

Signs of Hope

Focus



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BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 1998

Edited by Cynthia Ozick

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The ambition—one might say presumption—implicit in *The Best American Essays* series invites scrutiny. All but the most trusting readers may ask themselves whether selection X, Y, or Z in fact represents one of the “best” essays published in the preceding year, and the wit-sharpening fun of reading anthologies largely involves answering “Definitely,” “Could be,” or “I certainly hope not.”

These answers in turn beg the question of which criteria are employed by anthology and reader, assuming those criteria can be discerned. We can love an anthology as much for its consistent wrongness, its self-evident inferiority to our own tastes, as its ability to reflect our tastes.

Best American Essays 1998, guest-edited by Cynthia Ozick, provides neither of these pleasures, as no consistent criteria for selection are in evidence. The fault does not lie with Ms. Ozick, or even with the first readers who selected the approximately one hundred essays from which her final selections were drawn. The fault lies with the conflicted state of the American essay itself.

The volume’s twenty-five pieces are nothing if not diverse. To the credit of this year’s editors, eighteen publications are represented in the table of contents; in the 1997 edition approximately half of the titles were drawn from *The New Yorker* alone. Writers of various ethnicities, several religions (and none), and a reasonable number of genders are represented.

These faultlines, overlapping like circles in a Venn diagram, are further underlain by a trifurcation among selections. The first group is comprised of pieces which can only with difficulty be considered literary essays. These are represented

by Jeremy Bernstein’s “The Merely Very Good” and the late Diana Trilling’s “A Visit to Camelot”—the anthology’s longest essay. These selections, more properly memoirs, derive their interest primarily from the writer’s proximity to history.

In the latter essay, Ms. Trilling recalls Lionel Trilling’s and her attendance at John F. Kennedy’s 1962 White House dinner for Nobel Laureates. She chronicles with understandable pleasure a moment when elites in virtually every area of achievement converged to form America’s closest approximation to a royal court, and she observes with grace and understatement the complex dynamics of the Kennedys’ marriage. Particularly endearing is her willingness to confess how even the literati are not immune to becoming star struck.

In the former, Bernstein draws on his experience in the worlds of both physics and literature to discuss the parallel lives of Robert Oppenheimer and Stephen Spender, and Bernstein’s occasional contact with them. Distinguished as they were, these men’s careers were ultimately linked with and overshadowed by those of more illustrious friends and colleagues. Oppenheimer’s achievement was ultimately referential to that of Paul A.M. Dirac, one of the originators of quantum physics, as Spender’s was to that of W.H. Auden. Bernstein carefully describes the pathos of careers that, largely through accidents of birth and history, inevitably suffer in comparison to others. This dilemma merits discussion, as Scottie Pippen or anyone with a sibling knows. Bernstein’s account does not, however, display the depth of reflection or the command of language that transforms the memoir from journalism or “nonfiction” to literature.

These essays illustrate the potential of the form and how many of its practitioners neglect that potential.

A second and larger group of essays consists largely of memoirs, unredeemed by historical significance, that ironically risks fitting Henry Ford's definition of history as one damned thing after another. These selections display the zeal for communicating experience that underlies all literature, but this impulse is turned awry. Many of the collection's entries betray a sense that experience is less intrinsically valuable than made valuable by contact with the writer. On one page of Andre Aciman's "Shadow Cities" the pronoun "I" appears 24 times, crowding out the other words that could help to explain, through Aciman's residence in New York, Alexandria, and other cities, how we construct places as well as inhabit them.

A similar spirit informs many of the other selections. If all that which is human concerns us, we can rightly rejoice that in "Water Babies" Oliver Sacks has enjoyed a lifetime of swimming; it is a wholesome exercise. We can likewise celebrate that in "How I Learned to Speak Italian," Helen Barolini takes on the fortunate task of narrating how she recovered her ancestral language and the ethnic identity stripped from her family through the Procrustean process of Americanization; those of us with a shakier grasp on our roots can only envy her success. In each instance, though, the effect is not unlike that of reading a stranger's letters. Whatever the contents may be, it is uncertain what they have to do with us, or why we should be reading them.

A third group of essays, unfortunately small in number, takes the writer's self as a prism for experience, or relegates the self to the periphery of the essay. In these selections the self is evident largely through the implicit filtering of experience and the qualities of the individual voice. In one of these pieces, "Soldier's Heart," Louis Simpson finds in his experience of combat, nervous breakdown, and recovery the means for self-definition as a man and a writer as well. He additionally manages to place that self in a wider world:

The more you pay attention to the world outside the self and think about individuals and the things they do, the more interesting

they become. It seems they need to be expressed, and in expressing them you express the best part of yourself. We who have seen and suffered less can hardly argue.

Like Simpson's contribution, the other essays in this group are not primarily personal essays—as if the genre needed an adjective applied to hygiene and miniature pan pizzas. In the presence of substantial topics, high minds are at work or play. In "Will You Still Feed Me," Joseph Epstein addresses his own aging as less a calamity than the basis of a self-effacing meditation on mortality. William H. Gass displays his prodigious wit and free association in "The Test of Time," and at the same time he offers a striking, idiosyncratic defense of high culture against the onslaught of mass amusements. Ian Frazier's "Someplace in Queens" demonstrates obvious delight in the borough's ethnic diversity and down-at-the-heels quiddities, and Sven Birkerts's "States of Reading" argues for literature, primarily the novel, as a means of obtaining an alternative form of consciousness.

These essays, and a few like them, illustrate the potential of the form and how many of its practitioners neglect that potential. This is no small matter, as, in a time of fragmented knowledge, intellectual discourse is too important to be left entirely to academic specialists whose careers all too often depend on larding their work with citations and riding the waves of theoretical fashion. Simpson and like-minded contributors, though, take up the task of integrating consciousness implicit in the essay, and in their work the genre shows signs of hope.

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