

The Lexington Reader



Lynn Z. Bloom

THE LEXINGTON READER



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Credits

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PREFACE

E. B. White, essayist *par excellence*, says of his art: "The essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest. He is a fellow who thoroughly enjoys his work, just as people who take bird walks enjoy theirs. Each new excursion of the essayist, each new 'attempt,' differs from the last and takes him into new country. This delights him. Only a person who is congenitally self-centered has the effrontery and the stamina to write essays." White has captured the essence of the writers in *The Lexington Reader*—its title a reinforcement of the self-liberating activities initiated by the Minutemen's "shot heard 'round the world" at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in 1776. They delight in their work; they believe, rightly or wrongly, that whatever they experience or think about is of course of consuming interest to others; they expect to make a memorable impression on their readers. Joan Didion reinforces White's views from a more assertive stance: "In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.*"

White continues, "There are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses, as many essay flavors as there are Howard Johnson ice creams. The essayist arises in the morning and . . . selects his garb from an unusually extensive wardrobe: he can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter—philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast." The essays in *The Lexington Reader* have been chosen to reveal writers of essays in their many voices, many modes—shirts of many colors and fashions. It is my hope that the texts of the essays themselves, and the related material about the author's life, as well as about the particular work, the study questions, and strategies and suggestions for writing will enable students and their teachers to recognize in published essays elements and processes they can use in writing essays of their own.

The 122 essays in *The Lexington Reader* are drawn from many sources, particularly the most distinguished and distinctive contemporary writing about people, places, humanities and the arts, controversy, science and the social sciences, how-to, humor, and the phenomenon of writing itself. There

is a leavening of classics by such authors as Swift, Franklin, and Thoreau, whose ideas and style remain as fresh and provocative today as when they were written. Of particular importance are a dozen essays by undergraduate college students, which provide not only discussions of interesting subjects (the numbing effect of video games, East St. Louis in the Roaring Twenties, the causes and cures of acid rain, the use of pheromones to control insect pests) but also models of style and particular types of writing that other students can emulate. This blend of essays by professional writers and people in other disciplines—scientists, physicians, social analysts, film and drama critics, business executives, humorists, travelers, cooks (and eaters), among others—majority and minority authors, men and women, provides a realistic representation of engaging, witty, and elegant writing of current interest.

It's unfortunate that a word more compelling than *nonfiction* has yet to be coined to convey the excitement, variety, and distinction of works that one critic has called "the literature of fact"—writing based on truth and verifiable evidence. Indeed, one of the major aims of *The Lexington Reader* is to demonstrate the versatility and stylistic finesse of which nonfiction writers are capable. Like writers of fiction, nonfiction writers shape their material into many forms that follow particular literary conventions, presenting reviews, how-to writings, investigative reporting, parodies, and other modes with great imagination and flexibility.

Like writers of fiction, nonfiction writers present characters, but these characters are real flesh and blood. Who could forget Henry Mitchell's talented but down-to-earth Eudora Welty, Sally Quinn's feisty Alice Roosevelt Longworth at 90, or Eugene Meyer's principled but anachronistic L. G. Broadmoore—all very real and extraordinarily memorable people? Like writers of fiction, nonfiction writers transport us to distinctive settings, whether John McPhee's sparsely beautiful New Jersey Pine Barrens, Tim Payne's foreboding beach at Bar Harbor, or glimpses of New York as seen by tourist Jan Morris, luncheonette habitué Kate Simon, or ghetto native Alfred Kazin.

Nonfiction writers, like writers of fiction, thrive on the cadences of people talking, whether in the brisk dialogue of sculptor Louise Nevelson, the cynical overtones of a former Miss U.S.A., or the deadpan narration of James Thurber as a calm obligato to his family's pandemonium. Nonfiction writers, too, set scenes: Mark Twain as a child, basking in the abundance of Uncle John's nurturing farm; Thoreau as an independent young man, philosophizing at provocative Walden; Maxine Hong Kingston as an established writer, proud but uneasy in her new home. Nonfiction writers provide action, and interaction, to make their points in the form of structured vignettes or more sustained activity. Joan Didion offers candid snapshots of Las Vegas weddings; George Orwell presents "Marrakech," with glimpses of hungry, forgotten, and oppressed natives, ignored by their white rulers; E. B. White unwinds a slow motion movie of the long, sweet sighs and sights of summertime, "oh summertime," at an immortal lake in Maine.

A distinctive style, as individual as a fingerprint, is as characteristic of the writer of nonfiction as it is of the fiction writer. We know Woody Allen by his neurotic but hilarious non sequiturs: "While taking my noon walk today, I had more morbid thoughts. What *is* it about death that bothers me so much? Probably the hours." We experience, in the hard-hitting style of Bob Considine, the sportswriter's ringside punch: "Listen to this, buddy, for it comes from a guy whose palms are still wet, whose throat is still dry, and whose jaw is still agape from the utter shock of watching Joe Louis knock out Max Schmeling. It was a shocking thing, that knockout—short, sharp, merciless, complete." We acknowledge the measured elegance of Virginia Woolf, with her revealing, female metaphors: "But who, then, is the desirable man—the patron who will cajole the best out of the writer's brain and bring to birth the most varied and vigorous progeny of which he is capable?" And we recognize in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., the rhetoric of the pulpit, in which he was nurtured: "Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you. . . .' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: 'Let justice roll down like waters. . . .' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.'"

Nonfiction is an art, for nonfiction writers construct artifacts of the facts and figures that form the basis of their work. The writers of nonfiction, then, are artists, as justifiably proud of their craft and as troubled by the problems in "getting the words right" as Hemingway ever was when he rewrote the ending of *A Farewell to Arms*, he claimed, "thirty-nine times." It is to provide an understanding of that art, and of its manifestation in writing, that these distinctive selections have been included in *The Lexington Reader*. The essays vary in length from one to twenty pages, though most are between three and seven pages. They range in difficulty from easily accessible to rather complicated. They have been arranged to demonstrate various ways of writing about familiar topics—people, places, performances, controversy, science, how-to, and humor; the alternative Rhetorical Table of Contents indicates rhetorical groupings, and the Index is arranged alphabetically by author. Chapter One, "Writing About Writing," deals with matters crucial to the writing process—why and how writers write, how they develop a style (and how readers can develop styles of their own), and how they revise, including three versions of Richard Wright's revised (and re-revised) "Interview Comments on *Black Boy*," and two student papers—Teresa Whitlock's original and revised versions of her essay, "My 'Professional' Hairstyle," and Mary Langenberg's "Interview with Alfred Everett" and the resulting essay, "East St. Louis, from Blues to Dirge."

The introductions to each of the chapters define the particular type of writing under discussion by identifying its conspicuous characteristics, its purposes and uses, its characteristic forms and subjects. The consistent focus of *The Lexington Reader* on writing processes includes discussions of the rhetorical strategies an author can use to effect the purposes of each type,

illustrated with references to the selections that follow. These rhetorical strategies are summarized at the end of each chapter in a checklist of questions to guide student writers as they try to create their own versions of a particular type of essay. The checklists are followed by suggested writing topics especially appropriate for each type. For example, Chapter Four, "Writing About Controversy," offers strategies for writing direct and implied arguments, narratives with arguments, and articles based on investigative reporting. Among the essay topics suggested is a paper arguing against discrimination, modeled after one or another of the essays by James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., George Orwell, or Richard Rodriguez, that is included in that chapter.

The introduction and study questions for each individual essay are designed to help students focus on several salient aspects of the writing situation. The introduction to each essay provides a brief biography of the author, and identifies his or her major professional and literary works, examined from the perspective of what in the author's life or work contributed to the writing of this essay. It also indicates the principal features and distinctive characteristics of the essay in question, and—when the information is available—the author's statement on why and how he or she wrote it. The commentary on the essay itself (reinforced by study questions for selected essays) focuses on the type of essay it is and the audience for which it is intended. This introductory commentary also considers the rhetorical strategies and techniques (such as organization, emphasis, level and type of language, tone, choice of illustrations) the author uses to accomplish his or her aims. The Glossary on 807–24 explains basic terminology to aid in analyzing the essays, by oneself or in class discussion. All footnotes are by the essay authors.

The Lexington Reader also includes a remarkable collection of photographs by Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Stan Grossfeld. These pictures, no matter what their subject—news, human interest, or scenes of everyday life—demonstrate not only Grossfeld's artistry but his great respect for his subject, medium, and audience. His accompanying philosophy of composition explains the interrelation of assignment, medium, technique, and artistry—a process in the visual medium analogous to the writing process.

The Lexington Reader has, in various ways, been in progress for the past quarter-century. I am particularly indebted to the candid commentaries of multitudes of writing students over the years, whose preferences and perplexities have so significantly influenced both the shape and emphasis of this volume, particularly its process-oriented approach to the subject. I am likewise grateful for the thoughtful suggestions of writing teachers throughout the country who have commented on various versions of *The Lexington Reader*: Jay Balderson, Western Illinois University; Don Cox, University of Tennessee; Lisa Ede, Oregon State University; Carol Hartzog, University of California—Los Angeles; Michael Johnson, University of Kansas; Nan John-

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L.Z.B.

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