



The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015

Rebecca Skloot (Editor) , Tim Folger (Editor)

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The Best American Series

The next edition in a series praised as “undeniably exquisite” (Maria Popova), *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015* includes work from both award-winning writers and up-and-coming voices in the field. From Brooke Jarvis on deep-ocean mining to Elizabeth Kolbert on New Zealand’s unconventional conservation strategies, this is a group that celebrates the growing diversity in science and nature writing alike. Altogether, the writers honored in this year’s volume challenge us to consider the strains facing our planet and its many species, while never losing sight of the wonders we’re working to preserve for generations to come.

The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015 includes Sheri Fink, Atul Gawande, Leslie Jamison, Sam Kean, Seth Mnookin, Matthew Power, Michael Specter and others

REBECCA SKLOOT’s award-winning science writing has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* and elsewhere. Her book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller. It was named a best book of 2010 by more than sixty media outlets, including *Entertainment Weekly* and NPR, and by the National Academies of Science and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, among others. Skloot is currently writing a book about humans, animals, science, and ethics.

TIM FOLGER, series editor, is a contributing editor at *Discover* and writes about science for several magazines.

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**Download and Read Free Online The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015 Rebecca Skloot
(Editor) , Tim Folger (Editor)**

From Reader Review The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015 for online ebook

Peter Aronson says

Three and a half stars. Some good articles, but no physics or computer science or much hard science at all.

Shawn says

I don't consider myself to be a "science person", per se, but I've enjoyed reading this 'Best Of' series the past several years. Some collections are better than other, and within collections there are standout articles, and those easily forgotten. This grouping I found to have more of the "easily forgotten" than in years past. Though varied, the stories started to become indistinguishable from one another. I couldn't tell if this was because they were all similar, or because I'd lost interest in them for similar reasons. Oddly, the most powerful writing comes in two stories by the same author, Jourdan Imani Keith, and both are less than two pages long. She seemed to masterfully execute and understand what so many others in this collection did not -- the idea that less is more.

Chunyang Ding says

Absolutely wonderful anthology. I was glad to see many stories that explored curiosities and fascinations, instead of solely reporting on the very-important-but-often-depressing news of the ways humans are destroying the world. Of special note for me were The Empathy Exams by Leslie Jamison and Curious by Kim Todd.

Jeff says

I always enjoy the Best American Series and have spaced out the reading of the collection thru the year. With one more to go I should be just about done when Amazon sets them up in the bargain bin again in December.

A review of the articles in this collection includes

Waiting for Light which tells of how new technology and new marketing efforts are bringing, if not electricity, at least incandescent light to parts of India that have been living sunset to sunrise in the dark even now, in the 21st century.

In Deep is another excerpt from a New Yorker piece about Deep Caving that was featured in a different Best American series this year as well.

A Question of Corvids centers on that species of birds that includes crows, ravens, rooks, and Magpies. Much of the information focuses on the intelligence of crows which is something that has been featured in many media formats recently.

The Health Effects of a World Without Darkness is the first of the very strong articles. Going into the biology of our Circadian clocks and exploring how certain types of cancer are much more prevalent (when removing for all other factors) in people who work the overnight shift. An in depth study of the change to human biology from artificial light is needed to explore further. The effect on migratory birds and other members of the animal kingdom are also explored. After reading this red shifted lights become important to learn about.

Spotted Hyenas are featured in a short piece which tells of their violent nature and explores how they sometimes kill for nothing more than the joy of it. Their painful birth process, which is odd indeed is featured as well.

Life, Death, and Grim Routine Fill the Day at a Liberian Ebola Clinic is a featured New York Times article. It is self explanatory but is an excellent piece of writing.

Atul Gawande is one of the best medical writers around. An article from him from Slate titled No Risky Chances speaks to the authors common topic of how to best help our loved ones have the death experience that they want. Very well written and thoughtful.

Linux for Lettuce was a very interesting, as well as maddening article, that speaks to the issue of food and agricultural patents. We meet some academics who have run afoul of the giant food companies such as ConAgra and Monsanto who worry us about the future of food security.

Down by the River addresses the attempted regeneration of the extreme Southern section of the Colorado river. Focusing on the success story of the city of Yuma.

The title story of Leslie Jamison's " The Empathy Exams " was featured when her collection of stories was published. This story features the story of her experience as a medical actor at medical schools as well as her own experience with the health care system through her own abortion as well as heart surgery that no young person expects to have to go through.

The Deepest Dig is a story about Deep Sea Mining and it's coming importance. The dangers to the ocean is touched on as well, dangers that appear to be the potential equivalent of oil drilling near a pristine lake.

A story on Phineas Gage explores the most important person in the history of brain science research. As he survived a horrendous brain injury and thus was available to be studied by scientists no one case has taught us more about the different sections of the brain and their capabilities.

Two very short articles titled " At Risk " and " Desegregating the Wilderness " both center on the need for and the efforts to bring young people from the cities and people of color in general more in contact with the parks and nature areas of the country.

Into the Maelstrom is an article about the battle in the scientific community about one scientists theory of a change in the jet stream. Many of us became familiar with the term polar vortex over the last couple of winters and this article explains the theory that the the warming Arctic is changing the jet stream itself , especially how it moves weather systems across the continents. Many other scientists are in dispute of this idea and the battle has, at times, turned contentious.

The Big Kill was a story about New Zealand the countries efforts to rid itself of invasive species. As no mammals were native to the country this is an attempt to save the islands natural flora and fauna as well as the hundreds of birds which have been jeopardized by small rodents such as stoats and rats. This does not even address those, which are many, that are already gone permanently.

Digging Through the Worlds Oldest Graveyard centers on the efforts of archaeologists efforts in The Great Rift Valley in Ethiopia. I learned a lot and it is a marvel to see how much can be ascertained from the smallest bone fragment and how much effort it takes to extract these items. Again much of the article centers on a publicity hound scientist ruffling the feathers or his more stoic colleagues.

One of a Kind is a New Yorker article that introduces us to parents dealing with the terrible effects of unknown conditions on their children and their efforts to find others with the same symptoms which could, in theory lead to advances to help their children.

A Pioneer as Elusive as His Particle centers on Physicist Peter Higgs as his theory of the unknown particle labeled the Higgs Boson comes to fruition with experiments in the Hadron Collider. Some pretty heavy science here but very interesting.

Blood in the Sand was a great story about a sad subject, namely the ongoing battle between scientists and nature lovers to protect the breeding grounds of the huge leatherback sea turtles from the encroaching poachers who value the eggs as a way to support themselves. A fight that has actually turned deadly at times to not just the turtles.

Chasing Bayla is another story that follows a scientist trying to preserve an endangered species. Another species that finds man as the one who is threatening it. Right Whales have seen their numbers decimated by hunting but now their deaths often occur as a side effect of the huge fishing and lobstering industry in the East Coast. Known to feed with a their large mouth open they consistently get caught in wires, rope, and other hunting effluent and slowly over a period of months die from infection and or starvation. We follow a scientist who is trying to come up with a way to sedate the whales long enough to free them with mixed results

Partial Recall was published in the New Yorker and centers on the effort to find a way to reduce the effects of PTSD. Dealing with not the removal of bad memories but the different and new techniques to remove the traumatic feelings associated with said memories is, as one can imagine, a magnet for controversy.

The City and the Sea tells of the harm caused by Hurricane Sandy and the efforts by some to restore the oyster beds around NYC as a way to build a natural buffer to protect from storms.

The Aftershocks is the incredible story of how seismologists in Italy have been tried and convicted of manslaughter for not warning of an earthquake that destroyed a small Italian village and killed many. As one would expect scientists the world over are watching this story and hoping the appeal reverses what they feel would be an incredibly backwards precedent.

From Billions to None was one of many articles written recently about Passenger Pigeons and the short distance between when billions blacked the sky to the time period less than fifty years later in the early twentieth century when the last one died. Hunted to death, habitat destroyed, an incredibly tragic story.

Jeffrey says

I am really a sucker for nature essays. I have read this series most years since 2000. The books are curated magazine articles from the previous year (in this case 2014). I am not sure why I enjoy them more in book form than in the magazines. I think it is because I am more focused when presented as a book. In any case, I find these essays an excellent end of day meditation on the endlessly fascinating and rapidly changing developments in Science and the equally important impact on us humans. These essays are always a riot of ideas and opening each is like unwrapping Christmas gifts. This book's topics included rural solar lighting in India (cool!), light pollution, end of life care, plant patents (boo!), medical actors (who knew?) Phineas Gage and lots more. It took a while to read this one, though.

Jim says

I read a lot of science articles, but they're a tiny percentage of those available & the idea of a good science editor picking the very best is just too good to pass up. I originally came across it because the 2013 edition was edited by Mary Roach, a favorite author. A friend gave me this edition - a great place to start. I've heard of Skloot's book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, but haven't read it yet. I've heard good things, though. This also contains a piece by Atul Gawande who I've enjoyed reading.

- **Foreword** by Tim Folger - good intro.

- **Introduction** by Rebecca Skloot - long & didn't add much to Folger's foreword.

- **Waiting for light** by Jake Abrahamson - paints a great picture of the problem (lack of electric, especially light) in rural India & mentions several attempted solutions. The current one sounds interesting, but why should it work when so many others have failed? How does/could it apply other places? A science author must include the economic sustainability of the technology or it's just a pipe dream. This didn't, so it is a puff piece - whining. **1 star**

- **In deep** by Burkhard Bilger - is about caving. Wow! I've read some about it before, but never has the entirety been captured so well: the people, the challenges, types of caves, equipment, & more. This has it all including antibacterial underwear & the dangers of fungus. Wow! Fantastic. **5 stars**

- **A question of corvids** by Sheila Webster Boneham - is a wandering look at the crow family. Fun, almost poetic. **3 stars**

- **The health effects of a world without darkness** by Rebecca Boyle - doesn't have a lot of hard data, but there isn't a lot apparently. Artificial light has caused changes & some aren't good. I wasn't thrilled with the overtones that the changes, unless otherwise specified, were bad, though. **3 stars**

- **Spotted hyena** by Alison Hawthorne Deming - was very short & still managed to wander aimlessly. Still, it was interesting. **3 stars**

- **Life, death, and grim routine fill the day at a Liberian ebola clinic** by Sheri Fink - was exactly that. Nothing particularly shocking or new. **2 stars**

- **No risky chances** by Atul Gawande - is a bit from his book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, a 5 star book. This piece is it in a nutshell. **5 stars**

- **Linux for lettuce** by Lisa M. Hamilton - covers the issues around patenting seeds. This is not a simple subject & there seems to be no good solution or compromise. The idea of using the Creative Commons (best known for computer Open Source code like Linux) licensing model to create a harbor for seed sharing outside the commercial sector is both. Excellent, if a bit too long. **4 stars**

- **Down by the river** by Rowan Jacobsen - is about the restoration of the native ecology along the Colorado river near Yuma. Wow!!! What a great success story. **5 stars**

- **The empathy exams : a medical actor writes her own script** by Leslie Jamison - had an interesting premise. I don't care for the style in which it was written. There were a few good points, but they were overshadowed by a lot of dreck. **2 stars**

- **The deepest dig** by Brooke Jarvis - very interesting piece about the deep ecosystem, how we're going to start mining it, & what it means to some of those nearby. I wanted more. **4 stars**

- **Phineas Gage, neuroscience's most famous patient** by Sam Kean - Interesting how one case can be so influential & yet have so few verifiable facts. There are several themes running through this. Well worth reading even though I wasn't particularly interested in the case itself. **4 stars**

- **At risk** by Jourdan Imani Keith - is about minorities in the wilderness. It's a good side of the story to read about, although her effort didn't impress me. It was short, though. **3 stars**

- **Desegregating wilderness** by Jourdan Imani Keith - didn't convince me. I understand her concerns (She's black, female, & originally from the city.) & feels white men are keeping the wilderness for themselves. I think she's right in wanting to integrate more wilderness into the cities, but I don't think any specific sex or race is to blame for not doing it. I'd love it if city people understood the wilderness & country life better. I'm disappointed that she's using her ideals to blame rather than solve in this piece. She does work hard to solve by taking kids out to camp & work in the woods in real life. I guess she does better than she writes, at least to me. **2 stars**

- **Into the maelstrom** by Eli Kintisch - was an interesting look at the scientific community grappling with one small aspect of climate change. It also shows how the popular story can change when politics gets involved. Well worth reading. **4 stars**

- **The big kill** by Elizabeth Kolbert - is about New Zealand's fight with mammals, their determination to exterminate them, & why. I thought our problems with invasive species were bad. Oy! Losing my ash trees, fighting with Japanese honeysuckle, garlic mustard, & multiflora rose are nothing compared to what they're dealing with. **5 stars**

- **Digging through the world's oldest graveyard** by Amy Maxmen - is an interesting look at the trials of archaeology. It also pushes getting the locals involved. **4 stars**

- **One of a kind** by Seth Mnookin - the power of social networking meets the genome project to figure out unique diseases. Unfortunately, it's not a miracle cure & seems to take a lot of money & stature to work it. **3 stars**

- **A pioneer as elusive as his particle** by Dennis Overbye - is an interesting look at Higgs. **3 stars**

- **Blood in the sand** by Matthew Power - conservationism isn't for wimps. This discusses the murder of one guy who tried to save leatherback turtles in Costa Rica. The economic pressures are terrible, though. **4 stars**

- **Chasing Bayla** by Sarah Schweitzer - is about the plight of whales mainly focusing on one man rescuing them from rope. Awful! **4 stars**

- **Partial recall** by Michael Specter - memory is very slippery as are the ethics surrounding healing it. **4 stars**

- **The city and the sea** by Meera Subramanian - is NYC dealing with rising waters & storms, using nature to help stave off issues like hurricane Sandy while cleaning up the environment at the same time. **4 stars**

- **Curious** by Kim Todd - what is curiosity & why does it grip us so tightly sometimes? Not enough science. **3 stars**

- **The aftershocks** by David Wolman - is about Italian scientists being criminally prosecuted for not properly warning people about earthquakes and brings up several important points from misunderstandings (scientists to reporters to population) to expectations. We can't predict earthquakes, yet still the Italian courts convicted scientists of not warning people properly. Yeah, you really need to read this - the dangers of Sunday Supplement science & the general idiocy of our litigious society. **4 stars**

- **From billions to none** by Barry Yeoman - discusses the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon, a fairly well documented case that helped kick off our society's interest in conservation. It was good, but a little too one-sided for me. It briefly mentions a town covered in excrement from the passage of one flock & how they stripped fields, but glosses over these facts while concentrating on how men destroyed them out of greed. **4 stars**

Overall, this was a very readable collection. I'm looking forward to getting others in the series eventually.

Valerie says

As usual, a reliable book to read to catch up on science news I would otherwise miss! Climate change, endangered animals, evolution, invasive plants in New Zealand. The rich variety of great reading about fascinating topics is enlightening and educational.

Andy Kristensen says

This book was a rather pleasant surprise- when I first started reading it, I was under the impression that it would be full of dry, dense, and heavily-detailed essays about obscure scientific topics that had little in the way of interesting topics. Instead, many of the articles and essays in this collection are ten times better than the essays found in the annual "Best American Essays" collection. Definitely looking forward to reading the 2016 edition of this series.

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Anthology season is one of my favorite times of year. It's not just the Best American Series -- there are other collections such as The Best Food Writing, The Best American Magazine Writing, Best Business Writing. And there are anthologies that only last a few years and then disappear such as Best Music Writing, Best Medical Writing, and so on.

I've enjoyed the Best American Series for decades, and my favorite is almost always the Best American Essays volume. But lately I've also been looking forward to the Best American Science and Nature Writing.

This year's collection is guest edited by Rebecca Skloot, author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. It's heavy on natural sciences and light on physical sciences -- no chemistry, physics, or math here. It touches on astronomy only in passing, in an article about how artificial light is affecting our ability to see the stars (among other things), and a profile of Peter Higgs of Boson fame.

That leaves a lot of room for essays about wildlife, including a fascinating article about crows and other corvids, the spotted hyena, a whale, and more. There are also essays about exploration of deep caves, fossil hunting in Ethiopia, the extinction of passenger pigeons, and a particularly captivating story about open-source seeds as a response to the patenting of some varieties of plants.

My favorites were Atul Gawande's thoughts on the doctor's role in end-of-life care, Michael Specter's essay on the mysteries of memory and forgetting, and Sam Kean's original take on an old topic -- that of Phineas Gage, the man who survived a steel rod through the brain in 1848 with no effects, minor effects, or major effects, depending on who's telling the story.

Alex says

I was disappointed. The books from this series which I have read before had a much stronger focus on explaining scientific facts. This edition seemed to me much more focused on human interest stories, not really explaining complex scientific observations and theories. There were a number of articles in this book which mostly were concerned about the feelings of the author or the protagonists.

Jude Bee says

In sharp contrast to the 2014 anthology, which gave sober and much needed critical attention to the pressing issues in the world today, with emphasis on the most pressing -- though perhaps most depressing as well -- issue of them all (climate change), Ms Skloot's edition is determinately light, uplifting, and fluffy, adjectives not quite becoming when it comes to scientific writing. Early in her Foreword, Ms Skloot puts her foot down squarely, by quoting from an email by a reader:

'It seems to me that content (of the series) has become darker and less hopeful over this time... When I marvel at what telescopes have seen... I get giddy. I suppose I would just like to see a bit more wonder -- a bit more magic -- in the content and less doom and gloom.'

It does seem Ms Skloot stands by her foot, or rather, squarely on it, the foot that has been boldly thrust forth thus. In this volume you will find magic, wonder, giddy-worthy account of third-world children awe-struck in electric light brought by modern technology and uppity entrepreneurship. Human ingenuity, in that universal form called Human Adaptive Optimism ('The Collapse of Western Civilization', Oreskes & Conway), once again triumphs, over dark and menacing Reality.

On paper, that is.

Dan Martin says

Okay, so as always, I love this annual collection. And there were some excellent essays in this year's group. 'The Empathy Exams' is at the top of my list for must reads, and as a result, I'll be picking up the self-titled book soon. However, this year's collection felt disjointed to me. It seems that in years past, there's a theme that arcs through the book. This year it was harder to detect, if at all.

That said, this is by far my favorite collection to read every year, I'm forever surprised by the stories and find myself wanting to know more. So bravo the the editors for sifting through the thousands of essays that get whittled down to the two dozen or so that make the cut.

Angela says

Unfortunately this was a meh collection. It ran heavy on eco and nature, lighter on hard science. The only physics essay (that I can recall) was a bio-essay on Higgs (of particle fame). Even that article felt thin. Nothing on computers or jiggery pokery Internettery, alas.

At its best, this series has blown my mind and opened up my horizons. At its worst (and this 2015 edition was pretty bad), it's just OK. I mean, it's never been BAD. But the disappointment of non-inspiration can be acute. Oh well, obviously I'll read all the other editions I can get my hands on, and I recommend you do too. :)

Joy Wilson says

Excellent science articles from across the board

I really enjoyed reading this collections due to its wide range of excellent articles. As a science teacher I enjoy writing that enlightens and inspires and this collection certainly does both of those well. I will consider getting each yearly edition to have timely articles for my students and myself to read, discuss, and digest.

Meera Subramanian says

Can't go wrong with this series.
