THE BEST AMERICAN SERIES® 2004

THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS®

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Foreword

As the new century anxiously arrived, I made a resolution to form an amiable discussion group that each year would read a few essay collections and nonfiction books published exactly one hundred years before. My group still consists of one person, myself, but I recommend the practice — each reading is like celebrating an anniversary. Last year I renewed acquaintance with three classics: W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk,* Jack London's *The People of the Abyss,* and Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life.* This year one of my favorites is *Compromises* by Agnes Repplier. I happen to own a hardcover copy of this volume of essays, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1904. Its advertised gilt top is still shiny and inviting, but until this year I had never poked around inside to sample the contents. The book originally cost $1.10, and I doubt I paid much more at the used-book store where I unearthed it.

A century has done little damage to this tight little book. Although its green cloth cover has faded to a shade as yet unnamed by Benjamin Moore, *Compromises* remains in remarkably healthy condition, a pleasure to handle and peruse: crisp thick paper, wide margins, a friendly and open typeface. You can cover all the print on the page with a standard three-by-five index card. As a deliberately slow reader, someone who silently voices a good sentence over several times just to admire its architecture and rhythm, I've grown fond of small, open pages that permit me the illusion of reading more rapidly than I actually do. My halting pace remains the same; the illusion of course comes from the action of turning pages more frequently, a satisfyingly tangible measure of progress we miss on a computer screen.

The book has survived splendidly. But can the same be said of its contents? Unlike those above-mentioned classics that deal head-on with race, poverty, and disability — all issues we confront today — *Compromises* instead is the sort of book that initially strikes one as having vanished from literary fashion. Du Bois, London, or Keller invites us to step into our collective future; Agnes Repplier's essays escort us backward into the past, usually to what she termed the "happy half-century" from 1775 to 1825. The style of essay she loved, the "light essay," was even then, at the turn of the twentieth century, rumored to have gone out of favor. In fact, when her first essays began appearing regularly in the 1880s, some critics attacked their antiquated style and dismissed them as a dead end. Yes, she admitted, she wrote about "the insignificant aspects of life," and it's true that she leaned closer to the manner of Jane Austen (whose books she appeared to know by heart) than to the growing realism of her time.

Agnes Repplier was once quite famous. A friend of many celebrated authors and public figures, she was — as was still possible in her time — renowned as an essayist and for nothing else. A self-educated, lifelong Philadelphian, she presided over the American essay for many decades. She lived a long, productive, and single life (*Compromises* contains her spirited defense of "The Spinster"), publishing numerous collections of essays, most of which first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly,* a handful of biographies, a memoir, and several nonfiction studies. Born a few years before the Civil War, in 1857 (that's her date; I've seen others), she died in 1950, but by then fame had given way to obscurity. The early rumors she fought so hard to dispel about the death of the essay had been much exaggerated, but they nevertheless came true.

A devout Roman Catholic who had sporadically attended convent schools, she was by training and disposition conservative. But like many highly intelligent people of her era, her values and opinions were nuanced, refreshingly unpredictable, and not easily extrapolated from an allegiance to a political party. One would suppose, for instance, that given her polite literary manner, with its emphasis on cultivated judgment, she would prefer the poetry of James Russell Lowell to Walt Whitman, both of whom she knew personally. But here's the amusing way she recalled her meeting with Lowell, at the time one of Boston's leading literary figures

and an arbiter of national taste. It is 1887 and she is thirty years old:

> His interest in me centered solely in the fact that I was a townswoman, or as good as a townswoman, of Walt Whitman, and fairly well acquainted with that unclassified genius. "Why," he asked, "do you Philadelphians call him the Good Gray Poet?"
>
> I explained that the name had been given to him by a fiery New York journalist, and that he, Mr. Whitman, liked it. He called himself the Good Gray Poet whenever he had the opportunity.
>
> "I dare say," grumbled Mr. Lowell. "But nobody calls me the Good Gray Poet, though I am as gray as Whitman, and quite as good — perhaps a trifle better."
>
> He paused, and for an instant I was on the point of saying, "Then there is only the poet to consider," but I forbore.

That little exchange — with its cutting irony and polite forbearance — goes to the heart of Repplier's writing style. She learned her Jane Austen well, and not in graduate seminars. It was life to her, not study. Beneath the decorous veneer of her essays, she hits hard and is invariably on target. By a "light essay" she hardly meant humorous, trivial, or slight. On the contrary, the essays are deeply rooted in research and reading, polished to her idea of perfection, literary without sounding academic, familiar without being confessional, discriminating without seeming dogmatic, civilized without sacrificing their edge. Early in her career, she eschewed opinions and issues, finding them destructive of companionable conversation. We get a sense of this from the Victorian-steeped titles of her first few collections: *Essays in Miniature, Essays in Idleness, In the Dozy Hours.* But as the First World War (she supported our entry) shed its darkness over Europe and the United States, she began to engage broader public issues, though not always in the spirit of the time. Later titles indicate her shift in attitude: *Counter-Currents, Points of Friction, Under Dispute, Times and Tendencies.*

Repplier's essays turn out to be not as obsolete as her critics — both early and late — judged them to be. She does connect with the contemporary essay, though not necessarily in tone or idiom. Many of her recurring subjects are still vital today and our essayists still confront them. A hundred years ago she addressed the differences between male and female novelists, and how they compete with each other; she wrote about the prevalent assumption that for

women "there *are* no interests outside of marriage; no emotions, ambitions, nor obligations unconnected with the rearing of children"; she looked at American tourists crowding Europe: "noisy, self-assertive, and contemptuous"; she wondered to what extent it is permissible to "share our troubles" with others; she dissected conversational habits and was critical of specialists who can't speak without lecturing, or worse, storytellers who "usurp" the dinner table with their "potted" personal anecdotes, or perhaps worst of all, those who appear to be socially oblivious of the "unconvincing nature of argument." She enjoyed nothing more than unpedantic but thought-provoking discussion on any earthly topic — or beyond. I'm confident that she would have enjoyed this year's wide-ranging conversations. And cheerfully joined the discussion.

The Best American Essays features a selection of the year's outstanding essays, essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and forcefulness of thought. Hundreds of essays are gathered annually from a wide variety of national and regional publications. These essays are then screened, and approximately one hundred are turned over to a distinguished guest editor, who may add a few personal discoveries and who makes the final selections. The list of notable essays appearing in the back of the book is drawn from a final comprehensive list that includes not only all of the essays submitted to the guest editor but also many that were not submitted.

To qualify for the volume, the essay must be a work of respectable literary quality, intended as a fully developed, independent essay on a subject of general interest (not specialized scholarship), originally written in English (or translated by the author) for publication in an American periodical during the calendar year. Today's essay is a highly flexible form, however, so these criteria are not carved in stone. As this year's volume demonstrates, contributors can also be long deceased. What matters is that their essays had never been previously published (James Agee and Tennessee Williams wrote the essays collected here in the early 1940s, but neither essay appeared in print until 2003).

Magazine editors who want to be sure their contributors will be considered each year should submit issues or subscriptions to: Robert Atwan, Series Editor, The Best American Essays, P.O. Box 220, Readville, MA 02137. Writers, editors, and readers can also

contact me by writing to: Robert Atwan, Director, The Blue Hills Writing Institute, Curry College, 1071 Blue Hill Avenue, Milton, MA 02186-2395. You can also visit www.curry.edu and look for the writing institute under "Continuing Education." If you use the Curry College address, please be sure to put "Attention: Best American Essays" on the envelope. Writers and editors are welcome to submit published essays from any American periodical for consideration; unpublished work does not qualify for the series and cannot be reviewed or evaluated. Note that all submissions must be taken directly from the publication and not be in manuscript or printout format.

I'd like to dedicate this year's volume — the nineteenth in the series — to one of the contributors, Leonard Michaels ("My Yiddish"), a marvelous writer and gifted teacher, who died in May 2003. Although well known for his fiction, he also wrote and published numerous essays, two of which (also from *Threepenny Review*) had appeared in previous editions of *The Best American Essays:* "I'm Having Trouble with My Relationship," selected by Justin Kaplan for 1990, and "The Zipper," selected by Susan Sontag for 1992. I extend thanks to the Houghton Mifflin staff, especially Deanne Urmy, Melissa Grella, and Larry Cooper, for their always generous assistance. It was a pleasure this year to work with one of our most distinguished literary and cultural critics, Louis Menand. This year's wide-ranging collection vividly reflects his affection for the essay form and his appreciation of its dazzling variety.

R.A.

Introduction: Voices

YOU CANNOT TASTE a work of prose. It has no color and it makes no sound. Its shape is without significance. When people talk about writing, though, they often use adjectives borrowed from activities whose products make a more direct appeal to the senses — painting, sculpture, music, cuisine. People say, "The writing is colorful," or "pungent," or "shapeless," or "lyrical," and no one asks them where, exactly, they perceive those qualities. Discussions of "tone" and "texture" are carried on in the complete ontological absence of such things. (You could say that so are discussions of "meaning," but that's another philosophical problem.) Writing is a verbal artifact that, as it is being decoded, stimulates sensations that are unique to writing but that, for some reason, often have to be described in terms of nonverbal experiences.

One of the most mysterious of writing's immaterial properties is what people call its "voice." Editors sometimes refer to it, in a phrase that underscores the paradox at the heart of the idea, as the "voice on the page." Many editors think that a voice is what makes great writing great. Most writers do, too. Prosę can show many virtues, including originality, without having a voice. It may be packed solid with intellectual nutrients; upon its import, much may seem to depend. It may avoid cliché, radiate conviction, be grammatically so clean that your grandmother could eat off it. But none of this has anything to do with this elusive entity, a "voice." There are probably all kinds of literary sins that prevent a piece of writing from having a voice, but there seems to be no guaranteed technique for creating one.

"Voice" is sometimes associated with "style," but they are not always the same. Writing can be stylish and still be voiceless, and this is as true of the plain, "just the facts" style as it is of the style of high figuration. Ingenuity, wit, sarcasm, euphony, frequent outbreaks of the first-person singular — any of these can enliven prose without giving it a voice. Of all the intangibles of good writing, voice is probably the most transcendental. You can set the stage as elaborately as you like, but either the phantom appears or it doesn't.

When it does make an appearance, the subject matter is often irrelevant. "I do not care for movies very much and I rarely see them," W. H. Auden wrote to the editors of *The Nation* in 1944; "further, I am suspicious of criticism as the literary genre which, more than any other, recruits epigones, pedants without insight, intellectuals without love. I am all the more surprised, therefore, to find myself not only reading Mr. Agee before I read anyone else in *The Nation* but also consciously looking forward all week to reading him again." A lot of the movies James Agee reviewed between 1942 and 1948, when he was *The Nation*'s film critic, were negligible then and are forgotten now. Auden was not merely being a curmudgeon. But you can still read those columns with pleasure. They continue to pass the ultimate test of good writing: it is more painful to stop reading them than it is to keep going. When you get to the end of Agee's sentences, you wish, like Auden, that there were more sentences.

Writing that has a voice is writing that has something like a personality. But whose personality is it? As with most things in art, there is no straight road from the product back to the person who made it. There are writers read and loved for their humor who are not especially funny people, and writers read and loved for their eloquence who, in conversation, swallow their words or can't seem to finish a sentence. Wisdom on the page correlates with wisdom in the writer about as frequently as a high batting average correlates with a high IQ: they just seem to have very little to do with one another. Charming people can produce prose of sneering sententiousness, and cranky neurotics can, to their readers, seem to be inexhaustibly delightful. Personal drabness, through some obscure neural kink, can deliver verbal blooms. Readers who meet writers whose voice they have fallen in love with usually need to make a small adjustment in order to hang on to their infatuation.

Some confusion about what it means for writing to have a voice arises from the metaphor itself. Many readers, and many writers, for that matter, think that effectiveness in writing has something to do with how close it is to speech. Writers often claim that they never write something that they would not say. It is hard to know how this could be literally true. Speech is somatic, a bodily function, and it is accompanied by physical inflections (tone of voice, winks, smiles, raised eyebrows, hand gestures) that are not reproducible in writing. Spoken language is repetitive, fragmentary, contradictory, ambiguous, loaded down with space holders (*like, um, you know what I'm saying*) — pretty much all the things writing teachers tell students not to do. But speakers are generally understood right away. You don't have to hear a sentence three times before you get it. On the other hand, you often have to read a sentence three times, occasionally even a well-written one. As a medium, writing is a million times weaker than speech. It's a hieroglyph competing with a symphony.

The other reason that speech is a bad metaphor for writing is that writing, for 99 percent of people who do it, is the opposite of spontaneous. Some writers write many drafts of a piece, and some write one draft, at the pace of a snail. But chattiness, slanginess, in-your-face-ness, and any other feature of writing that is conventionally characterized as "like speech" are all usually the results of intense experimentation, revision, calibrating, walks around the block, unnecessary phone calls, and recalibrating. Writers are people in whom *l'esprit de l'escalier* is a recurrent experience: they are always thinking of the perfect riposte when the moment for saying it has already passed. So they wait a few years and put it in print. Writers are not mere copyists of language; they are polishers, embellishers, perfecters. They are people who spend hours getting the timing exactly right — so that it sounds absolutely unrehearsed.

There's a wonderful story about the gap between speech and writing. It features the British critic Desmond McCarthy. McCarthy was a member of the Bloomsbury group, and, apparently, a legendary talker. His friends thought that his writing, which he produced reluctantly, gave a poor idea of his conversational gifts. So they hired a stenographer and invited McCarthy over. They hid the stenographer outside the door and had McCarthy hold forth. McCar-

thy obliged his friends by discoursing brilliantly for an hour or so, and then left. The friends waited impatiently for the transcription of his conversation to arrive. It did. They read it. The writing was completely banal.

Still, the claim that the written "voice" is an artificial construction of language, deliberate and self-conscious or impersonal and accidental but never spontaneous and natural, is not a claim most writers could accept. Writing is personal; it *feels* personal. The unfunny person who is a humorous writer does not think, of her work, "That's not me." Critics speak of a literary persona, which is a device for compelling a divorce between the author and the text. But no one, or almost no one, writes "as a persona." People write as people, and if there were nothing personal about the outcome, few would bother with it. Composition is a labor-intensive business. And what makes it especially so is that the rate of production is beyond the writer's control. The words don't just appear on a conveyor belt, and you package them up. You have to wait, and what you are waiting for is something inside you to come up with the words. That something, for writers, is the voice.

The real basis for the metaphor of voice in writing is not speaking. It is singing. You cannot know a singer from her speech, and although "natural phrasing" and "from the heart" are prized attributes of song, actually singing that way requires rehearsal, preparation, and getting in touch with whatever it is inside singers that, by a neural kink or the grace of God, enables them to turn themselves into vessels of musical sound. Right before he walked onstage at the opera house, Luciano Pavarotti is reported to have taken a big bite of an apple. That's how he helped his voice to sound fresh, spontaneous, and natural.

What writers hear, when they are trying to write, is something more like singing than like speaking. Inside your head, you're yakking away to yourself all the time. Getting *that* down on paper is a depressing, Desmond McCarthy–like experience. What you are trying to do when you write is to transpose the yakking into verbal music; and the voice inside, when you find it, which can take hours or days or weeks, is not your speaking voice. It is your singing voice — except that it comes out as writing. Writers labor under two anxieties. The first is that the voice that they found a hundred times in the past has gone forever, that they will never listen to it again. The

other is that, having finally found it this time, they will lose it again before the piece is finished. Then, they know that, having sung its song, it will disappear again. This is the voice people are surprised not to encounter when they "meet the writer." The writer is not so surprised. One day, he or she will be back in front of the paper or the keyboard and have to find the voice all over again. Some writers, when they begin a new piece, spend hours frantically rereading their old stuff, trying to remember how they did it. Rereading rarely works, because nothing works reliably. Sooner or later, normally later than everyone involved would like, the voice shows up, takes a bite out of the apple, and walks onstage.

Most of the essays in this volume were picked by ear. I was searching for voices. Some are cool and some are anti-cool. I like both. There are many subjects here — for the subject, to a point, doesn't matter. Still, as a reader, my favorite kind of essay is the one that makes a lost time present — the essay that tells me how it was in New York City in the 1970s, or on a Manhattan bus in the 1940s, or at a midwestern high school, or during a summer on Cape Cod. Selfishly — and why shouldn't an editor be selfish? — I like to read stories about my own times. I never get tired of it. I feel as though I could do it forever, and I probably will.

Writing is a window. It opens onto vanished feelings and vanished worlds. Often it is the only window there is, the only access we will ever have to those things. It is more than a mere record, like a photograph, because it is also a sensibility, a point of view, a voice. It is the place where, fifty or a hundred years from now, people will go to see — or to hear — what it was like to be alive when we were alive. We were alive in 2003, and these pieces are part of what remains.

LOUIS MENAND

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