



The Best American Essays 2004

Louis Menand (Editor) , Robert Atwan (Series Editor)

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Here you will find another "splendid array of unpredictable and delectable essays" (Booklist), chosen by the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Louis Menand, another collection with "delights on every page" (Dallas Morning News). The Best American Essays once again earns its place as the liveliest and leading annual of its kind.

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Jeff Lacy says

A rather good selection of essays in the edition of Best American Essays. Of note is James Agee's discovered essay, "America, Look at Your Shame!" that addresses the Detroit race riots in June 1943, and race relations in general. Also interesting is Kathryn Chetkovich's, "Envy," where she addresses writer envy. "The Arctic Hedonist" about Vilhjalmur Stefansson, by Anne Fadiman was a interesting essay about the Antarctic explorer. One can always count on Dr. Oliver Sacks for his edification on any medical issue. In "The Mind's Eye," he discusses blindness occurring at birth, months after birth, in childhood, and in adulthood, and how the brain reacts to the deprivation of this sense. Also appealing was the curious essay about the development of taxidermy over the years by Susan Orlean, entitled, "Lifelike."

Will says

As usual, a great collection.

All of the essays are excellent, but Moody's 'Against Cool' really stands out.

Steven says

It's difficult to recount in this space everything good and bad about an anthology such as this, so I'm going with essays I found interesting and/or useful:

- a rediscovered piece by James Agee on the 1943 Detroit race riots
 - Jared Diamond's "The Last Americans," which seems to be a starting point for his book "Collapse."
 - "The Unreal Thing" by Adam Gopnik, which is both a review of the Matrix films and an examination of the philosophical issues they raised.
 - Laura Hillenbrand's amazing account of her battle with chronic fatigue syndrome and the effort it took to write her first book, "Seabiscuit."
 - "Yarn" by Kyoko Mori, a mix of histories about knitting.
 - Susan Orlean's "Lifelike," a personal report from the 2003 World Taxidermy Championship.
 - Oliver Sack's "The Mind's Eye," which looks at blindness and how the brain adapts to it.
 - Janna Malamud Smith's meditation on her father in "My Father is a Book."
 - a previously unpublished essay by Tennessee Williams, "Amor Perdida."
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Ayelet Waldman says

I love essays. They are fun to read, often weird, and usually can be relied on to make me cry.

James says

Fairly interesting collection. The "My"s have it: "My Yiddish," by Leonard Michaels and the astounding "My 80s," by Wayne Koestenbaum.

Genevieve says

I needed to read 300 pages of essay, short stories, or poetry for my creative writing class. Since I had the least experience with essays, I picked that genre. I am amazed at the quality of writing. I have read about subjects from Jews in Iraq, chronic fatigue syndrome, women writers, taxidermy, knitting, rock scholarship, the origins of "cool" and it is incredible that they can make me be interested in all of them. I hope to read a lot more of the series.

Linda DiMeo Lowman says

I did not enjoy many of these essays. I skipped two of them after reading a couple of pages. I think since 2004, essays have evolved into a more personal, memoir-like form. As far as I'm concerned, out with the old, in with the new.

Shannon says

I read 17 of the 22 essays.

America, Look at Your Shame! by James Agee-3
Envy by Kathryn Chetkovich-3
Caught by Jonathan Franzen-3.5
A Sudden Illness by Laura Hillenbrand-5
Passover in Baghdad by Tim Judah-5
My 80's by Wayne Koestenbaum-2
My Yiddish by Leonard Michaels-2
Bix and Flannery by Ben Miller-4
Against Cool by Rick Moody-3
Yarn by Kyoko Mori-3
Lifelike by Susan Orlean-4
Rock 101 by Alex Ross-3
My Lost City by Luc Sante-3
My Father is a Book by Janna Malamud Smith-3.5
Bullet in My Neck by Gerald Stern-4
Amor Perdida by Tennessee Williams-4
An Enlarged Heart by Cynthia Zarin-4

Sean says

This is my second foray into the best American Essay series and there are some good ones in here. My favorites include Rick Moody's "Against Cool," a look at the origins and meanings of cool; and Kathryn Chetkovich's "Envy," a personal essay about a relationship between two writers.

Jenny Mckeel says

I have a hard time reading a book of unrelated essays, but there were, predictably, a number of great ones in this book. My favorites:

"Envy," by Kathryn Chetkovich

"The Arctic Hedonist" by Anne Fadiman

"Caught," by Jonathan Franzen

"A Sudden Illness," by Laura Hillenbrand

"Against Cool," by Rick Moody

"Lifelike," by Susan Orlean

"Amor Perdida," by Tennessee Williams

All of these essays are completely awesome.

Richard says

Hardly a single essay in here could maintain my vested interest. The one exception here was Gerald Stern's essay about the bullet in his neck, but I would more recommend finding the particular issue of Georgia Review it came from than to buy this, which is tainted with the kind of stilted, faux-literary writing that seems to infect most of the Best American choices.

Jien says

Overall, the female authors were much better than the male ones.

The worst (1 star) are Franzen, Gopnik, Miller, and Moody.

The best (5 stars) are Diamond, Fadiman, Mori, Sacks, and Zarin.

The absolute best was Oliver Sacks, obviously. Hard for anyone to compare to him, no one made me think as deeply.

N says

Consider the word "fine," which can mean--among its many degrees of value--"unacceptable" (if uttered as exclamation) or "very good indeed" or "okay." This BAE volume is fine in the latter sense, its contents generally innocuous and unremarkable. I gave single check marks to six better-than-okay essays: Jared Diamond's "The Last Americans," Jonathan Franzen's "Caught," Adam Gopnik's "The Real Thing," Kyoko Mori's "Yarn," Susan Orlean's "Lifelike," and Oliver Sack's "The Mind's Eye."

Daniel says

I found that most of these were indeed quite notable and enjoyable to read. I found "A Sudden Illness," ""My '80s," "Bix and Flannery," "Against Cool," "My Father is a Book," and "An Enlarged Heart" to be of the most interest and/or best written. Some ("Passover in Baghdad," "Rock 101," "Arrow and Wound") didn't reach me at all. The others were just sort of "there" and interesting to read, but leave no real lasting memories.

I look forward to the next in the series.

JP says

There's nothing instrumental here but they styles and approaches are a concise mix worthy of exploration. My favorites: "Arrow and Wound," "Passover in Baghdad," and "Lifelike."
