I'll be sad to see you leave, but really, I'd rather not be woken up. It's midnight now, and I gotta get to sleep, so I'll just say bye now. It was great having you here, and I'll see you next time I'm in town. Hope the couch wasn't too uncomfortable." "No, no, buster-boy. I'll see you in the morning. I'll just give you a quick goodbye punch on the shoulder. It's something I like doing, so I'll see you then. Afterward, you can go back to sleep if you want to." "Oh boy, Jim," Marcus said. "It really sounds great, that goodbye punch you're talking about, but you know, I really love my sleep to be sorta of the uninterrupted kind, and besides, I just had a booster shot, and man, it'd hurt like a mother to have you punching my shoulder there, especially in the cruel light of morning. So anyway, I guess we'll say farewell here, while we're both lucid and all. Farewell, goodbye, et cetera. It's been good." "No-no-no. No! No. No. I can't let you off that easy, you mean too much to me. What is this, Russia? No, I insist, as a good guest, on thanking you properly. I'll just whisper —" "Listen, shitwipe. If you dare to even turn the knob on my door, I'm gonna hack you to death with an ax made from your own tibia and fragments of your skull. I'm gonna —" "Well then. Good night, Dad." "Yeah. Good night. Come back soon, son. Any time at all."

## Very Short Story No. 2: *Accident*

You all get out of your cars. You are alone in yours, and there are three teenagers in theirs, an older Camaro in new condition. The accident was your fault and you go over to tell them this. Walking to their car, which you have ruined, it occurs to you that if the three teenagers are angry teenagers, this encounter could

be very unpleasant. You pulled into an intersection, obstructing them, and their car hit yours. They have every right to be upset, or livid, or even contemplating violence. As you approach, you see that their driver's-side door won't open. The driver pushes against it, and you are reminded of scenes where drivers are stuck in submerged cars. Soon they all exit through the passenger-side door and walk around the Camaro, inspecting the damage. "Just bought this today," the driver says. He is eighteen, blond, average in all ways. "Today?" you ask. You are a bad person, you think. You also think: What a strange car for a teenager to buy in 2005. "Yeah, today," he says, then sighs. You tell him that you are sorry. That you are so, so sorry. That it was your fault and you will cover all costs. You exchange insurance information, and you find yourself, minute by minute, evermore thankful that none of these teenagers has punched you, or even made a remark about your being drunk or blind, which you are not. You become more friendly with all of them, and you realize that you are much more connected to them, particularly to the driver, than possible in perhaps any other way. You have done him and his friends harm, you jeopardized their health, and now you are so close you feel like you share a heart. The driver knows your name and you know his, and you almost killed him and because you got so close but didn't, you want to fall on him, weeping, because you are so lonely, so lonely always, and all contact is contact, and all contact makes us so grateful we want to cry and dance and cry and cry. In a moment of clarity you finally understand why boxers, who want so badly to hurt each other, can rest their heads on the shoulders of their opponent, can lean against one another like tired lovers, so thankful for a moment of rest.

### Very Short Story No. 3: *Georgia Is Lost*

Rodney is looking for his daughter. He's looking desperately for his daughter, Georgia, who is tiny, only two, and has run off from the bowling alley and is presumed lost. Today is her uncle Beau's birthday party, he insisted on a bowling theme because he must al-

ways be offbeat and clever. Georgia loves her uncle Beau (Rodney's brother-in-law) but somewhere between the second and third frames, she disappeared and now everyone is looking for her. Rodney's wife, Pollyanna, is losing her mind. People are desperate. Someone has called the police. The partygoer-bowlers are running around the alley, the parking lot, the streets surrounding; all are calling Georgia's name. Pollyanna, after joining the search for ten minutes, has now collapsed into a puddle by the vending machines, weeping. "Someone took my daughter!" she moans. Rodney has searched the bar, the snack area, and the bathrooms. He has sent two of the party's attendees to their cars, to comb the neighborhood, and while Rodney is looking for Georgia, he can't help hoping — he is so, so ashamed the thought has entered his mind — that Beau doesn't find her first. It would be just like Beau. Beau the Beautard. Beau the pisswad, who has, since Georgia was born, made sure that everyone — especially Georgia — thinks he, and not Rodney, is the girl's primary male presence or focus or role model, or whatever the hell the term is. His Christmas gifts have to be bigger, more obscenely clever. His weekend outings have to be more spectacular and unforgettable and well-thought-out. Archery! Whale watching! Glass blowing! Beau is a putz. He makes his own clothes, wears clogs at home, and insisted last year on defacing poor Georgia's room with a floor-to-ceiling mural of the signing of the Magna Carta. "Uncle Beau!" Georgia could say that before she could say "Daddy" or "food" or even "no." And now Beau is running around, his fanny pack bouncing off his bloated backside, calling out Georgia's name. Rodney is running, too, thinking *Please God, let it be me, let it be anyone but Beau — let anyone but Beau find my daughter*. And his hair! Did he really wear barrettes that one day at the beach? Does he really color his graying hair with brown shampoo? Why can't Georgia see through that kind of narcissism? Oh, Georgia, where are you? And why doesn't he have a real job? He's a "life coach"? If he had a real job he wouldn't be around every goddamned day when Rodney got home from work. He wouldn't be chasing Georgia through the house, both of them shrieking like pigs, Georgia passing by her

own father like he was a hat rack. Uncle Beau with the ankle tattoo, the legs of a satyr, and the ass of an ass. Well, for once Rodney will not come second when it comes to his own daughter. Not this time. No chance. For once — Oh no. Oh lord. Please no. Here he comes. Yes, I see who you found, Beau. Hello, honey. Thanks, Beau. Yes, I was scared, too. Yep, she's lucky to have her uncle Beau. Aren't you, Georgia? I just don't know how to repay you, Beau. I guess I'll have to start thinking about that. I'm gonna get started right away, about just how best to repay you, our good Uncle Beau.

Now, about 826 Valencia and this Captain Rick problem: 826 Valencia started in 2002 as a nonprofit writing and publishing and tutoring center for San Francisco youth. It now has affiliated locations in Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Seattle, Ann Arbor, and Chicago. In all of these places, we offer free tutoring after school, and we send tutors into schools all over the city to help students and teachers with writing-related projects. In addition, classes are held at 826 every evening, ranging from rock music reviewing for the radio (wherein the students actually read their record reviews on the local station) to writing persuasive essays in dealing with your parents (wherein students learn terrible Machiavellian tricks that will bring them trouble and great success). We also have a very busy publishing schedule, which allows San Francisco students to bring about fifty new books, journals, newspapers, zines, and comic books into the world each year. If you have read the BANR before, you know all this. You know, too, that if you would like more information, you can look at Google us and visit our Web sites. You also know that all the proceeds from this and previous BANR editions go directly to the San Francisco center.

And perhaps you even know that in the storefront of the San Francisco tutoring center, we sell supplies to buccaneers. Yes, you know this. We sell eyepatches, peg legs, lard, planks (by the foot), hand replacements, puffy shirts, and red and white striped socks. This is true. We run the Bay Area's only *independent* pirate-supply store, but this is not easy. As you know, we have competition.



There is a chain pirate-supply store, and every week, it seems, they open a new franchise, encroaching evermore closely on our territory, such as it is. Can we survive the tidal wave that is known as Captain Rick's Booty Cove? We are not sure, but we intend to fight to the end.

Who is Captain Rick? you ask. That is what many people want to know. He claims to be a seafarer of some renown, who, after many decades on the ocean, decided to hang up his parrot and perpetual tan, and open a few humble supply shops. Sounds like a nice story — if it were true. In the interest of informing you, the buying public, about Captain Rick, we're enclosing in these pages six of our ongoing informational posters about Captain Rick. Once a week or so, 826 Valencia publishes its newest findings about our competitor, and though this may not be the most appropriate venue, the truth must be heard. One thing not mentioned in these announcements is that Captain Rick's planks are made of balsa. Balsa is no good for planks.

# BASIC QUESTION: IS CAPTAIN RICK AN AUTHENTIC CAPTAIN?

	RICK SAYS	BUT THE TRUTH IS
LEADERSHIP	<i>He commanded over eighty men</i>	<i>He commanded one man, who was over eighty</i>
COURAGE	<i>He throttled a great serpentine beast of the deep</i>	<i>Declined to battle serpentine beast</i>
SEAFARING EXPERTISE	<i>Seven Seas, blah blah blah</i>	<i>Took the ferry once, to Sausalito</i>
GARB	<i>His are brine-soaked, wind-torn</i>	<i>His are in fact from Ross, Dress-for-Less, and artificially tattered. Tore holes in jeans himself.</i>
PUBLIC SPEAKING	<i>He's like some big expert</i>	<i>He gets all nervous and sweaty. Thinks Power-Point means to point at something very forcefully.</i>
SCURVY PREVENTION	<i>He's real good at scurvy prevention</i>	<i>Was not aware that limes were good to have around</i>

**826 VALENCIA: WE JUST WANT YOU TO  
KNOW ALL THE FACTS BEFORE YOU DECIDE  
WHERE TO BUY OCEAN MAPS AND LARD**

# HAS CAPTAIN RICK EVER EATEN A TURTLE? THERE'S ALMOST NO CHANCE

As we all know, when you are out to sea for months or years at a time, often you need to find and eat whatever you can find in the sea. Sometimes this means eating fish. Fish are pretty common in the sea, and thus make a practical meal. But when you can find some turtles, then you eat the turtles. Why? Let us count the reasons:

1. You can keep the turtles in the ship, in buckets or chests, and with just a little water and food, you can keep them fresh for a long time.
2. They are tasty.
3. They are very big, and thus feed many people.
4. They don't talk or complain.

For all these reasons, turtles are eaten by seafarers everywhere. They're favored by northern seafarers and southern seafarers and seafarers who go both ways. But does Captain Rick eat turtles? Pretty unlikely. We had a spy call Captain Rick one morning, and this is how it went down:

Spy: Ring, ring.

Captain Rick: Hello?

Spy: Hey, Captain Rick. Have you eaten turtles before?

Captain Rick: Excuse me? Who is this?

Spy: No one. [Hangs up.]

This spy was not one of our best people; she panicked. But she insisted that before she hung up, Captain Rick seemed scared by the question, which proves to any reasonable person that he's never eaten turtles, and thus is a fraud, and thus should not be selling pirate supplies.

## 826 VALENCIA: WE EAT THEM WITH GUSTO