

THE BEST

AMERICAN

ESSAYS

1998

CYNTHIA OZICK

EDITOR

ROBERT ATWAN

SERIES EDITOR

The Best
AMERICAN
ESSAYS
1998

Edited and with an Introduction
by CYNTHIA OZICK

ROBERT ATWAN
Series Editor



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK 1998

Copyright © 1998 by Houghton Mifflin Company
Introduction copyright © 1998 by Cynthia Ozick
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the copyright owner unless such copying is expressly permitted by federal copyright law. With the exception of nonprofit transcription in Braille, Houghton Mifflin is not authorized to grant permission for further uses of copyrighted selections reprinted in this book without the permission of their owners. Permission must be obtained from the individual copyright owners as identified herein. Address requests for permission to make copies of Houghton Mifflin material to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

ISSN 0888-3742

ISBN 0-395-86051-2

ISBN 0-395-86052-0 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body.” First published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Copyright © 1998 by Cynthia Ozick.

“The Telephone” by Anwar F. Accawi. First published in *The Sun*. Copyright © 1997 by Anwar F. Accawi. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“Shadow Cities” by André Aciman. First published in *The New York Review of Books*. Copyright © 1997 by André Aciman. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“How I Learned to Speak Italian” by Helen Barolini. First published in *The Southwest Review*. Copyright © 1997 by Helen Barolini. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“Graven Images” by Saul Bellow. First published in *News from the Republic of Letters*. Copyright © 1997 by *News from the Republic of Letters*. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“The Merely Very Good” by Jeremy Bernstein. First published in *The American Scholar*. Copyright © 1997 by Jeremy Bernstein. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“States of Reading” by Sven Birkerts. First published in *The Gettysburg Review*. Copyright © 1997 by Sven Birkerts. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“What Is Realism?” by J. M. Coetzee. First published in *Salmagundi*. Copyright © 1997 by J. M. Coetzee. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“Altar Boy” by Brian Doyle. First published in *The American Scholar*. Copyright © 1997 by Brian Doyle. Reprinted by permission of the author.

“Witness” by Andre Dubus. From *Meditations from a Movable Chair* by Andre Dubus. Copyright © 1998 by Andre Dubus. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

“Will You Still Feed Me?” by Joseph Epstein. First published in *The American Scholar*. Copyright © 1997 by Joseph Epstein. Reprinted by permission of the author.

The Best
AMERICAN
ESSAYS
1998

GUEST EDITORS OF
THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS

1986 ELIZABETH HARDWICK

1987 GAY TALESE

1988 ANNIE DILLARD

1989 GEOFFREY WOLFF

1990 JUSTIN KAPLAN

1991 JOYCE CAROL OATES

1992 SUSAN SONTAG

1993 JOSEPH EPSTEIN

1994 TRACY KIDDER

1995 JAMAICA KINCAID

1996 GEOFFREY C. WARD

1997 IAN FRAZIER

1998 CYNTHIA OZICK

"Someplace in Queens" by Ian Frazier. First published in *DoubleTake*. Copyright © 1997 by Ian Frazier. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"The Test of Time" by William H. Gass. First published in *The Alaska Quarterly Review*. Copyright © 1997 by William H. Gass. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Two Baths" by Elizabeth Graver. First published in *Shenandoah*. Copyright © 1997 by Elizabeth Graver. Reprinted by permission of The Richard Parks Agency.

"A Peaceable Kingdom" by Edward Hoagland. First published in *Preservation*. Copyright © 1997 by Edward Hoagland. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"In History" by Jamaica Kincaid. First published in *Callaloo*. Copyright © 1997 by Jamaica Kincaid. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

"Nearing Ninety" by William Maxwell. First published in *The New York Times Magazine*. Copyright © 1997 by William Maxwell. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

"Silk Parachute" by John McPhee. Reprinted by permission; © 1997 (John McPhee). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"Building the House" by Mary Oliver. First published in *Shenandoah*. Copyright © 1997 by Mary Oliver. Reprinted by permission of Molly Malone Cook Literary Agency.

"Orion the Hunter" by Tim Robinson. First published in *The Recorder*. Copyright © 1997 by Tim Robinson. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Water Babies" by Oliver Sacks. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.; © 1997 (Oliver Sacks). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"The Page Turner" by Lynne Sharon Schwartz. First published in *The Threepenny Review*. Copyright © 1997 by *The Threepenny Review*. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Soldier's Heart" by Louis Simpson. First published in *The Hudson Review*. Copyright © 1997 by Louis Simpson. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"A Visit to Camelot" by Diana Trilling. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.; © 1997 (Diana Trilling). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"Lost Art" by John Updike. Reprinted by permission; © 1997 (John Updike). Originally in *The New Yorker*.

"Real Life" by James Wood. First published in *News from the Republic of Letters*. Copyright © 1997 by James Wood. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

Foreword

I'VE GROWN so accustomed to being asked what makes a good essay that I was taken by surprise recently when someone asked me what I considered a poor essay.

Years ago, when I was instructing college freshmen in the humble craft of writing essays — or “themes,” as we called them — I noticed that many students had already been taught how to manufacture the Perfect Theme. It began with an introductory paragraph that contained a “thesis statement” and often cited someone named Webster; it then pursued its expository path through three paragraphs that “developed the main idea” until it finally reached a “concluding” paragraph that diligently summarized all three previous paragraphs. The conclusion usually began “Thus we see that . . .” If the theme told a personal story, it usually concluded with the narrative cliché “Suddenly I realized that . . .” Epiphanies abounded.

What was especially maddening about the typical five-paragraph theme had less to do with its tedious structure than with its implicit message that writing should be the end product of thought and not the enactment of its process. My students seemed unaware that writing could be an act of discovery, an opportunity to say something they had never before thought of saying. The worst themes were largely the products of premature conclusions, of unearned assurances, of minds made up. As Robert Frost once put it, for many people thinking merely means voting. Why go through the trouble of writing papers on an issue when all that's required is an opinion poll? So perhaps it did make more sense to call these

productions themes and not essays, since what was being written had almost no connection with the original sense of “essaying” — trying out ideas and attitudes, writing out of a condition of uncertainty, of not-knowing. “Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes,” says Emerson, “as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree.”

The five-paragraph theme was also a charade. It not only paraded relentlessly to its conclusion; it began with its conclusion. It was all about its conclusion. Its structure permitted no change of direction, no reconsideration, no wrestling with ideas. It was — and still is — the perfect vehicle for the sort of reader who likes to ask: “And your point is . . . ?”

The most talented essayists have aims other than merely getting a point across or a position announced or an identity established. It may help to imagine an essay as a Cubist rendition of an idea: the essayist would rather you see all sides and aspects of a thought. Some essayists — Montaigne was the first — seem literally to be turning ideas over in their minds. The intellectual essay is nothing if not ruminative; the autobiographical essay may continually lose its sense of direction. Both kinds of essays, like Samuel Johnson’s unforgettable *Rasselas*, will often reach a “conclusion in which nothing is concluded.”

You will find few tidy conclusions in this collection. To capture the essayistic spirit of this volume you might try reading the brief concluding essay first. After seeing a performance of *A Doll’s House*, the literary critic James Wood explains why he thinks Chekhov is a far more satisfying writer than Ibsen. It has to do with something all of us at one time or another have called “real life.” Unlike Ibsen, Chekhov is “not hustling life into comprehensibility.” His characters think aimlessly, their remarks aren’t conveniently underlined for the reader, they rarely make a “dramatic ‘point.’” In contrast, Ibsen “is always tying the moral shoelaces of his characters, making everything neat, presentable, knowable.” Like the five-paragraph theme.

But wait. There’s a small problem here, one that prevents a neat conclusion. Wood reminds us of how often in Chekhov’s fiction “we encounter the formulation ‘And suddenly he realized that . . .’” Is this, then, actually “real life” or are we back to literary convention? Are Chekhov’s stories responsible for the formulaic epiphany?

ies that ritually conclude so many personal essays? Is it artistically risky for the essay to imitate fiction? Or is “real life” so elusive that all a writer can do to pretend to capture it is substitute a fresh formula for one that’s gone stale? These are questions that will surface throughout this collection, whether, like Andre Dubus’s “Witness,” the essay is hauntingly private, or, like J. M. Coetzee’s “What Is Realism?,” it crosses so many literary boundaries at once that the reader may wonder whether “real life” exists at all — with or without quotation marks.

The Best American Essays features a selection of the year’s outstanding essays, essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and a 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 essays must be works of respectable literary quality, intended as fully developed, independent essays on subjects 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. Periodicals that want to make 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).

This year, I’d again like to thank my friend Matthew Howard at *The Boston Review* for his generous advice and assistance. It was a pleasure, as always, to work with the Houghton Mifflin staff, especially Janet Silver, Heidi Pitlor, and Larry Cooper. And it was a singular delight to work on this year’s collection with Cynthia Ozick. In her splendid introductory essay on the essay, she says that “true essayists rarely write novels.” It may be rare, but there are some noted exceptions, and she is one of them. Known for her award-winning fiction, she is also the author of three outstanding essay collections: *Art & Ardor*, *Metaphor & Memory*, and *Fame & Folly*. A truer essayist would be hard to find.

Introduction: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body

AN ESSAY is a thing of the imagination. If there is information in an essay, it is by-the-by, and if there is an opinion in it, you need not trust it for the long run. A genuine essay has no educational, polemical, or sociopolitical use; it is the movement of a free mind at play. Though it is written in prose, it is closer in kind to poetry than to any other form. Like a poem, a genuine essay is made out of language and character and mood and temperament and pluck and chance.

And if I speak of a genuine essay, it is because fakes abound. Here the old-fashioned term poetaster may apply, if only obliquely. As the poetaster is to the poet — a lesser aspirant — so the article is to the essay: a look-alike knockoff guaranteed not to wear well. An article is gossip. An essay is reflection and insight. An article has the temporary advantage of social heat — what's hot out there right now. An essay's heat is interior. An article is timely, topical, engaged in the issues and personalities of the moment; it is likely to be stale within the month. In five years it will have acquired the quaint aura of a rotary phone. An article is Siamese-twinning to its date of birth. An essay defies its date of birth, and ours too.

A small historical experiment. Who are the classical essayists who come at once to mind? Montaigne, obviously. Among the nineteenth-century English masters, the long row of Hazlitt, Lamb, De Quincey, Stevenson, Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman, Martineau, Arnold. Of the Americans, Emerson. It may be argued that nowadays these are read only by specialists and literature majors, and by the

latter only when they are compelled to. However accurate the claim, it is irrelevant to the experiment, which has to do with beginnings and their disclosures. Here, then, are some introductory passages:

One of the pleasantest things in the world is going on a journey; but I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me. I am then never less alone than when alone.
— William Hazlitt, "On Going a Journey"

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

I have often been asked how I first came to be a regular opium eater; and have suffered, very unjustly, in the opinion of my acquaintance, from being reputed to have brought upon myself all the sufferings which I shall have to record, by a long course of indulgence in this practice purely for the sake of creating an artificial state of pleasurable excitement. This, however, is a misrepresentation of my case.
— Thomas De Quincey, "Confessions of an English Opium Eater"

The human species, according to the best theory I can form of it, is composed of two distinct races, the men who borrow, and the men who lend.
— Charles Lamb, "The Two Races of Men"

I saw two hareems in the East; and it would be wrong to pass them over in an account of my travels; though the subject is as little agreeable as any I can have to treat. I cannot now think of the two mornings thus employed without a heaviness of heart greater than I have ever brought away from Deaf and Dumb Schools, Lunatic Asylums, or even Prisons.
— Harriet Martineau, "From Eastern Life"

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as times goes on, will find an ever and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. . . . But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion.
— Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry"

The changes wrought by death are in themselves so sharp and final, and so terrible and melancholy in their consequences, that the thing stands alone in man's experience, and has no parallel upon earth. It outdoes all other accidents because it is the last of them. Sometimes it

leaps suddenly upon its victims, like a Thug; sometimes it lays a regular siege and creeps upon their citadel during a score of years. And when the business is done, there is a sore havoc made in other people's lives, and a pin knocked out by which many subsidiary friendships hung together.

— Robert Louis Stevenson, "Aes Triplex"

It is recorded of some people, as of Alexander the Great, that their sweat, in consequence of some rare and extraordinary constitution, emitted a sweet odor, the cause of which Plutarch and others investigated. But the nature of most bodies is the opposite, and at their best they are free from smell. Even the purest breath has nothing more excellent than to be without offensive odor, like that of very healthy children.

— Michel de Montaigne, "Of Smells"

What might such a little anthology of opening sentences reveal? First, that language differs from one era to the next: there are touches of archaism here, if only in punctuation and cadence. Second, that splendid minds may contradict each other (outdoors, Hazlitt never feels alone; Emerson urges the opposite). Third, that the theme of an essay can be anything under the sun, however trivial (the smell of sweat) or crushing (the thought that we must die). Fourth, that the essay is a consistently recognizable and venerable — or call it ancient — form. In English: Addison and Steele in the eighteenth century, Bacon and Browne in the seventeenth, Lyly in the sixteenth, Bede in the seventh. And what of the biblical Koheleth — Ecclesiastes — who may be the oldest essayist reflecting on one of the oldest subjects: world-weariness?

So the essay is ancient and various: but this is a commonplace. There is something else, and it is more striking yet — the essay's power. By "power" I mean precisely the capacity to do what force always does: coerce assent. Never mind that the shape and intent of any essay is against coercion or suasion, or that the essay neither proposes nor purposes to get you to think like its author. A genuine essay is not a doctrinaire tract or a propaganda effort or a broadside. Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" and Emile Zola's "J'Accuse" are heroic landmark writings; but to call them essays, though they may resemble the form, is to misunderstand. The essay is not meant for the barricades; it is a stroll through someone's mazy mind. All the same, the essay turns out to be a force for agreement. It co-opts agreement; it courts agreement; it seduces agreement. For the brief hour we give to it, we are sure to fall into surrender

and conviction. And this will occur even if we are intrinsically roused to resistance.

To illustrate: I may not be persuaded by Emersonianism as an ideology, but Emerson — his voice, his language, his music — persuades me. When we look for superlatives, not for nothing do we speak of “commanding” or “compelling” prose. If I am a skeptical rationalist or an advanced biochemist, I may regard (or discard) the idea of the soul as no better than a puff of warm vapor. But here is Emerson on the soul: “when it breathes through [man’s] intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love.” And then — well, I am in thrall, I am possessed; I believe.

The novel has its own claims on surrender. It suspends our participation in the society we ordinarily live in, so that — for the time we are reading — we forget it utterly. But the essay does not allow us to forget our usual sensations and opinions; it does something even more potent: it makes us deny them. The authority of a masterly essayist — the authority of sublime language and intimate observation — is absolute. When I am with Hazlitt, I know no greater companion than nature. When I am with Emerson, I know no greater solitude than nature.

And what is most odd about the essay’s power to lure us into its lair is how it goes about this work. We feel it when a political journalist comes after us with a point of view — we feel it the way the cat is wary of the dog. A polemic is a herald, complete with feathered hat and trumpet. A tract can be a trap. A magazine article generally has the scent of so-much-per-word. What is certain is that all of these are more or less in the position of a lepidopterist with his net: they mean to catch and skewer. They are focused on prey — i.e., us. The genuine essay, by contrast, never thinks of us; the genuine essay may be the most self-centered (the politer word would be subjective) arena for human thought ever devised.

Or else, though still not having you and me in mind (unless as an exemplum of common folly), it is not self-centered at all. When I was a child, I discovered in the public library a book that enchanted me then, and the idea of which has enchanted me for life. I have no recollection either of the title or of the writer — and anyhow very young readers rarely take note of authors; stories are simply and magically *there*. The characters included, as I remember them, three or four children and a delightful relation who

is a storyteller, and the scheme was this: each child calls out a story element — most often an object — and the storyteller gathers up whatever is supplied (blue boots, a river, a fairy, a pencil box) and makes out of these random, unlikely, and disparate offerings a tale both logical and surprising. An essay, it seems to me, may be similarly constructed — if so deliberate a term applies. The essayist, let us say, unexpectedly stumbles over a pair of old blue boots in a corner of the garage, and this reminds her of when she last wore them — twenty years ago, on a trip to Paris, where on the banks of the Seine she stopped to watch an old fellow sketching, with a box of colored pencils at his side. The pencil wiggling over his sheet is a grayish pink, which reflects the threads of sunset pulling westward in the sky, like the reins of a fairy cart . . . and so on. The mind meanders, slipping from one impression to another, from reality to memory to dreamscape and back again.

In the same way Montaigne, in our sample, when contemplating the unpleasantness of sweat, ends with the pure breath of children. Or Stevenson, starting out with mortality, speaks first of ambush, then of war, and finally of a displaced pin. No one is freer than the essayist — free to leap out in any direction, to hop from thought to thought, to begin with the finish and finish with the middle, or to eschew beginning and end and keep only a middle. The marvel of it is that out of this apparent causelessness, out of this scattering of idiosyncratic seeing and telling, a coherent world is made. It is coherent because, after all, an essayist must be an artist, and every artist, whatever the means, arrives at a sound and singular imaginative frame — or call it, on a minor scale, a cosmogony.

And it is into this frame, this work of art, that we tumble like tar babies, and are held fast. What holds us there? The authority of a voice, yes; the pleasure — sometimes the anxiety — of a new idea, an untried angle, a snatch of reminiscence, bliss displayed or shock conveyed. An essay can be the product of intellect or memory, lightheartedness or gloom, well-being or disgruntlement. But always there is a certain quietude, on occasion a kind of detachment. Rage and revenge, I think, belong to fiction. The essay is cooler than that. Because it so often engages in acts of memory, and despite its gladder or more antic incarnations, the essay is by and large a serene or melancholic form. It mimics that low electric hum, sometimes rising to resemble actual speech, that all human beings carry inside their heads — a vibration, garrulous if some-

what indistinct, that never leaves us while we wake. It is the hum of perpetual noticing: the configuration of someone's eyelid or tooth, the veins on a hand, a wisp of string caught on a twig, some words your fourth-grade teacher said, so long ago, about the rain, the look of an awning, a sidewalk, a bit of cheese left on a plate. All day long this inescapable hum drums on, recalling one thing and another, and pointing out this and this and this. Legend has it that Titus, emperor of Rome, went mad because of the buzzing of a gnat that made its home in his ear; and presumably the gnat, flying out into the great world and then returning to her nest, whispered what she had seen and felt and learned there. But an essayist is more resourceful than an emperor, and can be relieved of this interior noise, if only for the time it takes to record its murmurings. To seize the hum and set it down for others to hear is the essayist's genius.

It is a genius bound to leisure, and even to luxury, if luxury is measured in hours. The essay's limits can be found in its own reflective nature. Poems have been wrested from the inferno of catastrophe or war, and battlefield letters too: these are the spontaneous bursts and burnings that danger excites. But the meditative temperateness of an essay requires a desk and a chair, a musing and a mooning, a connection to a civilized surround; even when the subject itself is a wilderness of lions and tigers, mulling is the way of it. An essay is a fireside thing, not a conflagration or a safari.

This may be why, when we ask who the essayists are, it turns out — though novelists may now and then write essays — that true essayists rarely write novels. Essayists are a species of metaphysician: they are inquisitive — also analytic — about the least grain of being. Novelists go about the strenuous business of marrying and burying their people, or else they send them to sea, or to Africa, or (at the least) out of town. Essayists in their stillness ponder love and death. It is probably an illusion that men are essayists more often than women (especially since women's essays have in the past frequently assumed the form of unpublished correspondence). And here I should, I suppose, add a note about maleness and femaleness as a literary issue — what is popularly termed "gender," as if men and women were French or German tables and sofas. I *should* add such a note; it is the fashion, or, rather, the current expectation or obligation — but there is nothing to say about any of it. Essays are written by men. Essays are written by women. That

is the long and the short of it. John Updike, in a genially confident discourse on maleness (“The Disposable Rocket”), takes the view — though he admits to admixture — that the “male sense of space must differ from that of the female, who has such an interesting, active, and significant inner space. The space that interests men is outer.” Except, let it be observed, when men write essays: since it is only inner space — interesting, active, significant — that can conceive and nourish the contemplative essay. The “ideal female body,” Updike adds, “curves around the centers of repose,” and no phrase could better describe the shape of the ideal essay — yet women are no *fitter* as essayists than men. In promoting the felt salience of sex, Updike nevertheless drives home an essayist’s point. Essays, unlike novels, emerge from the sensations of the self. Fiction creeps into foreign bodies; the novelist can inhabit not only a sex not his own, but also beetles and noses and hunger artists and nomads and beasts; while the essay is, as we say, personal.

And here is an irony. Though I have been intent on distinguishing the marrow of the essay from the marrow of fiction, I confess I have been trying all along, in a subliminal way, to speak of the essay as if it — or she — were a character in a novel or a play: moody, fickle, given on a whim to changing her clothes, or the subject; sometimes obstinate, with a mind of her own; or hazy and light; never predictable. I mean for her to be dressed — and addressed — as we would Becky Sharp, or Ophelia, or Elizabeth Bennet, or Mrs. Ramsay, or Mrs. Wilcox, or even Hester Prynne. Put it that it is pointless to say (as I have done repeatedly, disliking it every moment) “the essay,” “an essay.” The essay — an essay — is not an abstraction; she may have recognizable contours, but she is highly colored and individuated; she is not a type. She is too fluid, too elusive, to be a category. She may be bold, she may be diffident, she may rely on beauty, or on cleverness, on eros or exotica. Whatever her story, she is the protagonist, the secret self’s personification. When we knock on her door, she opens to us, she is a presence in the doorway, she leads us from room to room; then why should we not call her “she”? She may be privately indifferent to us, but she is anything but unwelcoming. Above all, she is not a hidden principle or a thesis or a construct: she is *there*, a living voice. She takes us in.

CYNTHIA OZICK

The Best
AMERICAN
ESSAYS
1998