

THE BEST

AMERICAN

ESSAYS

of the

CENTURY

JOYCE CAROL OATES

editor

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Foreword

The Essay in the Twentieth Century

When I was very young, my father purchased a small, uniform set of cheap literary classics. Why, I never knew. He was not a reader. Perhaps he had been duped by a door-to-door salesman. Perhaps he had aspirations for his children. The books crowded the only bookshelf in a cramped two-family house hedged in by humming factories on a narrow street that dead-ended into the mysterious and spectacular sumac-lined banks of the Passaic River in Paterson, New Jersey. As a result of his once-in-a-lifetime purchase I grew up with the privilege of knowing that Emerson was not merely the name of a television set.

I found Emerson's message bracing and liberating. I can see it now as self-help elevated to the highest literary standard, but reading "Self-Reliance" as an adolescent I simply took heart from his exhortations to resist conformity, trust in oneself, and not feel pressured by conventions, parties, and authority: "I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions," he said. "If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument," he said. "Insist on yourself; never imitate," he said. He warned about the physical pain of forced smiles and acknowledged the advantages of being misunderstood. If the writings of the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides comprised a *Guide for the Perplexed*, Emerson's essays provided a *Guide for the Intimidated*. His independent, freethinking, inquisitive mind shaped American thought and writing, and his spiritual heirs invented the twentieth-century essay.

Although Emerson may be said to hover over the volume, his presence can be detected more directly in one of his most prominent de-

scendants, William James. Although this selection of great American essays begins in 1901, one could argue that the symbolic origins of the twentieth-century essay go back to the day in 1842 when Emerson was invited by the James family to visit their New York apartment and "bless" young William in his cradle. As a teacher, lecturer, physician, scientist, and one of the founders of modern psychology, William James would exert a powerful influence over the new century. Two of his students, W.E.B. Du Bois and Gertrude Stein, would permanently alter the course of the American essay by initiating two new modes of literary introspection: Du Bois's "double-consciousness" grounded in racial identity and Stein's experiments with "stream of consciousness." Both originated in the critical first decade of the century, and their literary legacies can be felt throughout this collection.

The twentieth-century essay also emerged from a resistance to the "familiar" or "polite" essay that had been a literary staple of the preceding era. Proper, congenial, Anglophilic, the genteel essay survived, even against the skepticism and irascibility of the Mark Twains, Randolph Bourne, and H. L. Menckens, who did their best to bury it. By the 1930s, however, some writers were lamenting its demise, and in the most curious metaphors. "The familiar essay, that lavender-scented little old lady of literature, has passed away," one wrote, regretting that magazines now filled their pages with "crisp articles, blatant exposés, or statistic-laden surveys," and concluding that one day "her pale ghost will not appear at all, and the hard young sociologists can have her pages all to themselves." But the "pale ghost" did not vanish all at once. It lived on in college courses and gave the essay a bad name for decades. The goal of English teachers, the novelist Kurt Vonnegut recalls, was to get you "to write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago."

This collection features none of those "lavender-scented" essays, not even for historical reasons. Our object was not to construct a Museum of the American Essay. Although some vestiges of "gentility" or essayistic "leisure" may have seeped in here and there, the ruling idea behind the volume was that the essays should speak to the present, not merely represent the past. So you will find more "hard young sociologists" here than "cultivated" literati. After all, some of those young social scientists were Jane Addams, Zora Neale Hurston, and a youthful Saul Bellow, who happened to be studying sociology and anthropology at Northwestern at precisely the same time the genteel essayists were lamenting their own demise. The sociologists, accompanied by such self-taught social critics as Edmund Wilson, Richard Wright, and James Agee,

brought the essay out of the library and into the American factories, city streets, courthouses, and tenant farms. For many of them, ardent pacifists and reformers, writing essays would amount to what James called "the moral equivalent of war."

Malala (Unlike their predecessors, twentieth-century essayists were eager to confront inner as well as outer strife. To be sure, the genteel essay was personal, but no matter how "familiar," it always politely stopped short of full disclosure. Here, too, William James made his presence felt. The brilliant chapters "The Divided Self" and "The Sick Soul" in his monumental *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) would become a valuable resource for essayists seeking ways to articulate despair, breakdowns, aberrant states of consciousness, psychic confusion, the ineffable in general. F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous observation in "The Crack-Up" — "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" — laid out a course for future essayists and expanded the possibilities of self-disclosure. As writers began amplifying the personal essay into what is now known singularly as "the memoir," the processes of confession would know no limits.

What next? Will this new century reject our "best" essays as dramatically as the twentieth discarded those of James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes? The 1890s, too, saw astonishing changes in technology, rapid changes that frightened Henry Adams as he wondered what the "Law of Acceleration" would finally lead to. We have reached his speculative end point — visionary though he was, he never imagined a world transformed by electronics. The Internet is already generating new sources of essays. Will it somehow channel the usual processes of prose into new literary forms the way some thought the typewriter had once done? Will young essayists discover audiences without having to sweat through the hundreds of rejection slips James Thurber received before he could break into print? And will they do what few from any century have ever done: make a living writing essays? These remain to be seen, but what I think we can say for certain is that whatever new forms the essay takes, if they are wonderful, they will have the blessing of William James and his legitimate heirs.

About This Collection

This volume is not a "best of the best." I founded *The Best American Essays* series in 1986, and therefore Joyce Carol Oates and I had only a

small slice of the century to provide us with essays that had already achieved an annual "best" status. Only seven of the essays in this volume come from the series. We wish we could have included many more of the superb contemporary writers who have contributed to the yearly books, but it was of course not possible. Our consolation is that their work is still accessible to readers and that the annual books are for the most part available in libraries and bookstores. It was important that we include writers from previous generations who may not be well known to today's readers and who in our opinion still very much deserve an audience.

I proceeded with this book in much the same way that I have with the annual volumes. I screened a good number of essays — though far, far more than usual — and turned them over to Joyce Carol Oates for a final decision. There were hundreds of essays to consider and so little space. But we winnowed and winnowed and arrived at these fifty-five. We tried to include the best of as many different kinds of essay as possible — personal, critical, philosophical, humorous, pastoral, autobiographical, scientific, documentary, political. Obviously we had to pull back in many cases. A comparable volume could be assembled to showcase each one of these categories. I also exercised one final choice: I insisted that Oates's essay from *The Best American Essays 1996*, "They All Just Went Away," be included.

"Essays end up in books," Susan Sontag writes, "but they start their lives in magazines." That fact may not interest many readers, but it played a large role in the research for this book, since between an essay's debut in a periodical and its inclusion in a collection, a good deal of revision often occurs. Vladimir Nabokov's memoir of his father, for example, went through three very distinct publishing stages. It began life as "The Perfect Past" in *The New Yorker* in 1950, but Nabokov, dissatisfied with some of the editing, returned to his original typescript when he included (and expanded) it as the opening chapter of his 1951 autobiography, *Conclusive Evidence*. When he revised that book as *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* in 1966, he expanded the essay yet again. Of the three published versions, we chose — as we did with many of the selections — to reprint the final version, as it would reflect and respect the author's final decisions. But in some instances (consistency "is the hobgoblin of little minds," Emerson said), we selected the first or a different published version.

Some essays start out looking like essays only to reemerge in unexpected contexts. James Agee's lovely childhood reminiscence, "Knox-

ville: Summer of 1915," started out in *Partisan Review* in 1938 but was given a new twist when an editor cleverly borrowed and italicized it in 1957 to serve as the introduction to Agee's posthumously published novel, *A Death in the Family*. Other essays in this book were also put to service by their authors to introduce works of fiction: Richard Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" became the preface to his collection of stories *Uncle Tom's Children*, and N. Scott Momaday's "The Way to Rainy Mountain" now serves as the prologue to his popular novel of the same title.

I discovered that there is rarely only one version of an essay. Susan Sontag's useful observation sometimes gets reversed: an essay starts out in book form and ends up in a magazine. Several essays in this volume were skillfully carved out of books and re-created either by their authors or a magazine's editors as independent essays. Usually, what's required is the removal of the interstitial glue that connects a book's separate chapters. For example, the opening sections of Maya Angelou's 1970 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, were transformed into a memorable childhood reminiscence of the same title in *Harper's Magazine*.

Because essays may go through so many publishing variations, settling on a precise date for each selection was no easy matter. I proceeded largely case by case. Nabokov's 1966 essay on his father was so transformed from its 1950 origins that it seemed only reasonable to use the later date. So, too, I decided to use the final publication date for John Muir's Alaskan adventures with his unforgettable companion Stickeen; it was that version, and not the earlier and now forgotten essay, that became his most popular work. But occasionally I thought it would be misleading to use the final date of publication. Langston Hughes's "Bop," for example, clearly comes out of the forties; though it was revised considerably for subsequent book publication, to place it in a later decade would distort its contemporary flavor. An essay like Mark Twain's "Corn-pone Opinions," never published in the author's lifetime, is listed by date of composition.

For the reader's convenience, I have attached brief notes to each essay outlining its publishing history and supplying relevant contextual information. I have placed an asterisk before the source used for this collection. I have also translated foreign words and phrases within brackets when it seemed necessary. Additional information is contained in the Biographical Notes in the back of the book, where I included pertinent information on the writer's career, relevant details to establish a context

for the selected essay, and titles of books and collections (with the emphasis on nonfiction) that will direct interested readers to more books by that writer.

Writers and magazine editors interested in submitting published essays for the annual volumes should send complimentary issues, subscriptions, or appropriate material to Robert Atwan, Series Editor, The Best American Essays, Box 220, Readville, Massachusetts 02137-9998. Criteria and guidelines can be found in the annual book.

Acknowledgments

As I researched books and periodicals for this unprecedented volume, I often felt like Henry Adams, poised at the crossroads of two time periods: the rapidly accelerating age of cyberspace that instantly furnishes vast amounts of information and the old-fashioned era of dim library stacks and dusty, out-of-print books. The experience was both high-tech and low-tech. If it was satisfying to sit at my desk and click a few keys for immediate access to material that only a few years ago would have required frequent library visits, it was even more satisfying to hold in my hand hardcover first editions of books like Martin Luther King's *Why We Can't Wait* or H. L. Mencken's *Prejudices*. Even obtaining these books involved travel in both worlds: through the Internet I could enter my local library's regional network, discover books it didn't own, and conveniently order them online. A day or two later — and sometimes within hours — I would be experiencing the tactile and intellectual pleasures of handling some of the treasured pieces of our literary heritage. For their invaluable assistance, then, I want to thank especially the staff of the Milton Public Library as well as all the other institutions connected with the Old Colony Library Network in Massachusetts.

What I was unable to find, my researcher could. Much of the knottier research — establishing the original source or date of an essay, or tracking down an elusive periodical — was performed by Donna Ashley, who relied on the superb resources of the libraries at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University, Boston College, and the Boston Public Library. Nearly all of the source notes attached to each essay derive from her dogged research; without her assistance this project might have taken another year to complete. I want to thank, too, Arthur Johnson for his generous help in providing permissions data for all of the essays. I borrowed a good deal of biographical information about the essayists from some of my previous anthologies and

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