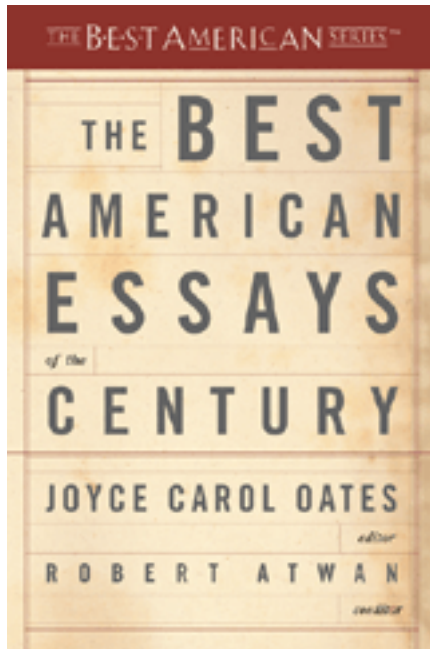


Press Release



The Best American Essays of the Century

Edited by Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan

- Introduction
- About the Editors
- Selections from *The Best American Essays of the Century*

"Oates has assembled a provocative collection of masterpieces reflecting both the fragmentation and surprising cohesiveness of various American identities." — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"[An] outstanding, galvanic collection . . . All the essays transcend fashion and speak just as eloquently to us today as they did when they were first published." — *Entertainment Weekly*

"The strength of *The Best American Essays of the Century* lies not only in the literary merits of the works included, but also in the mirrors these gifted writers hold up to our collective soul." — *Minneapolis Star-Telegram*

Introduction

"My belief is that art should not be comforting; for comfort, we have mass entertainment and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish." — Joyce Carol Oates, from her introduction

This outstanding collection, available now for the first time in paperback, is nothing less than a political, spiritual, and intensely personal record of America's tumultuous modern age by our foremost critics, commentators, activists, and artists. Along with Robert Atwan, who has overseen the

acclaimed *Best American Essays* volume since its inception in 1986, Joyce Carol Oates has chosen work by the century's most prominent nonfiction writers, focusing on the voice of the essay as the locus of its unique power, transforming public address into something intimately personal. The essays included in this volume are not always comforting, in many cases casting a cold light on the dark realities of modern life. All of them, however, serve to raise awareness of the plethora of situations, personalities, and lifestyles that make up the history of American writing.

Met with overwhelming critical praise when it was published in hardcover in 2000, *The Best American Essays of the Century* includes fifty-five essays that move from personal experience to larger cultural concerns. From Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Crack-Up" to Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" and Lewis Thomas's "The Lives of a Cell," these definitive essays provide, in Oates's words, "a kind of mobile mosaic, suggesting where we've come from, and who we are, and where we are going."

The stellar lineup of contributors reads like an honor roll of twentieth-century American letters, including Mark Twain, John Muir, Ernest Hemingway, H. L. Mencken, Robert Frost, E. B. White, Langston Hughes, Tom Wolfe, Adrienne Rich, Annie Dillard, and Saul Bellow.

About the Editors

Joyce Carol Oates, novelist, essayist, critic, poet, playwright, and teacher, is one of the preeminent literary figures and social critics of the twentieth century. Her honors include an NEA grant, a Guggenheim fellowship, the PEN/Malamud Lifetime Achievement Award, and the F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for Lifetime Achievement in American Literature. She has written more than forty novels and novellas, among them the 1970 National Book Award winner *Them*, as well as several volumes of poetry, many plays, and five books of literary criticism. She has been a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters since 1978.

Robert Atwan is the series editor of *The Best American Essays*. He has edited numerous literary anthologies and written essays for periodicals nationwide. He recently edited *Divine Inspiration*, a volume of world poetry on the Gospels.

Selections from *The Best American Essays of the Century*

On the twenty-ninth of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father's funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker's chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the third of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.

The day of my father's funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday. As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us. It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas. And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son. I had declined to believe in that apocalypse which had been central to my father's vision; very well, life seemed to be saying, here is something that will certainly pass for an apocalypse until the real thing comes along. I had inclined to be contemptuous of my father for the conditions of his life, for the conditions of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own. — James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 1955

If he found a board in a ditch as he walked home from the day's work, and if the board had a bent nail in it, he would hammer the nail out of the board with a rock and take it home. If the board would make kindling or if it was strong enough to build with, he would take it along too. He would straighten the nail with a hammer on the anvil at his lean-to shop and put it in a box with other nails of the same dimensions. He might have to move a dozen other boxes to find the right one, but he would know where it was. It wasn't that he was a miser, for he cared nothing for the money he saved by collecting used nails. And when he died he did not, like the misers reported in the newspapers, leave a hundred thousand dollars in the back of a mirror; he left a hundred thousand straightened nails. He saved the nails because it was a sin to allow good material to go to waste. Everyone knows the story about the box of pieces of string, found in an old attic, labeled "String too short to be saved." — Donald Hall, "A Hundred Thousand Straightened Nails," 1961

Seeing this black body was like seeing a mushroom cloud. The heart

screeched. The meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination. It obliterated meaning itself. If you were to glance out one day and see a row of mushroom clouds rising on the horizon, you would know at once that what you were seeing, remarkable as it was, was intrinsically not worth remarking. No use running to tell anyone. Significant as it was, it did not matter a whit. For what is significance? It is significance for people. No people, no significance. This is all I have to tell you.

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field; our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned. — Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse," 1982

[Booksellers Home](#) | [Trade Home](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Map](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Trademark Information](#)

[Copyright © 2003 Houghton Mifflin Company](#), All Rights Reserved