

*Best Contemporary
American Essays*



当代美国散文精选

Shouhua Qi 祁寿华 [旅美]

Terry Wallace [美]



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外教社

Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

当代美国散文精选 = Best Contemporary American Essays / 祁寿华编. —上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 2003
ISBN 7-81080-593-2

I. 当… II. 祁… III. 英语-语言读物, 散文
IV. H319-4:I

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2002)第 071067 号

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出版发行: 上海外语教育出版社

(上海外国语大学内) 邮编: 200083

电 话: 021-65425300 (总机), 35051812 (发行部)

电子邮箱: bookinfo@sflep.com.cn

网 址: <http://www.sflep.com.cn> <http://www.sflep.com>

责任编辑: 陈鑫源

印 刷: 常熟市华顺印刷有限公司
经 销: 新华书店上海发行所
开 本: 880×1230 1/32 印张 11.375 字数 379 千字
版 次: 2003 年 8 月第 1 版 2003 年 8 月第 1 次印刷
印 数: 5 000 册

书 号: ISBN 7-81080-593-2 / I · 045
定 价: 15.80 元

本版图书如有印装质量问题,可向本社调换

Acknowledgements

- "Hair" by Marcia Aldrich. First published in *Northwest Review*. Copyright © 1992 by Marcia Aldrich. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- "Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind" by Woody Allen. *Tikkun* 1990.
- "Graven Images" by Saul Bellow. *News from the Republic of Letters* 1997.
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About the Editor

Shouhua Qi, a native of Nanjing, China, has published extensively on issues of cross-cultural understanding and literary studies both in China and in the United States. He is the author of *Bridging the Pacific: Searching for Cross-Cultural Understanding between the United States and China*, a collection of original essays (English edition by China Books, Inc., San Francisco, 2000; Chinese edition by Henan People's Press, 1999). He has also authored four other books: *Voices in Tragic Harmony: Essays on Thomas Hardy's Fiction and Poetry* (coauthor, 2001), *Success in Advanced English Writing: A Comprehensive Guide* (2000), *Western Writing Theories, Pedagogies, and Practice*, and *New Century Guide to Practical English Communication* (2000; all by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press). In addition, he has published two translations: Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1994) and *The Well-Beloved* (1998; both by Yiling Press). A professor of English at Western Connecticut State University, Dr. Qi has taught both graduate and undergraduate creative nonfiction classes. He lives with his family in central Connecticut.

编者简介

编者是美国西康州州立大学英语教授,曾在美国和国内数家期刊和报纸上发表过多篇中、英文作品,包括文学评论、随笔、社会评论、客座专栏和短篇小说等。已经出版的主要著作有文学评论集《回应悲剧缪斯的呼唤:托马斯·哈代小说和诗歌研究文集》(合著,2001年)、英文版文集《超越太平洋》(2000年)、中文版《超越太平洋》(1999年)、英文版《高级英文写作指南》(2000年)、专著《西方写作理论、教学和实践》(2000年)、《新世纪实用英语交际指南》(2000年),以及经典小说翻译《意中人》(1998年)和《一双蓝蓝的眼睛》(合译,1994年)等。

编者序

Essay 的中译一般为论文、散文、随笔、小品文等,大概是因为在英语中其概念的內涵和外延都有些朦胧模糊的缘故,也许这也正是其魅力的所在。

本集冠之以《当代美国散文精选》。需要说明的是,这里的“散文”不是汉语中狭义的抒情或叙事散文,而是一个涵盖比较灵活宽松的概念或写作样式。收集在这里的“散文”几乎每一篇都有叙事,都有抒情,有写头发、午睡等琐碎小事的,也有写以色列和巴勒斯坦冲突之国际争端的,风格有庄亦有谐,但其共同点是对自己、对人生、对世界的坦诚的、勇敢的感觉和思考并把感觉和思考真真实实地袒露给读者。编者以为这是“散文”的灵魂所在。没有切肤的感觉,没有深邃的思考,没有勇敢的袒露,文笔再优美,也只能是稍稍好听些的“无病呻吟”罢了。

再需要说明的是“精选”二字。所有收在这里的“散文”都在其发表的当年荣获“Best Essay of the Year”的荣誉,仅此就足以说明它们为什么会出现这个集子里。细心的读者只要翻一下目录,发现 Saul Bellow 和 Joyce Carol Oates 等名字,就知道云集在这里的几乎都是驰骋当代美国文坛的大手笔了。另外,几乎所有的“散文”都是 20 世纪 90 年代以后发表的,是再“当代”不过的了。

编者为每一篇“散文”提供了作者简况、简评(或赏析)和注释等,以助读者阅读欣赏。简评或赏析算是编者阅读的点滴感受或心得,所注则是国内一般工具书中不易查找的涉及当代美国社会文化生活的词句或表达方式。读者在阅读、欣赏中有什么感受、心得,可以通过电子邮件与编者交流。

承蒙上海外语教育出版社社长庄智象教授信任,约我编这么个集子,现在算是交卷了。愿这个集子对国内读者了解当今美国社会、揣摩高层次的英语写作有所裨益。

Introduction

I do not recall exactly when I began to learn to read and write, but I remember clearly the first writing lesson I took with a middle school (junior high, to be more exact) Chinese language teacher.

It was fall 1970 and the storm of the Cultural Revolution was still raging in its full sound and fury. Mr. Xu Jiye, the Chinese teacher, was in his early 40s. Well groomed and his abundance of rich black hair always combed all the way back, he had a gentlemanly aura which was quite rare during those days. When he walked, you could feel his hair bouncing rhythmically on his big head. As a teenager wondering around with a confused identity and a head of untamed hair, which I felt hugged my scalp a bit too intimately for my comfort, I envied my teacher for having so stylish a hairstyle. Mr. Xu's stained teeth and the tanned (or burnt) tips and nails of the index and middle fingers of his right hand bore lethal evidence of excessive consumption of nicotine. Perhaps he had developed a liking for or dependence on the tobacco while hunting for new fossils in wild deserts and deep mountains. A fall from a misstep had forced him to quit what he loved to do as a geologist and to settle for a spot in front of a rugged blackboard in the dilapidated classrooms of a suburban middle school.

It was not the best time for anyone to be a teacher of anything. It was even worse for anyone to be a teacher of Chinese during those days. There was only one book to teach from and there wasn't much to teach anyway. Mr. Xu, however, seemed to have his own ideas of how to awaken, in the dormant minds of the 30-some kids in his care, the innate desire to learn and to acquire an ability to appreciate the beauty and power of language. He didn't follow to the letter the "teaching plan" sanctioned by the school's administration, the so-called "Revolutionary Committee". Now and then he would stray away from the "plan" and smuggle in a piece or two from banned

classics such as *Best Essays from Antiquity* (*Gu Wen Guan Zhi*) or a few of the best-known poems by Li Bai and Du Fu. The way he read aloud the poems, with such cadence, in such a singsong manner, his head of rich black hair swaying left and right, back and forth, to harmonize with the flow of the verse lines, was quite pleasant to both my ear and my eye.

The topic for our first composition, or essay if I may use the term loosely, was "Study for the Revolution". What other topics would you expect a teacher to assign his students back then? It didn't take me too long to dash off something which I thought did justice to the assignment and to my literary prowess.

The essay began with something grand and oratorical to the effect that the five continents and four oceans of the world were dancing rapturously with the good tidings of the Revolution, which was followed by something to the effect that the nine million sixty thousand square kilometers of our motherland was shining and shimmering with seas of red flags waving high and low and everywhere in gusty winds, which in turn was followed by a declaration to the effect that we, the Chinese people, were the happiest and the luckiest in the world and were determined to carry the Revolution from victory to greater victory, which was followed by announcements of good tidings pertinent to my province, my city, and my municipal district before it wound down to a statement that we the young pupils should study hard for the revolution.

After handing back all the essays at the end of class two days later, Mr. Xu got me to the teachers' office, a small room with a few simple wood desks lined against the walls. "Look, I'm not so sure of this continents and oceans business," he said quietly, pointing at the opening paragraph of my masterpiece with his burnt index finger, "I'd prefer to see the mountain right after opening the door"

Crestfallen, I took back my essay and went about cutting the continents and oceans which was blocking the view of the mountain. The next day I showed the revised piece to Mr. Xu, who glanced it through in one second, nodded his bouncing hair once or twice, and

mumbled something like “Better, but I still can’t see the mountain clearly yet.” I went back and went about cutting and trimming again until all the continents, oceans, flags, and anything else blocking the view, were completely removed. A fourth or fifth draft later, I emerged with an unpretentious introduction which didn’t fuss much before reaching the statement of studying for the revolution, which was supported by a brief discussion of three or four reasons, which in turn was followed by a line or two as conclusion.

“What’s the big deal!?” younger readers of this collection might dismiss the whole episode with a contemptuous laugh. Back then, however, it must have taken lots of guts for Mr. Xu to have even dared to suggest dumping those “politically correct” sacred lines in one of his students’ essays. Indeed, I suspect that his being transferred to another school a year later had something to do with his “petty-bourgeois sentiments” as manifested in his unorthodox approach to teaching. Otherwise, his well-groomed bouncing hair must have been the culprit.

But he had already made a difference. During my freshman year in high school, when the administration announced its decision to ax science classes from the curriculum due to budgetary difficulties, I used the newly acquired language power to write up a wall poster urging the administration to reconsider because China needed science education. The poster caused quite a stir and for days important looking people came swarming down to see it and try to figure out what was behind this daredevil move from a usually quiet boy. The result? Our science classes were saved from the guillotine at the last minute.

I have never seen Mr. Xu again, but that first lesson in essay writing burnt deep into the memory of a curious and impressionable young boy. In a way, Mr. Xu has taught me all there is to know about essay writing with only one lesson.

What is an essay, anyway? The word essay in its Latin origin means “to weigh out”, “to try”, “to make an attempt”. Which means writing an essay is quite an emotional as well as intellectual endeavor. It tests one’s guts to be honest with oneself and to be hon-

est with the world at large. It means numerous visioning and re-visioning and it produces results and consequences. It reflects who you are, politically, emotionally, as well as intellectually. The essay is the man (or the person).

Technically, any decent dictionary, Webster or American Heritage, would define the essay along the lines of it being a “short literary composition on a single subject, usually presenting the personal view of the author”. Beyond that, there is not much to go by.

In the literary history of Western civilizations, essays as “brief prose discussions” can be found in classical Greek and Latin Literature. During the European Renaissance, the essay began to evolve from the formal philosophical and academic discourse to more flexible and personal musings. As exemplified by the writings of Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), the essays became rather “personal, tentative, highly digressive, and wholly unsystematic” in their approach to a topic. Moving on to the 18th and 19th century England, students of English literature are likely to encounter prose writings by Thomas Addison (1672–1719), Richard Steele (1672–1729), William Hazlitt (1778–1830), etc., referred to as “periodical”, “informal”, or “familiar essays”.

Today, essays are an important part of the political, social, cultural, and economic life of the people all over the world. They are in newspapers, magazines, online publications, collections, and anthologies. It’s one of the most used modes of discourse whereby people express their feelings and thoughts on a whole range of subjects.

Some writers and scholars would like to differentiate between essays and articles. They explain that while both are literary compositions on a single topic, the difference between them is that the article is usually concerned with a timely topic, or about something of “current interest” while the essay is very flexible with subject, theme, organization, and point of view; the article usually stays close to the facts, rarely strays away from “the point” while the essay tends to be personal, reflective, and leisurely. Such a fine distinction may be of interest in scholarly discussions. In everyday

practice, however, it may not be that crucial.

Many of the essays collected here can be called creative nonfiction, another term that is closely associated with the essay and that has come into fashion only recently. A very inclusive term, creative nonfiction can range from memoir, biography, lyric and personal essay to meditation and nature writing. Such writings are “nonfiction” because they are factual in nature, i. e., the people, place, and events described in the writings have to be true. On the other hand, such writings are “creative” because they employ almost all the techniques usually associated with fictional writings: dialogue, scene description, figurative language, etc. To many people, creative nonfiction has been firmly established as the fourth genre, after poetry, fiction, and drama.

A personal essay assignment given to a “creative writing class” I taught recently may illustrate this new creative nonfiction concept:

In this essay, you are to write about yourself: i. e., speaking *in* the first-person singular *about* the first-person singular. As you have found out through your own writing experiences and reading, the essay is the perfect literary vehicle for both self-disclosure and self-discovery.

Of course, the first-person singular is not a simple equivalent of the self, a mere matter of slapping down the word “I” in front of every sentence. You have to decide your own level of comfort with being “intimate, candid, and revealing” about yourself.

What can you explore about yourself in this essay? Well, personal relationships, individual identities, and ethnic or racial heritages, among other things. And it’s better to focus on a single moment, a single event (it doesn’t have to be earth-shaking, though), or a single place: a drop of water which can reflect some truth (if not the whole universe) about yourself. Your essay should be “close to the pulse of” real human experi-

ence.

By that it means that stories need to be *true*, *believable*, *enlightening* as well as *artful* and *entertaining*. You can dance along the thin line between being truthful and being artful, using fictional techniques: plot, characterization, dialogue, scenes, episodes, and climax, etc. to reshape, reconstruct, or recreate real life experiences.

Ultimately, the writing needs to ring true, believable, and be fun to read!

As with the other essays you have written, the epiphany has to be earned (no easy conclusion with “I suddenly realized” and “It suddenly dawns on me that”).

The length? 5–7 pages.

Be creative and have fun!

The essays collected in this book have all been named among *Best American Essays* in the year it was published. Some of them are more reflective than narrative; some may be more pungent than the taste buds of many readers would like; some are more opaque and prove more difficult to penetrate than others. But they are all honest (sometimes brutally so), reflective, thought-provoking, delicious, and speak with a distinct personal voice. Penned by authors such as Saul Bellow and Joyce Carol Oates, they are indeed the best, or the gems of contemporary American essays.

For each of the essays selected, I have provided a brief bio of the author, a comment, and notes on terms, expressions, and allusions of a cultural or popular cultural nature which a reader in China may not be able to find references in regular dictionaries. I have tried to give a bit of “personal” touch in my comments of the essays, too. Indeed, to be true to the spirit of the essay as a genre, I have

written each of the comments as a mini-essay in itself.

I hope that reading these essays should be like taking an excursion into some of the most intellectually stimulating and aesthetically pleasing mindscapes of contemporary America.

Bon Voyage!

S. Qi

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Hair

Marcia Aldrich

I'VE BEEN AROUND and seen the Taj Mahal and the Grand Canyon and Marilyn Monroe's footprints outside Grauman's Chinese Theater,¹ but I've never seen my mother wash her own hair. After my mother married, she never washed her own hair again. As a girl and an unmarried woman — yes — but, in my lifetime, she never washed her hair with her own two hands. Upon matrimony, she began weekly treks to the beauty salon where Julie washed and styled her hair. Her appointment on Fridays at two o'clock was never canceled or rescheduled; it was the bedrock of her week, around which she pivoted and planned. These two hours were indispensable to my mother's routine, to her sense of herself and what, as a woman, she should concern herself with — not to mention their being her primary source of information about all sorts of things she wouldn't otherwise come to know. With Julie my mother discussed momentous decisions concerning hair color and the advancement of age and what could be done about it, hair length and its effect upon maturity, when to perm and when not to perm, the need to proceed with caution when a woman desperately wanted a major change in her life like dumping her husband or sending back her newborn baby and the only change she could effect was a change in her hair. That was what Julie called a "dangerous time" in a woman's life. When my mother spoke to Julie, she spoke in conspiratorial, almost confessional, tones I had never heard before. Her voice was usually

tense, on guard, the laughter forced, but with Julie it dropped much lower, the timbre darker than the upper-register shrills sounded at home. And most remarkably, she listened to everything Julie said.

As a child I was puzzled by the way my mother's sense of self-worth and mood seemed dependent upon how she thought her hair looked, how the search for the perfect hair style never ended. Just as Mother seemed to like her latest color and cut, she began to agitate for a new look. The cut seemed to have become a melancholy testimony, in my mother's eyes, to time's inexorable passage. Her hair never stood in and of itself; it was always moored to a complex set of needs and desires her hair couldn't in itself satisfy. She wanted her hair to illuminate the relationship between herself and the idea of motion while appearing still, for example. My mother wanted her hair to be fashioned into an event with a complicated narrative past. However, the more my mother attempted to impose a hair style pulled from an idealized image of herself, the more the hair style seemed to be at odds with my mother. The more the hair style became substantial, the more the woman underneath was obscured. She'd riffle through women's magazines and stare for long dreamy hours at a particular woman's coiffure. Then she'd ask my father in an artificially casual voice: "How do you think I'd look with really short hair?" or "Would blonde become me?" My father never committed himself to an opinion. He had learned from long experience that no response he made could turn out well; anything he said would be used against him, if not in the immediate circumstances, down the line, for my mother never forgot anything anyone ever said about her hair. My father's refusal to engage the "hair question" irritated her.

So too, I was puzzled to see that unmarried women washed their own hair, and married women, in my mother's circle at least, by some unwritten dictum never touched their own hair. I began studying before and after photographs of my mother's friends. These photographs were all the same. In the pre-married mode, their hair was soft and unformed. After the wedding, the women's hair styles bore the stamp of property, looked constructed from

grooming talents not their own, hair styles I'd call produced, requiring constant upkeep and technique to sustain the considerable loft and rigidity — in short, the antithesis of anything I might naively call natural. This was hair no one touched, crushed, or ran fingers through. One poked and prodded various hair masses back into formation. This hair presented obstacles to embrace, the scent of the hair spray alone warded off man, child, and pests. I never saw my father stroke my mother's head. Children whimpered when my mother came home fresh from the salon with a potent do. Just when a woman's life was supposed to be opening out into daily affection, *the* sanctioned affection of husband and children, the women of my mother's circle encased themselves in a helmet of hair not unlike Medusa's.

In so-called middle age, my mother's hair never moved, never blew, never fell in her face: her hair became a museum piece. When she went to bed, she wore a blue net, and when she took short showers, short because, after all, she wasn't washing her hair and she was seldom dirty, she wore a blue plastic cap for the sake of preservation. From one appointment to the next, the only change her hair could be said to undergo was to become crestfallen. Taking extended vacations presented problems sufficiently troublesome to rule out countries where she feared no beauty parlors existed. In the beginning, my parents took overnights, then week jaunts, and thereby avoided the whole hair dilemma. Extending their vacations to two weeks was eventually managed by my mother applying more hair spray and sleeping sitting up. But after the two-week mark had been reached, she was forced to either return home or venture into an unfamiliar salon and subject herself to scrutiny, the kind of scrutiny that leaves no woman unscathed. Then she faced Julie's disapproval, for no matter how expensive and expert the salon, my mother's hair was to be lamented. Speaking just for myself, I had difficulty distinguishing Julie's cunning from the stranger's. In these years my mother's hair looked curled, teased, and sprayed into a waved tossed monument with holes poked through for glasses. She believed the damage done to her hair was tangible proof she had