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Our Times

Readings
from Recent
Periodicals

Robert Atwan



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Readings from Recent Periodicals

Edited by

ROBERT ATWAN

Seton Hall University

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Preface for Instructors

Our Times is a collection of very contemporary nonfiction and short fiction intended for use in composition courses. This wealth of recent writing — most of it published since 1985 and drawn from virtually every important American periodical — provides an intriguing and distinctive view of life in America today.

The book's sixty-two readings are grouped into twenty-seven units that treat many of the dominant themes, issues, and ideas of our time. These topics appeal directly to today's students: the difficulties of parent-teenage conversation, the obsession with personal appearance, the frustrations of modern romance, the supposed dangers of rock music, the consequences of sex and drinking on campus, the fascination of television game shows, and new modes of college cheating. Represented, too, are a variety of perspectives on some of our country's most compelling social and political problems — AIDS, the homeless, teenage suicide, the drug crisis, crime, corporate ethics, abortion, and pornography.

A word about the size of these thematic units. In contrast to most thematically organized readers, which contain a small number of broad categories, *Our Times* features a large number of tightly focused units, each with only two or three selections that speak directly to each other. For example, instead of one large chapter on the media or television, *Our Times* has a smaller unit on situation comedies and another on game shows. The advantages to using these smaller, bite-size units in a composition course will be immediately apparent to experienced instructors: They permit a wider range and variety of topics to be covered in a syllabus; they allow for better-focused discussion and writing; and they can be adequately handled in one or two class periods.

The organization of *Our Times* and its assignments conveniently conforms to the writing agenda of most composition programs. The units themselves are roughly arranged to move from topics close to students' private lives and personal experiences (today's generation, manners, physical appearance) to topics dealing with more public aspects of American life (drugs, crime, pornography). The progression of the units is reflected in changes in the types of writing assignments. Generally, the unit assignments in the first third of the book ask students to write personal narrative and reflective essays; in the second third they concentrate on expository and analytical

writing; in the final third the assignments ask for argumentative and persuasive papers.

With its emphasis on recent issues and ideas, *Our Times* invites class discussion and debate; in fact, the book is carefully designed to facilitate such student responses. Each unit is prefaced by a contextual note that not only helps students find their way into the readings but points the way to future discussion. Key biographical information about the authors is unobtrusively included in footnotes. Each unit ends with a section called “Discussing the Unit,” which includes three sets of interlocking study questions and tasks that help students prepare for class discussion and then incorporate that discussion into their own writing. First, a “Suggested Topic for Discussion” lets students know beforehand what main topic their class discussion will cover. This topic gives students a common purpose in reading and helps keep the discussion focused. Second, “Preparing for Class Discussion” gives students questions and ideas to think about so they will come to class with something to say about the topic. Many of these preparatory questions ask the student to do some preliminary writing. Third, “From Discussion to Writing” gives students a writing topic that — without being redundant — draws on and applies the class discussion.

A basic premise of *Our Times* is that class discussion — often overlooked as a pedagogical resource — can play an important role in composition by stimulating fresh ideas and creating a social context for writing. Instructors interested in using class discussion as a basis for writing (or in simply eliciting more discussion in general) are encouraged to have their students read “Participating in Class Discussion: A Brief Note,” which offers some practical advice on how to prepare for and participate in class discussion.

A fuller description of the educational advantages of linking reading, discussion, and writing, along with tips for directing class discussion, can be found in my introduction to the instructor’s manual.

Prepared by Charles L. O’Neill of New York University, *From Discussion to Writing: Instructional Resources* is bound into the Instructor’s Edition of the book. It is an indispensable component of *Our Times*. Besides providing a convenient, brief summary of the selections and their relation to the topic, it offers numerous classroom activities for each unit. The manual encourages instructors to use a variety of collaborative tasks, from small-group writing exercises to informal panels and debates. It also contains suggestions for additional reading and research as well as recommendations for supplementing the readings with related and readily available films. Perhaps the most valuable part of the manual, however, is its “Suggestions for Directing Class Discussion.” Linked directly to the “Preparing for Class Discussion” questions in the book, these suggestions offer instructors explicit ways to channel their students’ reading and preparation into lively and productive discussion — and then into engaging compositions.

Finally, for instructors who don't want to use the class discussion unit, or who don't want to use it all the time, *Our Times* contains alternative apparatus. A set of questions, "Points to Consider," follows each selection. These questions can be used by instructors who want to concentrate on individual pieces. Instructors who want to give writing tasks based on single selections alone will find in the *Instructional Resources* appropriate assignments that grow directly out of "Points to Consider." The manual also contains a table of contents that groups individual essays into large thematic categories for teachers who would prefer to organize all or some of the selections in different ways.

Acknowledgments

As series editor of the annual *Best American Essays*, I have the occasion to monitor every issue of practically every major national and regional magazine. I also have the good fortune to obtain suggestions from editors and publishers around the country who generously keep me posted on important essays and articles. Many of these people took a keen interest in *Our Times*, and I'd like to thank them here for their advice and recommendations.

I'd like to thank, too, my students in several writing classes I taught over the past few years at Seton Hall University, where I developed and tried out many of the ideas for this book. I hope some of these students — especially Jane Jubilee, Susan Stoessel, Raymond Piccolini, Nicholas Ghizzone, and Eric Callahan — learned as much from me about writing as I learned from them about teaching. A good part of my thinking about the links between writing and discussion grew out of a 1987 conference at Seton Hall, "Redefining the Essay for the Humanities," in which I participated with (among others) O. B. Hardison of Georgetown University, Donald McQuade of the University of California at Berkeley, William Howarth of Princeton University, Scott Russell Sanders of Indiana University, George Core of the *Sewanee Review*, Kurt Spellmeyer and Thomas Recchio of Rutgers University, Michael Hall of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Jacqueline Berke of Drew University, and Alexander Butrym (the conference director), Barbara Lukacs, and Nancy Enright of Seton Hall.

An early version of this book received some very cogent suggestions from Kathleen Shine Cain of Merrimack College, Michael Meyer of the University of Connecticut, and Thomas Recchio. My publisher, Charles H. Christensen, who brings a Montaignean spirit to these endeavors, helped me fashion and refashion, shape and reshape the project until it reached a "go-ahead" form. Joan E. Feinberg, in the best editorial tradition, not only helped me develop many of my thoughts but contributed many splendid ideas of her own. I also want to thank several other people at Bedford Books who helped me along the way: Chris Rutigliano, Mary Lou Wilshaw, Tara Masih, Matthew Carnicelli, and Sarah Royston. Lynn Goldstein managed to keep

track of more details than I thought humanly possible and made many wise suggestions. I appreciate, too, the help of Virginia Creeden, who expertly found her way through a maze of permissions, and Dan Otis, who skillfully handled the copyediting.

Working on *Our Times* would have been far more difficult and certainly far less fun without the help of two good friends, Jack Roberts of Rutgers University and Charles L. O'Neill of New York University. Both helped in the preparation of instructional apparatus, and much of this book is informed by their lively and intelligent discussion of topics and selections. They brought to the project a spirit of talk and inquiry that I have confidence will carry over into the classroom. Bringing many years of discussion-based teaching to the task, Professor O'Neill prepared the innovative and informative *Instructional Resources*, practically a composition text in itself.

It sometimes helps to look at one's country — its problems, its achievements, its opportunities — from a distance. Schedules being what they are, I happened to finish part of *Our Times* in a hotel room with high ceilings overlooking Gorky Avenue in Moscow, a guest of *glasnost*. I'd like to thank the publisher Vassiliy Zhiltsov and the essayist and novelist Valeriy Vinokourov for their impressive hospitality. Another part of the book was completed at Anancy's Web, a tiny cove on the northeastern coast of Jamaica named after the crafty spider of African folklore. I wish to thank the proprietor of that magical place, Dr. Herbert Wieder, for his equally impressive hospitality. And finally I'd like to thank my good friends Laurance Wieder of Dowling College and his wife, Andrea K. Wieder, of *Newsweek*. Along with my wife, Helene, they gladly discussed with me, amid the play of reggae and children, these topics of our times.

Contents

Preface for Instructors iii

1 The New Generation: Who Are We? 1

What events have had a lasting impact on the lives of young Americans? What issues concern them most? What directions might America take during the Bush presidency? An unprecedented poll offers a comprehensive picture of an entire generation. . . . A political analyst looks at the rise and fall of the most publicized group to emerge in the eighties — the yuppies.

WILLIAM GREIDER (Part I) AND DAVID SHEFF (Part II)
Portrait of a Generation: The *Rolling Stone* Survey 2
[*Rolling Stone*/April 7 and May 5, 1988]

HENDRIK HERTZBERG **The Short Happy Life of the American Yuppie** 13
[*Esquire*/February 1988]

2 Parents and Teenagers: Can They Communicate? 27

Why do parents and teenagers find it so difficult to talk to each other? A developmental psychologist offers a surprising answer to this seemingly unanswerable question. . . . A very timely short story dramatizes the complexity of the problem.

LAURENCE STEINBERG **Bound to Bicker** 28
[*Psychology Today*/September 1987]

JOYCE CAROL OATES **Shopping (story)** 33
[*Ms.*/March 1987]

3 Today's Manners: What's in a *First* Name? 45

How did we all suddenly get to be on a first-name basis with each other? A Penn. State English professor examines the effects of our "compulsive informality." . . . *The Washington Post's* advisor on manners, observing this trend of "instant intimacy," wonders if today's Americans need a new system of etiquette.

CHRISTOPHER CLAUSEN A Decent Impersonality 46
[*The American Scholar*/Autumn 1985]

JUDITH MARTIN The Pursuit of Politeness 52
[*The New Republic*/August 6, 1984]

4 Personal Appearance: How Much Do Looks Count? 65

Looks aren't everything, the saying goes. But are they? One of America's leading pollsters is surprised by our obsession with good looks. . . . A young career woman admits that being beautiful is a definite advantage. . . . Two research psychologists find that good looks are evaluated far differently for men than for women.

LOUIS HARRIS Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Worry over Personal Appearance 66
[*Inside America*/1987]

ELLEN PAIGE Born Beautiful: Confessions of a Naturally Gorgeous Girl 70
[*Mademoiselle*/February 1988]

THOMAS F. CASH AND LOUIS H. JANDA The Eye of the Beholder 76
[*Psychology Today*/December 1984]

5 Modern Love: Is Romance Dead? 83

Are today's young people down on romance? Do people still fall in love in the old head-over-heels fashion? A Princeton historian takes us on a tour of romantic love through the ages and claims that it may not be as "natural" as people think. . . . A *New York Times* reporter interviews young people throughout the country to see what they feel about marriage, relationships, and romance. . . . An award-winning story about a two-night stand reflects the jittery pulse of modern romance.

LAWRENCE STONE A Short History of Love 84
[*Harper's Magazine*/February 1988]

BRUCE WEBER **The Unromantic Generation** 88

[*The New York Times Magazine*/April 5, 1987]

PERRI KLASS **Not a Good Girl** (story) 98

[*Mademoiselle*/July 1983]

6 **The AIDS Epidemic: Is Anyone Safe?** 105

It is estimated that up to 1.5 million people around the nation are infected with the AIDS virus. A young feature writer tells the intimate story of three people who never thought AIDS could happen to them. . . . A social critic explores the difficult public health and philosophical challenges that AIDS presents to a democratic society. . . . An already famous *New Yorker* short story portrays the impact of the disease on a victim's circle of friends.

LISA DEPAULO **Love and AIDS** 106

[*Philadelphia*/May 1987]

RICHARD GOLDSTEIN **AIDS and the Social Contract** 116

[*The Village Voice*/December 29, 1987]

SUSAN SONTAG **The Way We Live Now** (story) 128

[*The New Yorker*/November 24, 1986]

7 **Public Space: Who Are Its Victims?** 144

Public space is space that should be shared equally by all. But it often isn't. A black *New York Times* editor walking alone at night wonders why other people automatically fear him. . . . Constant rudeness makes the life of a young woman in a wheelchair even tougher. . . . A woman writer describes what it feels like to be bothered in public places by men who ignore a woman's right to privacy.

BRENT STAPLES **Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space** 145

[*Ms.*/September 1986]

CHERYL A. DAVIS **A Day on Wheels** 149

[*The Progressive*/November 1987]

SUSAN JACOBY **Unfair Game** 152

[*The New York Times*/February 23, 1978]

8 **Divided Identities: Can We Live in Two Cultures?** 156

Many Americans experience the pressures of living double lives as they try to enter mainstream society without denying their ethnic heritage

and backgrounds. A *Life* feature investigates the situation of a star student at a prestigious prep school who could never leave behind the mean streets of the city. . . . A black teacher of writing reflects on the roles of white and black English in her education.

ROBERT SAM ANSON *The Two Worlds of Edmund Perry* 157
[*Life*/October 1985]

BARBARA MELLIX *From Outside, In* 171
[*The Georgia Review*/Summer 1987]

9 **Teens in Trouble: What's Happening to American Youth?** 182

Middle-class adults like to think of youth as a carefree time of life. But with over a million teenage runaways trying to survive on the streets of our major cities and with over five thousand teenage suicides a year, the myth of a problem-free youth is quickly dying in America. A *Newsweek* columnist who spent several months talking to teenage runaways in San Francisco reports on their battered dreams. . . . Revisiting her New England high school, a recent college graduate tries to discover why eight students took their own lives.

PETE AXTHELM *Somebody Else's Kids* 183
[*Newsweek*/April 25, 1988]

ADRIAN NICOLE LEBLANC *"You Wanna Die with Me?"* 192
[*New England Monthly*/December 1986]

10 **Sex on Campus: Date or Rape?** 205

Date rape or acquaintance rape is now an explosive topic on many college campuses. Most of the victims are freshmen. A University of New Hampshire graduate returns to his alma mater to investigate a rape that traumatized the school. . . . A women's magazine examines what colleges are doing and should be doing about the problem.

PAUL KEEGAN *Dangerous Parties* 206
[*New England Monthly*/February 1988]

ELLEN SWEET *Date Rape: The Story of an Epidemic and Those Who Deny It* 219
[*Ms.*/October 1985]

11 **The American Male: How Violent Is He?** 229

Is Rambo the ultimate role model for the American male? Is masculinity proven only by aggression and violence? An *Esquire* columnist visits a

Michigan bar where patrons shoot Uzi water guns at dancers. . . . A prize-winning essayist examines America's deadly fascination with military toys and violent games. . . . A sociologist explains the bad behavior of little boys.

BOB GREENE *Bar Wars* 230

[*Esquire*/November 1986]

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS *Death Games* 235

[*The North American Review*/March 1984]

GARY ALAN FINE *The Dirty Play of Little Boys* 247

[*Society*/November-December 1986]

12 **Recent American Movies: Do They Reflect Reality?** 258

Many new movies *look* realistic, but how true-to-life are they? A Vietnam veteran questions the accuracy of many recent films about the war. . . . Are today's film makers mistaking the surface of an adolescent's life for its substance, asks a critically acclaimed novelist.

LEO CAWLEY *Refighting the War: Why the Movies Are in Vietnam* 259

[*The Village Voice*/September 8, 1987]

ALICE McDERMOTT *Teenage Films: Love, Death, and the Prom* 267

[*The New York Times*/August 16, 1987]

13 **Elvis: Pop Culture or Pop Cult?** 275

Though he died in 1977, Elvis is now regularly "sighted" throughout the country. How did this choir boy from Tupelo, Mississippi, evolve into a modern demigod? A music critic inquires into the Elvis legend and what keeps it alive. . . . *The Wall Street Journal* visits Graceland and vividly describes the mecca of Elvis idolaters. . . . A look at some of the bizarre fringes of the Elvis cult.

JIM MILLER *Forever Elvis* 276

[*Newsweek*/August 3, 1987]

MANUELA HOELTERHOFF *The Royal Anniversary: Elvis Presley's Fiftieth* 285

[*The Wall Street Journal*/January 8, 1985]

GLEN DUFFY *All Shook Up* 288

[*Philadelphia*/April 1988]

14 **Rock: Music or Menace?** 294

Is rock music simply the opium of the young masses, or is it a legitimate art form? The controversial author of *The Closing of the American Mind* argues that today's students substitute popular music for serious books. . . . A noted fiction writer discovers in the songs of Bruce Springsteen rock music of a "higher order."

ALLAN BLOOM *Music* 295

[*The Closing of the American Mind*/1987]

RICHARD FORD *The Boss Observed* 307

[*Esquire*/December 1985]

15 **TV Game Shows: Is "Wheel of Fortune" a National Obsession?** 314

Each week, three dozen game shows command an audience of over 100 million Americans. What accounts for their enormous popularity? A *Newsweek* cover story examines how game shows cash in on America's obsession with money, shopping, and cheap thrills. . . . A media critic for *Rolling Stone* asks why "Wheel of Fortune" is one of the most successful shows in television history.

HARRY F. WATERS (WITH MICHAEL A. LERNER) *What a Deal!* 315

[*Newsweek*/February 9, 1987]

LEWIS GROSSBERGER *Triumph of the Wheel* 323

[*Rolling Stone*/December 4, 1986]

16 **American Sport: Is It Only a Game?** 333

According to recent polls, an overwhelming majority (81%) of adult Americans closely follow at least one professional sport. What do sports mean to the American people? A professor of religion at Penn. State observes that for many fans organized sports have taken the place of organized religion. . . . An M.I.T. historian discovers in baseball the structure and spirit of American society.

CHARLES S. PREBISH *"Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie": Sport and Religion* 334

[*The Antioch Review*/Summer 1984]

ELTING E. MORISON *Positively the Last Word on Baseball* 346

[*American Heritage*/August-September 1986]

17 TV Sitcoms: Are We Watching Ourselves? 356

Sitcoms are almost always about families. But what kinds of families are they and how real are their problems? A Catholic priest and best-selling author regards the current crop of situation comedies as powerful sermons for our time. . . . Examining some forty years of sitcoms, a mass communications specialist finds that they rarely reflect the conditions of actual American families. . . . A former television script-writer shares a sitcom idea that almost made it.

ANDREW GREELEY **Today's Morality Play: The Sitcom** 358
[*The New York Times*/May 17, 1987]

ELLA TAYLOR **TV Families: Three Generations of Packaged Dreams** 364
[*Boston Review*/October 1987]

BRUCE FORER **"Bradley": A Proposal for a Weekly Situation Comedy** 376

18 The Women's Movement: How Is It Changing? 381

What is the next wave of feminism? A feminist journalist predicts that the message of the women's movement will finally begin to reach vast numbers of working-class women. . . . In a short story that has become a modern classic, a chronicler of blue-collar America looks at the changing consciousness of one such woman.

BARBARA EHRENREICH **The Next Wave** 382
[*Ms.*/July-August 1987]

BOBBIE ANN MASON **Shiloh** (story) 388
[*The New Yorker*/October 20, 1980]

19 Sexism and Religion: How Did God Become a Man? 402

What was the "Big Discovery" and how did it lead to the perception of God as male? A religious scholar thinks the Big Discovery helps explain the evolution of our male-dominated religions. . . . A feminist author and futurist challenges this idea and finds in archaeological evidence the militaristic origins of a masculine God.

WILLIAM R. HARWOOD **Gods, Goddesses, and Bibles: The Canonization of Misogyny** 403
[*The Humanist*/May-June 1985]

RIANE EISLER **Our Lost Heritage: New Facts on How God Became a Man** 409

[*The Humanist*/May-June 1985]

20 The Farm Crisis: Are Rural Values Obsolete? 417

The family farm has long been a symbol of American values. But is that symbol losing ground? A teacher of creative writing believes that the recent farm crisis is best seen by examining the daily lives of ordinary farmers who are trying to weather it. . . . A political analyst argues that losing their farms may be the best thing that ever happened to some farmers.

MICHAEL MARTONE **Pulling Things Back to Earth** 418

[*The North American Review*/June 1985]

JEFFREY L. PASLEY **The Idiocy of Rural Life** 432

[*The New Republic*/December 8, 1986]

21 America's Homeless: What Should Be Done? 440

During the 1980s homeless people became a disturbing presence in our cities. But who are they and how many of them are truly homeless? The author of *Rachel and Her Children* argues that the homeless population is vast and that the problem is one of housing and economics. . . . A government analyst contends that the population is not as large as often reported and that the problems of the homeless are personal and not public. . . . A *Time* magazine reporter takes up residence with the homeless on the streets of Philadelphia and gives a vivid account of their day-to-day existence.

JONATHAN KOZOL **Distancing the Homeless** 441

[*The Yale Review*/Winter 1988]

THOMAS J. MAIN **What We Know About the Homeless** 453

[*Commentary*/May 1988]

JON D. HULL **Slow Descent into Hell** 465

[*Time*/February 2, 1987]

22 The Drug Crisis: Can We Just Say "No"? 472

Drugs have become so pervasive in our culture that most Americans are skeptical that any "war on drugs" could succeed. According to a psychiatrist, habitual marijuana use among the young leads to an increasingly narcissistic and isolated society. . . . A famous novelist

takes a walk through a drug-ridden city and sees a modern vision of hell.

FRED BLOOM *Marijuana Culture* 473

[*The Antioch Review*/Summer 1984]

ROBERT STONE *A Higher Horror of the Whiteness: Cocaine's Coloring of the American Psyche* 486

[*Harper's Magazine*/December 1986]

23 Educational Short Cuts: Are We Cheating Ourselves? 495

Many educators believe that cheating has increased dramatically on college campuses. Has the problem been compounded by easily available short cuts? The *National Review* investigates the widely advertised businesses that sell ready-made college term papers. . . . *The Wall Street Journal* reports on how videotapes of novels have become the latest short cut to reading. . . . *Rolling Stone* finds the real Cliff behind *Cliffs Notes*.

D. KEITH MANO *The Cheating Industry* 496

[*National Review*/June 5, 1987]

DANIEL AKST *Video Cheating: A Novel Approach* 499

[*The Wall Street Journal*/November 18, 1987]

NORMAN ATKINS *Fast Food for Thought* 502

[*Rolling Stone*/March 26, 1987]

24 Explaining Crime: Is There Safety in "Numbers"? 513

Why do professionals tend to analyze crime largely through statistics? And how do these statistics affect our perception of public safety? A Harvard paleontologist exposes some fallacious arguments about criminal behavior. . . . A political scientist examines the need for safety and explains what gets lost in our preoccupation with numbers.

STEPHEN JAY GOULD *Of Crime, Cause, and Correlation* 514

[*Discover*/December 1983]

CHARLES MURRAY *Crime in America* 520

[*National Review*/June 10, 1988]

25 The American Corporation: Whose Interest Does It Serve? 532

In a chilling speech, a buyout specialist in the movie *Wall Street* claims that corporations are motivated only by greed. Is this true? A political economist argues that we desperately need to establish a better rela-

relationship between corporation and nation. . . . A journalist proposes that executives whose corporations have knowingly caused the deaths of innocent citizens be put on death row along with other murderers.

ROBERT B. REICH *Corporation and Nation* 533
[*The Atlantic Monthly*/May 1988]

ROBERT SHERRILL *Murder, Inc.* 544
[*Grand Street*/Spring 1986]

26 Abortion: What Are Our Choices? 556

Probably no topic of our time has provoked more public controversy than abortion. Is there any way to resolve the issue? A registered nurse graphically describes the ambiguities of everyday life in an abortion clinic. . . . In a highly charged dramatic dialogue, a law professor presents virtually every moral and legal question concerning abortion.

SALLIE TISDALE *We Do Abortions Here: A Nurse's Story* 557
[*Harper's Magazine*/October 1987]

PETER LUSHING *Abortion: A Disputation* 565
[*Cardozo Law Review*/December 1986]

27 Pornography: What Is Its Place? 594

Why is pornography enjoying a huge commercial success in America today? *Harper's Magazine* invited a number of writers, social critics, and activists — along with one successful pornographer — to participate in a forum on the thorny topic of pornography. Though viewpoints vary enormously, the result is a model of lively and informed discussion.

LEWIS H. LAPHAM, AL GOLDSTEIN, MIDGE DECTER, ERICA JONG, SUSAN BROWNMILLER, JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN, AND ARYEH NEIER *The Place of Pornography: A Forum* 595
[*Harper's Magazine*/November 1984]

Participating in Class Discussion: A Brief Note 615

Index of Authors and Titles 621