



The Best American Essays 1991

Joyce Carol Oates (Editor), Robert Atwan (Series Editor)

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The 1991 volume of The Best American Essays marks the sixth year in this flourishing series. Consistently singled out as presenting the year's best short nonfiction, it has reawakened excitement for this remarkably versatile, often overlooked and occasionally maligned form. Includes works from Woody Allen, Stephen Jay Gould, Margaret Atwood and others.

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Will says

I do not know if these are the best essays but those chosen represent many different aspects of American life and culture. Joyce Carol Oates does note in the Introduction that she prefers an essay with knowledge to impart and there are many pieces in this vein. The most notable is Joy Williams confrontational "The Killing Game" and a thought provoking essay by Mario Vargas Llosa.

N says

I had high hopes for this BAE volume, edited by Oates with a smart, Oates-ian introduction, but the contents overall felt as much like a mixed bag as usual. In the table of contents of every BAE I've read I keep track of my favorite essays--good essays get one check mark, great ones get two. Six of the twenty-one essays got single check marks, and one (Naomi Shihab Nye's "Maintenance") got the elusive double. Woody Allen, Margaret Atwood, Diane Hume George, Amy Tan, Jane Tompkins, and Joy Williams got the singles with work that prompted me to pause and listen harder. Every essay was bright in its own way, but some dealt rather blandly with their otherwise interesting material and a few others didn't sound like the kind of essay the introduction described--"Instead of driving hard to make a point, the essay saunters. . . . Instead of reaching conclusions, the essay ruminates and wonders. . . ." All of this isn't to say that essays should try to impress me or that not impressing me means much. However, of the several BAE volumes I've read, this one doesn't stand out.

Patrick McCoy says

When I stumbled across The Best American Essays 1991, I thought I'd give it a read since it had essays by several authors that I admired (Woody Allen, John Updike, Mario Llosa Vargas, etc.) I skipped some essays, but most were enlightening or entertaining in some manner that I found worthwhile. Woody Allen's essay, "Random Reflections of Second-Rate Mind" was predictably funny. Margaret Atwood and John Updike both wrote on assignment about "The Female Body." Frank Conroy writes a reminiscence about his love of the pool hall in "Running the Table." Gerald Early writes about female identity, race, and the Miss America pageant in "Life with Daughters: Watching the Miss America Pageant." Dina Hume George uses personal anecdotes from her life to discuss the problems on a Sioux Indian reservation in "Wounded Chevy at Wounded Knee." Then Stephen Jay Gould offers up an interesting discussion of authenticity in "Counters and Cable Cars." Critic Elizabeth Hardwick writes about her beloved home city in "New York City: Crash Course." Garrett Hongo's personal essay on his grandfather, "Kubota," is enlightening about the Japanese-American experience before and after WWII. "Maintenance" is a chance for Naomi Shihab Nye to talk about the many applications of the term. In "Late Victorians" Richard Rodriguez talks about the architectural influence of this movement, San Francisco, and the gay movement and AIDS crisis. Dorien Ross discusses self-identity and image in "Seeking Home." And Mark Rudman muses on memory and the pleasures of walking in New York in "Mosaic on Walking." Amy Tan talks about language, family, and identity in "Mother Tongue." There is another essay that discusses race and identity, in Marianna De Marco Torgovnick's essay "One Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst." The last essay I read was from

one of my favorite contemporary novelists, Nobel Prize winning author Mario Vargas Llosa, who discusses the history of conquest in South America in "Questions of Conquest." Editor Joyce Carol Oates has done an admirable job of pulling together a variety of voices that reflect the American experience from a variety of genders, sexual identity, and racial backgrounds to show the complexity of American life that seems as though it may have been ahead of its time in 1991.

Kristin says

Meh. I don't find novella-length essays very interesting. But there were a few gems - just read the first half of the book and you'll be good.
