THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 1994

TRACY KIDDER

EDITOR

ROBERT ATWAN

SERIES EDITOR

The Best AMERICAN ESSAYS 1994

Edited and with an Introduction
by TRACY KIDDER

ROBERT ATWAN,
Series Editor

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK

ISSN 0888-3742
ISBN 0-395-69254-7
ISBN 0-395-69253-9 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

AGM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Foreword

"WHERE THERE'S A WILL there's a way," an excited William Hazlitt says to himself as he hurries down Chancery Lane "about half-past six o'clock, on Monday the 10th of December, to inquire at Jack Randall's where the fight the next day was to be." The year is 1821, the city is London, and Hazlitt is pursuing his way to an out-of-town boxing match, his first fight ever. He's eager to see big Bill Neate, the raging Bristol "Bull," take on the "Gas-Man," Tom Hickman, the bravest and cruelest fighter in all of England. "I was determined to see this fight, come what would, and see it I did, in great style."

You can consult all the handbooks on literary nonfiction for all the elements of style, structure, and composition, but you'll rarely find mention of what Hazlitt just noted — *determination*. Yet its literary value is inestimable.

This year's volume of essays — the ninth in the series — is filled with determination. You can see the fight in great style. You can narrate it with equally great style. But as Hazlitt reminds us, you first have to get there. No sitting in your study with a boxing encyclopedia, no telephone interviews with experts, no electronic highway; and the travel involved takes you beyond your local library.

Such narratives can be a risky business. For one thing, the destinations are often uncertain. When Ted Conover joins up with a convoy of African truckers, he has no idea of what he'll find when they reach Rwanda. Nor does Cynthia Ozick, who doesn't usually assume the role of reporter, know what odd literary asso-

ciations will result from her visit to the Louvre, where she sees "Salman Rushdie plain." In most of the essays collected here we confront worlds that exist thrillingly outside the writer's self. In fact, what makes this volume especially venturous is that most of these worlds also exist outside of the writer's control. Even when the essays concentrate on a wholly personal sphere, as Stanley Elkins's does, they confront human conditions verging on the unmanageable: "Being out of one's tree melts your watch like a Dali."

But there's an additional risk. After writing "The Fight," Hazlitt was surprised to find that people considered his eyewitness report a "vulgar thing." This wasn't simply because his story took readers into an unfamiliar subculture, but because it took them into unfamiliar prose territory as well. In other words, Hazlitt risked the unliterary; he was determined to find a way to develop an essay out of "unsuitable" material. We can see a similar determination in many of this year's essays; look at how S. Oso, Lauren Slater, and Andre Dubus III creatively confront unpromising or intractable subjects. Where there's a will there's a way.

From the narrative essays of Darcy Frey on inner-city basketball and Lucy Grealy on plastic surgery (both of which won 1994 National Magazine Awards) to the reflective performances of Nicholson Baker and John Updike, this year's volume showcases just about every type of contemporary essay: autobiographical, journalistic, critical, speculative, informative, humorous. Though their subjects range from the nuances of punctuation to the byzantine intricacies of city parking lots, what these essays have in common is their determination to take on tough assignments, to raise the difficulty level of the game.

That effort, it seems, is what finally transforms a piece of nonfiction prose into a memorable literary work. The best writers of essays or creative nonfiction seek out challenges, go for the toughest questions on the board. The challenges may spring from the demands of the assignment or of the composition — or both. The best writers of literary nonfiction resist the plodding memoir, the facile discovery of identity, the predictable opinion, or the sudden, life-altering illumination. As a great essayist, Gertrude Stein, audaciously put it, "If it can be done, why do it?"

*

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 turned over to a distinguished guest editor, who may add a few personal favorites to the list 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 (not excerpts) 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. Publications that want to make sure their contributors will be considered each year should include the series on their subscription list (Robert Atwan, *The Best American Essays,* P.O. Box 416, Maplewood, New Jersey 07040).

For this volume, I'd like to thank an old friend, William Vesterman, for the suggestions and encouragement he has generously offered me since the start of the series. I appreciate the assistance I received this year from Peter Krass, who helped with research and manuscript preparation. It was a great pleasure to work on this edition with Tracy Kidder, one of our truly distinguished prose writers. His immense range of human interests as well as his devotion to craft and accuracy are conspicuously present throughout this collection.

R.A.

Introduction

WE LIVE in an autobiographical age. An unusually large number of poets and novelists are writing their memoirs. Almost everyone who reports for magazines and journals uses the first person. Even academics and book reviewers begin essays with personal anecdotes, like waiters introducing themselves before getting down to business.

Contemporary critical theory lends authority to the autobiographical impulse. As every graduate student knows, only a fool would try to think or bear witness to events objectively anymore, and only an intellectual crook would claim to have done so. There's a line of reasoning that goes like this: writers ought to acknowledge that they are subjective filtering agents and let themselves appear on the page; or, in greater honesty, describe themselves in detail; or, most honest of all, make themselves their main subject matter, since one's own self is the only subject one can really know. Maybe widespread psychotherapy has made literary self-revelation popular. Certainly there are economic reasons. Editors and agents seem to think that the public's hunger for intimate true-life stories has grown large enough to include the private lives of literary figures as well as those of movie stars, mass murderers, and athletes. And the invitation to write about oneself has intrinsic attractions. The subject interests most writers. The research doesn't usually require travel or phone calls or hours in a library. The enterprise *looks* easy.

But the attempt to make one's self a character on the page invites a variety of mistakes. Paradoxically, when some people write in the first person, they feel the urge to universalize themselves. To an account of personal history or a patch of self-description,

the writer appends a summarizing statement such as "By all this I mean to say that I was in denial." It is often said, in testament to the potential power of writing, that anything can be *made* interesting. But the first person beguiles some writers, and the act of writing the word "I" tends to make them forget that they have to do more than merely assert the interestingness of their experience. Unearned revelations flourish. The phrase "suddenly I realized" often stands in for the particulars of thought and observation. The writer, striving to touch the universal, experiences the revelation all by himself again.

The thoroughgoing first person is a demanding mode. It asks for the literary equivalent of perfect pitch. Even good writers occasionally lose control of their tone and let a self-congratulatory quality slip in. Eager to explain that their heart is in the right place, they baldly state that they care deeply about matters with which they appear to be only marginally acquainted. Pretending to confess to their bad behavior, they revel in their colorfulness. Insistently describing their own biases, they make it all too obvious that they wish to appear uncommonly reliable. Obviously, the first person doesn't guarantee honesty. Just because they are committing words to paper does not mean that writers stop telling themselves the lies that they've invented for getting through the night. Not everyone has Montaigne's gift for candor. Certainly some people are less likely to write honestly about themselves than about anyone else on earth.

Many of the classic works of nonfiction have been built in the first person. Needless to say, most autobiographies have been written in that mode, though Henry Adams wrote a durable book about himself in the third person, and so, in effect, did Gertrude Stein. Some writers find in the first person the likeliest means of insinuating an individuality of voice into their prose on almost any subject. But the third person, in all its varieties, has often been made to carry a strong sense of voice. The first person is a serviceable tool, but so is the third person. The writer's choice of point of view is a choice among tools, and shouldn't be made on moral grounds or for the sake of fashion, even in an autobiographical era.

Given what I've just said, the reader may wonder why almost every essay in this volume is written in the first person. It wasn't that I

didn't look for notable third-person essays. In the confessional spirit of the day, I should admit that since I've written mostly in that mode myself, I was searching for some company, hoping to assemble a small third-person support group. But most of the essays that Bob Atwan sent me, and almost all of the ones that I liked best, were written in the first person. I was surprised, but, in the end, not disappointed. All of the authors represented here use the first person deftly.

I chose these essays from a group of about two hundred. I didn't have room to include all the ones I liked. I didn't take more than one essay by any one writer, but I was tempted in some cases.

Three pieces in this volume — by Ted Conover, Darcy Frey, and Mark Kramer — don't quite fit inside one traditional definition of the essay as personal reflection. They fall into a category sometimes called literary journalism. I'll call them narrative essays. These examples are all written in the first person, but none is about its writer. The "I" does not appear in all narrative essays; in all of these, the "I" is unobtrusive. Unlike many essays, these don't give the impression that the writer is thinking things over on the page, but in each of these pieces the writer addresses the reader in a personal, not a distant or institutional voice. More than most essays, these rely on reporting, but they aren't simply expository, in the manner of standard newspaper or magazine articles. The standard article presents information that a reader can use to reconstruct places, events, and people. The best narrative essays present already reconstructed worlds. They attempt to catch the reflection of human character on the page. They have underlying narratives. They deal with the big themes, and sculpt the reader's ruminations. The narrative essay deserves to be called literary. Certainly this kind of writing has a distinguished lineage. Among many others, Mark Twain, George Orwell, and Lillian Ross did some work in the form. And one can imagine James Agee or Joseph Mitchell — or for that matter the Edmund Wilson of *The American Earthquake* — in the place of Darcy Frey, hanging out with young basketball players on a Coney Island playground. Montaigne left the world and retired to his study. Writers of the narrative essay go out into the world, and then they too retire to their studies. The best narrative essays rely as heavily on the style of their writing as the best personal essays.

I've included a parody of the subject-tells-all magazine interview. This piece, by Ian Frazier, is the best commentary I've read on the subject, and certainly the funniest. For the purposes of this volume, I'll call it an essay that is cleverly disguised as a parody.

A number of these essays depend almost entirely on self-reflection. I consider them especially admirable, because I think the introspective essay is the hardest to pull off. And surely the riskiest form of literary introspection is the personal illness essay. I read several good ones, and included two. I found Lucy Grealy's essay painful and remarkably engrossing. Stanley Elkin's tale of temporary madness is a marvel. It's a vaudeville show mixed with meditation, set, as it were, in intensive care.

Many of these essays deal less with the author's life or person than with topics such as airplane flight, orangutans, *The Iliad,* the plight of Salman Rushdie, and, hilariously, the history of punctuation. In an essay about tropical plants, Jamaica Kincaid manages to say a great deal about herself while saying a great deal about many other things besides. A lot of the writers here have notably distinctive voices. Jamaica Kincaid's writing voice is one I'm sure I'd recognize in a crowd of unsigned manuscripts. Adam Gopnik uses the first person very sparingly, but the voice in his essay is strong, full of authority, intelligence, and wit, especially distinctive qualities in a contemporary essay about the fine arts. Unlike most writing on that subject, Gopnik's essay actually *describes* works of art, never resorting to the unintelligible jargon of the cognoscenti. His essay gives voice to a feeling of discomfort with the current art scene that I'd been harboring, inarticulately, for some time. I remember clearly how I felt when I finished Gopnik's essay, and indeed, all the other essays reprinted here. I felt grateful.

TRACY KIDDER

Contents

NICHOLSON BAKER

Survival of the Fittest

FROM THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

THE NINE BASIC MARKS of punctuation — comma, dash, hyphen, period, parenthesis, semi-colon, colon, space, and capital letter — seem so apt to us now, so pipe-smokingly Indo-European, so naturally suited in their disjunctive charge and mass to their given sentential offices, that we may forgivably assume that commas have been around for at least as long as electrons, and that while dialects, cursive styles, and typefaces have come and gone, the semi-colon, that supremely self-possessed valet of phraseology, is immutable.

But in fact the semi-colon is relatively modern. Something medieval called a *punctus versus,* which strongly resembled a semi-colon, though it was often encountered dangling below the written line, had roughly the force of a modern period; another sign that looked (in some scribal hands) exactly like a semi-colon was a widely used abbreviation for several Latin word endings — *atque* could appear as *atq;,* and *omnibus* as *omnib;*. But the semi-colon that we resort to daily, hourly, entered the picture with the first edition of Pietro Bembo's *De Aetna* two years after Columbus reached America, the handiwork of Aldus Manutius the Elder (or someone close to him) and his tasteful punch-cutter, Francesco Griffo. The mark, we are told by Dr. Malcolm Parkes, its historian, took much longer than the parenthesis did to earn the trust of typesetters: shockingly, its use was apparently not fully understood by some of those assigned to work on the first folio of Shakespeare.

And it is of course even now subject to episodes of neglect and derision. Joyce much preferred the more Attic colon, at least in

Ulysses, and Beckett, as well, gradually rid his prose of what must have seemed to him an emblem of vulgar, high-Victorian applied ornament, a cast-iron flower of mass-produced Ciceronianism: instead of semi-colons, he spliced the phrases of *Malone Dies* and *Molloy* together with one-size-fits-all commas, as commonplace as stones on a beach, to achieve that dejected sort of murmured ecphonesis so characteristic of his narrative voice — all part of the general urge, perhaps, that led him to ditch English in favor of French, *"pour m'appauvrir":* to impoverish himself.

Donald Barthelme, too, who said that the example of Beckett was what first "allowed him to write," thought that the semi-colon was "ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly" — but he allowed that others might feel differently. And still the semi-colon survives, far too subtle and useful, as it turns out, to be a casualty of modernism. It even participates in those newer forms of emotional punctuation called "smileys" or "emoticons" — vaguely irritating attempts to supply a sideways facial expression at the close of an e-mail paragraph — e.g., :-) and >%-(. The semi-colon collaborates in the "wink" or "smirk," thus — ;-).

So our familiar and highly serviceable repertoire of punctles was a long time coming; it emerged from swarms of competing and overlapping systems and theories, many of them misapplied or half-forgotten. Petrarch, for example, used a slash with a dot in the middle of it to signal the onset of a parenthetical phrase. A *percontativus,* or backward question mark, occasionally marked the close of a rhetorical question even into the seventeenth century — Robert Herrick wrote with it. A *punctus elevatus,* resembling an upside-down semi-colon or, later, a fancy, black-letter *s,* performed the function of a colon in many medieval texts; when used at the end of a line of poetry, however, it could signal the presence of an enjambment. A nameless figure shaped like a tilted candy-cane served to terminate paragraphs of Augustus's autobiography (A.D. 14), inscribed on his tomb. Around A.D. 600, Isidore of Seville recommended ending a paragraph with a 7, which he called the *positura.* He also advocated the placing of a horizontal dash next to a corrupted or questionable text ("so that a kind of arrow may slit the throat of what is superfluous and penetrate to the vitals of what is false"), and he relied on the ancient *cryphia,* a C turned on its side with a dot in the middle — ☋ — to be used next to

those places in a text where "a hard and obscure question cannot be opened up or solved."

The upright letter C, for *capitulum,* developed into the popular medieval paragraph symbol, ¶, called at times a *pilcrow* or a *paraph.* Seventh-century Irish scribes were in the habit of using more points when they wanted a longer pause; thus a sentence might end with a colon and a comma (:,), or two periods and a comma (..,), or three commas together („,). At the close of the twelfth century, one of the *dictaminists,* a man named Buoncompagno, troubled by so much irreconcilable complexity, proposed a pared-down slash-and-dash method: a dash would mark all final pauses, and a slash would mark all lesser pauses. It didn't take, although the "double virgula" (//) was used to separate sentences in the fifteenth century, and Edmund Spenser and Walter Ralegh sometimes hand-wrote with single slashes, rather than commas. A plus sign (+) stood for a period in a few early printed books; in others, it could set off a quotation.

Printing eventually slowed the pace of makeshift invention, forcing out many quaint superfluities, but novel marks, and surprising adaptations of old marks, may appear at any time. Besides smileys, on-line services have lately given rise to the ecstatic bracket hug of greeting: {{{{{{{Shana!!!}}}}}}}. Legal punctuation continues to thrive — the ™, the ®, and the © are everywhere. (The title of *Jurassic Park* is not *Jurassic Park,* but *Jurassic Park*™; likewise David Feldman's *Why Do Clocks Run Clockwise and Other Imponderables*™.)

Especially fashionable now is the ℠, as in "Forget Anything?℠" — observed not long ago on a triangular piece of folded cardboard beside the bathroom sink in a room at a Holiday Inn: a mark that modifies the phrase it follows to mean, "This is not merely a polite question regarding whether you have successfully packed everything you require during your stay, this utterance is part of our current chain-wide marketing campaign, and we are so serious about asking it of you that we hereby offer fair warning that if you or anyone else attempts to extend such a courtesy to another guest anywhere in the hotel industry in printed or published form, either on flyers, placards, signs, pins, or pieces of folded cardboard positioned at or beside a sink, vanity, or other bathroom fixture, we, the owner of this service mark, will torment and tease you with legal remedies." Even the good old comma continues to evolve: it

was flipped upside down and turned into the quotation mark circa 1714, and a woman I knew in college punctuated her letters to her high-school friends with home-made comma-shapes made out of photographs of side-flopping male genitals that she had cut out of *Playgirl.*

Until now, readers have had to fulfill their need for the historical particulars of this engrossingly prosaic subject with narrow-gauge works of erudition such as E. Otha Wingo's sober *Latin Punctuation in the Classical Age,* or John Lennard's extraordinary recent monograph on the history of the parenthesis, *But I Digress* (1991) — a jewel of Oxford University Press scholarship, by the way, gracefully written and full of intelligence, decked out with a complete scholarly apparatus of multiple indices, bibliographies, and notes, whose author, to judge by the startling jacket photo (shaved head with up-sticking central proto-Mohawk tuft, earring on left ear, wilted corduroy jacket, and over-laundered T-shirt bearing some enigmatic insignia underneath), put himself through graduate school by working as a ticket scalper at Elvis Costello concerts. (A discussion of Elvis Costello's use of the parenthesis in "Let Him Dangle" figures in a late chapter.)

At last, however, we have *Pause and Effect,* Dr. Malcolm Parkes's brave overview: "an introduction," so he unassumingly subtitles it, though it is much more than introductory, "to the history of punctuation in the West." Not in the East, mind, or elsewhere — Arabic, Greek, and Sanskrit customs await a final fuse-blowing collation. (And according to the MLA index, there is Nanette Twine's 1984 article on "The Adoption of Punctuation in Japanese Script," in *Visible Language,* a journal that has recently done exciting things for the study of the punctuational past, to be assimilated; and, for canon-stretchers, John Duitsman's "Punctuation in Thirteen West African Languages" and Carol F. Justus's "Visible Sentences in Cuneiform Hittite.") Though his punning title promises sprightliness, Dr. Parkes — fellow of Keble College and lecturer in paleography at the University of Oxford — has produced a rich, complex, and decidedly unsprightly book of coffee-table dimensions, with seventy-four illustrative plates, a glossary, and, regrettably, no *index rerum.*

It is not an easy book to read in bed. Because of the oversized folio format, each line on the page extends an inch or so longer

than usual, resulting in eye-sweeps that must take in fourteen words at a time, rather than the more comfortable ten or eleven. As his shoulder muscles tire of supporting the full weight of the open book, the reader, lying on his left side, finally allows it to slump to the mattress and assume an L-position, and he then attempts to process the text with one open eye, which, instead of scanning left to right, reads by focusing outward along a radically foreshortened line of type that is almost parallel with his line of sight, skipping or supplying by guesswork those words that disappear beyond the gentle rise of the page. The gaps between each word narrow, hindering comprehension, although they never achieve that incomprehensible Greek ideal of page-layout called *scriptio continua,* in which the text is recorded unspaced as solid lines of letters.

And why, in fact, did the Greeks relinquish so sensible a practice as word-spacing, which even the cuneiformists of Minoan Crete apparently used? Lejeune, for one, finds this development *"remarquable";* but even more remarquable is the fact that the pragmatic Romans had word-spacing available to *them* (via the Etruscans), in the form of "interpuncts," or hovering dots between each word (a practice successfully revived by Wang word-processing software in the 1980s), which they too abandoned in early Christian times. "For this amazing and deplorable regression one can conjecture no reason other than an inept desire to imitate even the worst characteristic of Greek books," scolds Revilo P. Oliver. Dr. Parkes, on the other hand, theorizes that class differences between readers and scribes may have had something to do with the perseverance of *scriptio continua* — a scribal slave must not presume to word-space, or otherwise punctuate, because he would thereby be imposing his personal reading of the constitutive letters on his employer. There were also, in monkish contexts, quasi-mystical arguments to be made for unspaced impenetrability: a resistant text, slow to offer up its literal meaning, encouraged meditation and memorization, suggested Cassian (a prominent fifth-century recluse); and the moment when, after much futile staring, the daunting word-search-puzzle of the sacred page finally spaced itself out, coalescing into comprehensible units of the Psalter, might serve to remind the swooning lector of the miracle of the act of reading, which is impossible without God's loving condescension into human language and human form.