

# *The Best* AMERICAN ESSAYS 1997

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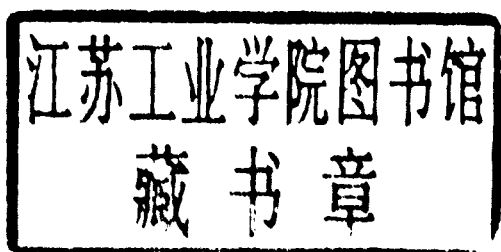
Edited and with an Introduction  
by IAN FRAZIER

ROBERT ATWAN  
Series Editor



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*The Best*  
AMERICAN  
ESSAYS  
1997



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## *Foreword*

A CENTURY or so ago, the essay occupied a prominent place in literary circles. It fell into the class of writing that critics called "polite letters." The essayists, for the most part gentlemen, addressed the literate world in an urbane, congenial, comfortable style. They almost always possessed three names — James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Thomas Wentworth Higginson — and more often than not they lived in New England. In this era, when "coming out" referred only to a young woman's debut, the typical essay was proper, genteel, and Anglophilic. Though it atrophied around the 1930s, the polite essay retained for many years an insidious power over America's college students, who were often forced to imitate its polished civility in that shadow genre known as the freshman theme. The goal of English teachers, Kurt Vonnegut recalls, was to get you "to write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago."

Today the essay is flourishing again, though it no longer can be characterized by its homogeneity. In fact, its diversity may be its most noticeable characteristic. In light of the essay's transformations, today's poetry and fiction appear stagnant: the essay is now our most dynamic literary form. We see narrative essays that seem indistinguishable from short stories, mosaic essays that read like prose poems. We have literary criticism with an autobiographical spin, journalism attuned to drama and metaphor, reflection with a heavy dose of information. Some essayists write polemic that sounds like poetry. Physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers are finding that complex ideas and a memorable prose style are

not irreconcilable. Even law review articles have turned literary. In other words, today's essay is incredibly difficult to nail down.

For the past twelve years, this series has been showcasing the essay's astonishing variety. This is done in two ways: by screening essays from an enormous range of periodicals and by inviting a distinguished American writer to serve each year as the guest editor.

To ensure diversity, the series welcomes all types of journals and magazines; this year, for instance, we feature writing from some of our leading national periodicals (*The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New Yorker*), from a number of outstanding literary reviews and quarterlies published throughout the nation (*The Paris Review*, *The Threepenny Review*), from some very popular men's and women's magazines (*Allure*, *Sports Afield*), and magazines with a strong regional flavor (*The Oxford American*, published in Mississippi by the best-selling novelist John Grisham). Not all selections, however, come from prestigious or well-established periodicals. Few readers will be familiar with *Under the Sun*, a brand-new literary journal edited by Michael O'Rourke and published by Tennessee Technological University: "Thank you," O'Rourke wrote upon being notified of the selection, "for looking past the fact that we still had a ways to go, cosmetically, in that first issue, and just reading what we printed." A glance at the list of Notable Essays in the back of the volume will quickly display the spectrum of periodicals annually consulted: it runs from *A. Magazine*, the "Inside Asia America" bimonthly, to Howard Junker's splendid San Francisco literary quarterly, *ZYZZYVA*.

But the commitment to diversity goes beyond the enormous range of periodicals. Each collection of *The Best American Essays* is shaped and informed by a unique literary perspective: Gay Talese showed how New Journalism had transformed the conventional essay; Annie Dillard viewed the contemporary essay as a literary form that rivals the best fiction and poetry; Justin Kaplan concentrated on the essay's role in interpreting public issues and events; Susan Sontag emphasized the essay's long-standing ties to criticism and intellectual controversy; Joyce Carol Oates featured the essay as an influential vehicle for multicultural voices; and Jamaica Kincaid made us aware of how brilliantly (and ironically) the essay can transgress familiar boundaries. This year, Ian Frazier's collection

For this year's volume I want to thank Richard Poirier, who introduced me to the pleasures of American literature — especially Emerson's essays — in his graduate seminars and in his brilliant books of criticism. For decades his has been one of the most intelligent, sensible, and eloquent voices in our critical literature. On a more practical level, I am again grateful to Matthew Howard, who graciously helped out with a score of details, many of them at the last minute. I am indebted as always to the indispensable support I receive from the Houghton Mifflin staff — in particular from my editor, Janet Silver, her assistant, Sandra Riley, and my manuscript editor, Larry Cooper.

It was an enormous pleasure to work with Ian Frazier, whose keen sense of humor, acute observations, and unwavering commitment to community have helped make him one of America's favorite writers. These qualities — plus his dedication to the art and craft of prose — can be felt throughout this remarkable collection.

R. A.



written paper of a certain length, on an assigned subject, with specified margins and neatness, due on the teacher's desk at a certain date. From about fourth grade on, I wrote many essays. "An essay a week" was a philosophy lots of grammar school teachers subscribed to back then. Recently I came across an essay of mine I'd saved from the fifth grade. It's called "If I Had Three Wishes." My first wish, as I described it, was for lots of fishing equipment, my second was for a canoe in which to go fishing, and my third was for a cabin in the woods somewhere near good fishing. I have more or less gotten those wishes, writing occasional essays about fishing all the while. Even in its present state as childhood artifact, "If I Had Three Wishes" retains its purposeful object-ness: the three-ring-binder paper with regular lines and space at the top for student's name, teacher's name, and date; the slow, newly learned script, in blue ballpoint, almost without mistakes; and the circled good grade in the teacher's hand.

But it was in school, too, that I first saw writing as something alive. In this case the writing was not an essay, but Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a work of reporting, and the object it leaped from was an issue of *The New Yorker*. I was a freshman in high school and had never given the writing in magazines much thought before. One day our English teacher, Mr. Waring, walked into class reading an issue of *The New Yorker* that he had just picked up at his mailbox down the hall. Mr. Waring was old and he did as he pleased. He sat at his desk and continued to read, and we watched him read. After a while he looked up and announced that instead of doing what we'd planned for that session he would read this article aloud to us. And he read us *In Cold Blood* from the magazine where it first appeared, seeing it for the first time himself as he read it out loud to us. When I tell this story — I tell it often — I generally exaggerate and say he read the whole book to us, all four installments, week after week. Most likely he didn't. I like that version, though, because the story is sort of a creation myth for me.

When I went home that evening, my father was reading the same piece. Lots of people in our town read it and talked about it. People talked about it at lunch at school. My father could not wait for the issue with the next installment, so early the next week he went to a newsstand up in Cleveland and bought it rather than trusting the magazine to come as usual in the mail. We bought the book when it came out. The book's cover, its title accented with

object — the physical piece of writing with its unpredictable content — is the action that produced it. The action, it seems to me, is easier to characterize. The difference is like that between a golf ball in the air and the swing of the golfer that propelled it: the flight of a struck ball varies, but the swing tends always to be the same. An essay is a golf swing, an angler's cast, a tennis serve. For example, say an experience happens to you, one that seems to have literary potential. You wait for it to grow in your mind into a short story or even just an episode of *Friends*, but somehow it doesn't. Then a further experience, or an odd chance, or something a friend says, or something in the newspaper chimes with the first experience, and suddenly you understand you can write about it, and you do. You quit longing for form and write what's there, with whatever serviceable prose comes to hand, for no better reason than the fun and release of saying. That sequence — that combination of patience with sudden impatience, that eventual yielding to the simple desire to tell — identifies the essay.

And what are you left with? A letter to the editor, perhaps, or a letter to a friend, or an E-mail sent to fifty addresses at a click. (E-mail, by the way, makes for the sloppiest essays, the speed of the technology catching nascent thoughts before they're real thoughts at all.) Or maybe it's just a long entry in your journal, or a rebuttal to something your spouse said, or a self-justifying explanation composed in full detail in your head during a traffic jam. Part of the essay's appeal is that it's a people's art. Sooner or later, everybody tries one, even if it's only a hypothetical discourse telling off the boss. The shadow of the essay can be seen under the TV announcer's ninety seconds of commentary, the hard-to-follow handwritten photocopied flyer outlining the supposed dangers of Ritalin, and the transcribed speeches of Indians at treaty gatherings two hundred years ago. An essay is its own form, but all kinds of other forms can contain essays. The next question is one of intent: Did you write it hoping, consciously or not, that it would see print? In certain good circumstances, what you're left with is a piece of some hundreds or thousands of words that a magazine will buy and publish, like the essays in this book.

One of my favorite essayists is Martin Luther King, Jr. An essay by him was above all an action — from the anger and sense of injustice that impelled it, through the disciplined prose with which it meant to tear injustice down. I like his essays, too, for their

Since the first *Best American Essays* appeared, in 1986, its editors have had more and more essays to choose from every year. Lots more people are writing them, short and long, on all kinds of subjects, for magazines that pay and for magazines that really don't. Maybe this is because the world has gotten more overwhelming and we want to make sense of it fast, and the essay is a handy tool for the job. Maybe we've reached a retrospective point, in our lives or in our culture, and the essay provides a way to tell the narratives and speculate on them at the same time. The witnessing of history can't help but bring with it an urge to say what it means; maybe that urge has struck a lot of us at once. Unavoidably, with time we know more about the people we love. True character is revealed, unguessed enormities come out in the wash. For some reason, the essay is especially apt at describing the accumulation of consequences that is a family. Writing about the family is one common thread among the essays collected here.

The essays this series considers are ones published in America. America is itself only an idea, and it has always depended on people thinking about what it meant, defining and redefining it. Essays have had a great bearing upon it. Centuries of thinking and writing about subjects like man's relationship to God or how people should best be governed converged at its beginnings. Sometimes an essayist's effect has been as immediate as Thomas Paine's, whose pamphlet *Common Sense*, reprinted by the hundreds of thousands, inflamed people to revolution. More often, the essayist in America has viewed his or her country more obliquely, telling what it feels like to be an individual in this would-be democracy, and measuring its sickness or health in what one person can see. Recently I read a writer from another country saying that Americans seem so hopeful and optimistic about their country, and that they write so wistfully about what it could be. Well, we are, and we do. Despite plentiful evidence to the contrary, many of us think it could be a glorious place. What I sense under the upsurge of essay-writing today, partly, is this persistent hopefulness about America. It's as if we believe that by taking stock, looking around, describing what we see, explaining what we'd like to see, we can get it right somehow. Certainly the idea of America needs a great volume of surrounding idéas to keep it afloat; maybe the writers of essays are just working harder to replenish the supply.

I think the essays in this collection are great. I liked many essays that I did not choose, but I liked these best. To say what moved me about various specific ones would not be to tell you much of use to you. Also, I would have the summarizer's problem of praising a few at the risk of seeming to dispraise those I leave out. Some of these essays I loved because they're funny and unexpected and effortless and they made me laugh out loud. In some, what's funny about them coincides exactly with what's sad. Anger drives others, marshals the words and makes the sentences stand in line. Some I liked because the author lays out an argument that I agree with completely but could not explain so well myself. Some are about suffering, in voices made incidentally beautiful by it. A few are by authors I've admired for years, and these reminded me why. Others that floored me are by authors I've never read before. In a few the force at work is curiosity, immediately engaged and allowed to go where it leads. Some do sleight-of-hand structural moves to which my hat is off, as they veer from one narrative into a long involved other and then back with hardly a jar. In some, not much happens at all, to excellent effect. As a group, what they share is strong intention elegantly followed through. The reader finishes each in a heightened and lively frame of mind, to a sound of loud internal applause.

IAN FRAZIER

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HILTON ALS

## *Notes on My Mother*

FROM THE NEW YORKER

UNTIL THE END, my mother never discussed her way of being. She avoided explaining the impetus behind her emigration from Barbados to New York. She avoided explaining that she had not been motivated by the same desire for opportunity that drove most female immigrants but instead had followed a man whom she had known in Barbados as her first and only husband's closest friend — a man who eventually became my father. She was silent about the fact that she had left her husband, by whom she had two daughters, after he returned to Barbados from the Second World War addicted to morphine, and that, having been married once, she refused to marry again. She was also silent about the fact that my father, who had grown up relatively rich in Barbados, had emigrated to America with his two sisters and his mother — women with whom he continued to live, throughout my childhood, in a brownstone in Brooklyn. My mother never discussed how she would visit my father in his room there, at night, and afterward sneak back to her own home and her six children, four of them produced by her union with my father: two girls and two boys. She never explained the bond that they shared, a bond so deep and mysterious that we children felt forever excluded from their love, and forever diminished by it.

My mother also never told me whether she recognized or understood where my fascination with her would take me, a boy of seven, and eight, and ten: to a dark crawl space behind her closet, where I put on her hosiery one leg at a time, my heart racing, and, over the hose, my jeans and sneakers, so that I could have her,



what I so admired and coveted, near me, always. As a Negress — for that was what she called herself — my mother was powerful in her silence, and for years she silently watched me, her first son, try to emulate her forbearance. She avoided discussing what that forbearance was worth.

For years before and after her death, I tried to absorb my mother by referring to myself as a Negress, and by living the prescribed life of an auntie man, which is what Barbadians call a faggot. I socialized myself as an auntie man long before I committed my first act as one. I had four older sisters, and I also wore their clothes when they were not home; the clothes relieved some of the pressure I felt at being different from them. My mother responded to the Negress inside me with pride and anger: pride because I identified with women like herself; anger because I identified with women at all. When I was five or six years old, we were sitting on a bench in the subway station near our building, and seated not far from us was a woman my mother knew from the neighborhood with her teenage son. My mother did not speak to this woman, because she did not approve of the woman's son, who, like me, was a Negress. Unlike me, he dressed the part. He was wearing black shoes with princess heels, flesh-colored hose through which dark hairs sprouted, a lemon-yellow shift with grease stains on it, a purple head scarf, and bangles. He carried a strapless purse, from which he removed a compact and lipstick, so that he could dress his face, too. As my mother looked at that boy, she brushed my eyes closed with the back of her hand, and she hissed the words "auntie man." I've never known whether she was referring to both of us.

Did my mother call herself a Negress as a way of wryly reconciling herself to that most hated of English colonial words, which fixed her as a servant in the eyes of Britain and of God? I don't think so; she was not especially interested in Britain or in history. My mother was capricious in her views about most things, including race. As a West Indian who lived among other West Indians, she did not feel "difference"; in her community, she was in the majority. She dropped her West Indian accent a few years after she became a United States citizen, in the early 1950s. She didn't like people who capitalized on being exotic. She didn't like accents in