



The Best American Essays 2015

Ariel Levy (Editor) , Robert Atwan (Editor) , Mark Jacobson (Contributor) , Zadie Smith (Contributor) , Roger Angell (Contributor) , Kendra Atleework (Contributor) , Anthony Doerr (Contributor) , Margo Jefferson (Contributor) , more... Philip Kennicott (Contributor) , David Sedaris (Contributor) , Tim Kreider (Contributor) , Kate Lebo (Contributor) , Rebecca Solnit (Contributor) , Cheryl Strayed (Contributor) , Kelly Sundberg (Contributor) , Malcolm Gladwell (Contributor) , Meghan Daum (Contributor) , Tiffany Briere (Contributor) , Isaiah Berlin (Contributor) , John Reed (Contributor) ...less

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“Writing an essay is like catching a wave,” posits guest editor Ariel Levy. “To catch a wave, you need skill and nerve, not just moving water.” This year’s writers are certainly full of nerve, and have crafted a wide range of pieces awash in a diversity of moods, voices, and stances. Leaving an abusive marriage, parting with a younger self, losing your sanity to Fitbit, and even saying goodbye to a beloved pair of pants imbued with meaning are all unified by the daring of their creation. As Levy notes, “Writing around an idea you think is worthwhile—an idea you suspect is an insight—requires real audacity.”

The Best American Essays 2015 includes

Hilton Als, Roger Angell, Justin Cronin, Meghan Daum, Anthony Doerr, Margo Jefferson, David Sedaris, Zadie Smith, Rebecca Solnit *and others*

ARIEL LEVY, guest editor, has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2008. She received the National Magazine Award for essays and criticism for her piece “Thanksgiving in Mongolia,” which she is expanding into a book for Random House. *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy’s first book, has been translated into seven languages. She teaches at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and at Wesleyan University.

ROBERT ATWAN, the series editor of *The Best American Essays* since its inception in 1986, has published on a wide variety of subjects, from American advertising and early photography to ancient divination and Shakespeare. His criticism, essays, humor, poetry, and fiction have appeared in numerous periodicals nationwide.

The Best American Essays 2015 Details

Date : Published October 6th 2015 by Mariner Books

ISBN : 9780544569621

Ariel Levy (Editor) , Robert Atwan (Editor) , Mark Jacobson (Contributor) , Zadie Smith (Contributor) , Roger Angell (Contributor) , Kendra Atleework (Contributor) , Anthony Doerr (Contributor) , Margo Jefferson (Contributor) , more... Philip Kennicott (Contributor) , David Sedaris (Contributor) , Tim Kreider (Contributor) , Kate Lebo (Contributor) , Rebecca Solnit (Contributor) , Cheryl Strayed (Contributor) , Kelly Sundberg (Contributor) , Malcolm Gladwell (Contributor) , Meghan Daum (Contributor) , Tiffany Briere (Contributor) , Isaiah Berlin (Contributor) , John Reed (Contributor) ...less

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Writing, Essays, Nonfiction, Anthologies, Short Stories

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From Reader Review The Best American Essays 2015 for online ebook

Kelly Chastain says

There are some absolute gems in this one!

El says

The best thing that came out of my first semester of grad school was being asked to read one of these *Best American Essays* anthologies. Now I'm sort of hooked. Now I'm that person who sits around in coffee shops with a big mug of something yummy and a sweet treat on the side looking all literary and stuff while reading these collections. The best part is I have so many left to read since I'm getting into this game exceptionally late. And I'm not, for once, being weird about it - when I find a copy, I'll pick it up. Normal-me would have to go back to the very inception and read them all in publication order... but that's bananas in this case.

This was the second book I took along with me to Ireland, figuring it would be great to have for those late nights when I can't just fall asleep but need a little something to help me doze off. It turned out exceptionally beneficial for that purpose, especially since my dorm room overlooked Doyle's Pub and, didja know pubs don't close in Dublin until 2:30 in the morning? And no one just goes right home, of course, there's a lot of lingering and brawling in the streets, so having an essay or two to dive into to keep me distracted was a fabulous choice.

Additionally, in my workshop we talked extensively about the ends of essays, and I mentioned this collection I was reading. My mentor asked me to copy a couple of endings and bring them in so we could look at them as a group, and the exercise was really helpful for all of us. (In case anyone is wondering, I brought in the endings to Kendra Atleework's *Charade* and Justin Cronin's *My Daughter and God*. The mentor enjoyed these so much that he wants to now read the collection, but they're hard to find in Ireland since, of course, these are *American* essays. Perhaps I'll mail him this copy.

I love the variety these anthologies provide. There's a number of skilled writers out there, and these collections give me a new batch of writers to keep an eye out for as their writing progresses, or introduces me to authors who have been around whom I have not yet read (like Cronin, for example). Others, like David Sedaris, are great in small doses just like his essay (a bit of an ode to his FitBit in *Stepping Out*) and I don't feel like I'm being inundated with any one voice. Lastly, since these essays are all taken from other literary magazines, I can find new publications worth checking out.

My mentor pointed out in the two weeks we were together that writing essays or creative nonfiction requires dishing dirt on someone. I hadn't considered it that way, per se, but some of these essays rang true in that regard, such as John Reed's *My Grandma the Poisoner* which is about, yes, just what he says in the title. If that's not dishing on someone, I don't know what is.

Since my mentor wants me to focus on writing essays (rather than the travel memoir I was writing since my ideas for that are much too vast and ambitious for the amount of time I have in the program), keeping these collections on hand is important. There are so many things I can do with essays, so much to say. I'll try not to dish on any of you, but don't piss me off.

Thanks, collection of 2015, for being such a good travel partner to Dublin.

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Each year's collection is a bit of a gamble. Sometimes there are only a few essays that connect, other years it's a jackpot. This year is closer to the jackpot end of the spectrum. Guest editor Ariel Levy tosses in a few sure bets -- Malcolm Gladwell and David Sedaris. The essay by Roger Angell about being old, which also appears in the forthcoming Best American Magazine Writing of 2015, is worth reading more than once, if you already saw it in The New Yorker.

If there's a theme to this bunch of essay, it's to do with life transitions. Getting old, becoming or not becoming a parent, beginning or ending a relationship. Not all of the essays fit into even this broad topic, and there are serious pieces, light-hearted articles, and hard-to-categorize essays. Some don't even seem like essays at all.

I especially liked Megham Daum's reflections on parenthood and Justin Cronin's essay on getting older and more dependent as his daughter grows into adulthood and independence. The final essay by Kelly Sundberg is a powerful telling of her marriage to a man who beat her. If you or anyone you know wonder why a woman wouldn't just leave such a relationship, read this and you may have a better understanding of how it isn't a simple decision. She doesn't excuse anyone and she did finally leave him, but you get a glimpse of the thinking behind what seems to many a mystifying decision.

Billie Pritchett says

I'll do my best to recall as many of *The Best American Essays 2015* as possible but I won't be able to, because I read them over an extended period, particularly one long period between essays and then I got back to this collection. Before I get into the essays, I would like to say that I've discovered just how every year's essays really does bear the mark of the editor. This year's editor was Ariel Levy, an incredible author in her own right, and she has made quite a good compendium here. Here are some of the more memorable ones.

Isaiah Berlin's "A Message to the Twenty-First Century" is a call for modesty in politics. I don't agree with all his points but in general there's something to take away here, namely that every large-scale measure involves tradeoffs, that certain liberties interfere with some cases of equality, and that it is very difficult to strike a balance here. Again, a call for modesty.

Margo Jefferson's "Scenes from a Life in Negroland" has since, I believe, been made into a book, *Negroland*. She writes of the difficulties of growing up a rich black girl in a neighborhood and a world largely dominated by whites. Particularly difficult is the kind of proprieties her wealthy black family must observe because the family as well as other white people are always looking out suspiciously for the black family to 'slip,' to associate with poor black people, who are so often demeaned, a world of contradictions.

Tim Kreider's "A Man and His Cat" is about him and his cat. Kreider essays are always awesome. Read them any chance you get. Fluffy or not, they're always perceptive.

John Reed's "My Grandma the Poisoner" is a great essay about Reed's grandmother perhaps poisoning her relatives' food incrementally and intentionally, and perhaps poisoning animals, always getting away with it, up until the end.

David Sedaris's "Stepping Out" is a tale of Sedaris's obsession with Fit-Bit, which both gets him into walking and discovering new ways to engage with the world, but also making him obsess over his dependency on this device.

Cheryl Strayed's "My Uniform" is a touching, if occasionally ribald, story about a pair of workout clothes that her husband teased her about, but which has special significance for the two of them.

And that's all I can remember offhand just by looking at the titles.

Mark Patton says

Every year, I read both The Best American Essays and The Best American Short Stories cover to cover and always am impressed by many of the works included. The essays, as usual, range from the humorous to the heartfelt, the political to the social, the surprising to the mundane. Recommended yearly reading!

Side note: I didn't discover that I hadn't read the 2015 volumes until I purchased the 2016 volumes and added them to my to-read pile. I'm not sure if this says something about me or about the size and disarray of the pile.

Iva says

As usual, these essays were exceptional examples of creative non-fiction and personal essays. Though many came from easy-to-find sources (The New Yorker, New York Times Magazine, etc.), small literary journals were represented as well. The strength came from a variety of subject matter and many were heart-wrenching as well as reflective. I look forward to 2016's collection.

Alexander Kot says

Nowhere near my casual fare but it fell into my lap. Admittedly I have next to zero experience with essays but I did enjoy this book for how varied the subjects were, albeit I'm 3 years tardy. If novels and compilations of short stories start to wear you down give one of these a try.

Kate Alleman says

So many feels reading this book!! Kate Lebo's "The Loudproof Room" was simply astounding. I loved her final paragraph: "Disability can create sensibility. My disability is invisible, my limitations are aesthetic. They make art and they make mistakes, reminding me constantly that the way I sense and experience the world is different. At a slight angle, as Forster said of Cavafy. Which is a reminder that difference isn't unique to me. That's why listening creates a conversation. That's how reading creates a poem. It's terrifying to lose your senses. Then, sometimes, it's a pleasure."

I also loved Roger Angell's "This Old Man." When I was studying Art History in undergrad, I tended to

gravitate towards themes on aging (the unideal, yet universal aspect). When he talks to his therapist that he doesn't know how he can continue on with this overwhelming sense of loss. He she responds with "Neither do I, but you will." That is so relevant to everyone's life. Nobody knows what joys and heartbreak lie around the corner, waiting for them, but they get through it.

Vince Darcangelo says

Faves:

Isaiah Berlin, "A Message to the Twenty-First Century"

Tim Kreider, "A Man and His Cat"

Kate Lebo, "The Loudproof Room"

John Reed, "My Grandma the Poisoner"

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Reflections on Indexing My Lynching Book"

Jacqueline Masumian says

This group of essays has *much* to offer. Many of them are personal essays, several of those having to do with old age or illness. But there is actually a wide variety in this collection, including humor and philosophical or political meditations. I particularly liked Meghan Daum's heartbreaking "Difference Maker," her story of attempting to mentor and be an advocate for needy children. Mark Jacobson's "65," in which he muses on the horror of turning that age, is another gem. And Anthony Doerr's "Things with Feathers..." tells the story of the early settlers of the first family home in Boise, Idaho; lyrical and thoughtful, it provides a glimpse into how history must be preserved in every way possible. Other high points: Sven Birkert's gorgeous imagery as he lies in bed recovering from surgery, and Ashraf Rushdy's painful and angry musings on indexing his book about lynching, and David Sedaris's funny story about becoming a slave to his Fitbit.

Actually, there are so many beautiful essays in this book, I cannot take time to name them all. But I highly recommend delving into this collection.

Julie Christine says

My first BAE! A trusted reader recommended the anthology and upon finishing I thought, "What took me so long to read one of these?" It's like having access to all those wonderful literary journals and magazines I can't afford, just there, on my nightstand, for my usual 3 a.m. open eyes.

So many of the names in this collection are familiar: Justin Cronin, Anthony Doerr, Malcolm Gladwell, Margo Jefferson, Kate Lebo, David Sedaris, Zadie Smith, Rebecca Solnit, Cheryl Strayed that I wondered, "Did these marquee names really write the best American essays of 2015?, or do they remain marquee names because their writing is just that good?" In a couple instances, I felt the writer's inclusion had more to do with attracting a certain demographic into reaching for an anthology of essays than it did with the actual quality of

the work.

But let's not worry about the few pieces I found forgettable. Because I've forgotten them already. Let's talk about the ones that made me tremble, laugh, cry, shake in outrage or wonder.

Aging seemed to be the only theme uniting some of these essays, and editor Ariel Levy cites the prevalence of essays on growing old published in the American essay canon this past year. Roger Angell wrote *This Old Man* at the remarkable milestone of ninety-three (I say "milestone" because I reckon each year over ninety deserves to be lauded). Sven Birkerts convalesces in *Strange Days*. Mark Jacobson looks at 65 and realizes he's reached a true milestone when the world deems him "old".

But the one that got to me, the one I could read over and over, the one I'd read at a slumber party, if I wasn't too old for slumber parties, is John Reed's ohmygodohmygodohmygod *My Grandma the Poisoner*. Yeah, it's about an old woman, but she wasn't always old. Question is, why didn't anyone notice she was always evil? Brrr... chilling. Unputdownable.

Despite the emphasis on aging and bodies broken down by time, it is the work of two younger writers that stopped me in my tracks. Kendra Atleework's *Charade* cries out to be a full-length work. Her writing is stunning. Raw. This is a true story, but I ache to read the rest, either as a novel, or in memoir form. Watch this writer. You will see her again. Kelly Sundberg's essay about her perfect marriage-turned-horror-show of abuse, *It Will Look Like a Sunset* is a perfect example of how the most intelligent, perceptive, strong people can lose their way, can be detoured by fear, manipulation, shame, and guilt. It is an exceptional piece of writing from yet another rising voice in creative non-fiction.

Anthony Doerr's meditation on one of the founding families of Boise, Idaho, *Thing with Feathers That Perches in the Soul*, is poignant and beautiful, as is most everything he writes. And then there is David Sedaris being utterly true to character, his usual unusual laugh-out-loud self, in *Stepping Out*.

Scenes for a Life in Negroland is one of my favorite pieces of this collection. Jefferson opens a window into her childhood, growing up in an upper-class Chicago neighborhood, the child of highly-educated, well-off parents.

We thought of ourselves as the Third Race, poised between the masses of Negroes and all class of Caucasians. Like the Third Eye, the Third Race possessed a wisdom, intuition, and enlightened knowledge the other two races lacked.

It's at first a fascinating, then a shattering, look at racial culture and racism in years leading up to the Civil Rights movement of the early 60s.

Philip Kennicott and Kate Lebo explore a different type of identity, in *Smuggler* and *The Loudproof Room*, respectively. Kennicott recalls encountering same-sex desire in literature and finding at last a common narrative to help shape and define his own feelings; Lebo's compromised hearing allows her to experience the world in ways she's not certain she's ready to give up to corrective surgery.

I end with the two pieces that took my breath away: Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's *Reflections on Indexing My Lynching Book* and Rebecca Solnit's *Arrival Gates*. Rushdy's piece speaks of past anguish that has caught up to our present, except that today we do not speak of lynchings, we hear instead the oft-repeated phrase, "police shooting of an unarmed black man", we see the statistics behind mass incarceration, we have to point out that Black Lives Matter, because Jim Crow still walks amongst us. Rushdy writes of his index, a listing of names—the names of the murdered, the murderers, those who fought to change the system and the culture; place names, dates—an alphabetical history of lynching in the United States.

... the index, the part with the least imaginative input ... contain a great deal of emotional energy that is probably not readily apparent to the reader.

It is a profound piece of writing.

I saved Solnit's essay for last, even though it is not the last in the BAE 2015, because: Rebecca Solnit. She does not disappoint. Solnit writes of traveling to Japan to see first-hand how the 2011 disaster trifecta has affected the country one year later and, in Solnit-style, this objective leads her into a journey of a different sort. She wanders through a park outside Kyoto and contemplates the representation of time, what we mean when we say "arrival" and how to be present with our own past and future. It's an essay I will return to, one that makes this particular volume a keeper in my personal library.

Nadia McDowell says

I read this book for a college English course, and frankly I was surprisingly satisfied with this read. Do not be discouraged from the title containing "Essays" and think this book is consisted of extensive dull writings, but rather the quite opposite. This book is composed of diverse essays, short enough for a quick read through actually. As I would recommend, if you are sensitive to subject matter containing abuse, or death, you might want to stray away from the first two essays-but it is not severe. The first essay is Kelly Sundberg's "It Will Look Like a Sunset" which details her suffering from the abuse of her husband Caleb, following the aftermath. The overwhelming emotions felt through the relationship clouded her decision in leaving him, she remained hopeful it would end for the sake of their son. Sundberg expressed that "Faith was what kept people together" (Sundberg 209) in her reasoning for staying with Caleb. The essay following: Kendra Atleework's "Charade" parallels with this theme as well, in terms of self-actualization and resilience through hardships. This essay tells of the 16 year old coping with the death of her mother lost to cancer. Kendra uses the emotional attachment of her best friend to fill the void of loneliness. This read was a little more sad in my opinion, but still worth it to understand the grief people experience, as I have not myself. The rest of the book contains essays with themes surrounding culture, such as assimilation and spiritual understanding. This gives the book depth in a unique variety of themes, and allows the audience to explore the different types of essays. The stories in the book are only as great as you can perceive their understandings, my class enabled me to discuss and comprehend each story, so I recommend reading with a group or class! Also, I do not think there is anything significant I disliked about this book besides- Guernica's essay "Scenes From a Life in Negroland" the thematic issue of her negatively looking at black culture as a result of assimilation was not an enjoyable read to me.

Y says

I'm not generally one for these compilations, for all the most obvious reasons-- art is subjective, essays are tough, the likelihood of enjoying the whole thing is on par with being struck by lightning (for the prior two reasons). I was therefore happily surprised when this collection came together on such a strong set of themes, with a group of genuinely great essays. I can honestly say I fully enjoyed all but one, and multiple left me with some fantastic thinking material. Admittedly, I came here for Sedaris, but by the time I finished I found I didn't mind at all that his contribution was one I'd already read.

Maphead says

A pretty good collection. My favorites were about subjects outside my experience - the history of gay literature, a first hand account of spousal abuse and a grandmother who may or may not have been a serial poisoner.

Andy Kristensen says

A few good essays, a few blah, a few pretty bad, and one disgusting essay.

Let's start off with the essay that I find disgusting and abhorrent and awful: Meghan Daum's "Difference Maker." Long story short: it's an ego-centric, self-centered, whining, pat-herself-on-the-back essay that basically brags about how great she is because she "tries" to help foster kids and considers herself better than couples who have biological kids. She never once speaks about how the foster kids she supposedly "helps" feel or the troubles and pain they go through. No, instead she focuses purely on how "great" she is for volunteering to spend time with foster kids. I had a physical reaction to how absolutely godawful this essay was. I hope I never come across another piece by this author and that she gets relegated to the bottom rungs of the literary world some day. Horrible, horrible essay and message.

The next 25% are bad and the next 40% are blah.

The few good ones: Tiffany Briere's "Vision," Malcolm Gladwell's "The Crooked Ladder," and Katie Lebo's "The Loudproof Room."

Saying all this, there are two absolute gems in this collection, both of which are among my all-time favorite essays: Anthony Doerr's "Thing With Feathers That Perches in the Soul," a beautiful essay that tells the story about the first family to arrive in Boise, ID and their personal history while intersplicing personal details about the author's life throughout the narrative, including how the author discovered the historical family and his feelings of apprehension when his wife first became pregnant, and the last essay in the collection, Kelly Sundberg's "It Will Look Like a Sunset," an essay consisting of short paragraphs that details her abusive relationship with her now ex-husband.

Not the greatest year for the Best American Essays series by far, but at least there were a few diamonds in the rough.
