



The Next American Essay

John D'Agata (Editor), Guy Davenport (Prologue by)

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In this singular collection, John D'Agata takes a literary tour of lyric essays written by the masters of the craft. Beginning with 1975 and John McPhee's ingenious piece, "The Search for Marvin Gardens," D'Agata selects an example of creative nonfiction for each subsequent year. These essays are unrestrained, elusive, explosive, mysterious—a personal lingual playground. They encompass and illuminate culture, myth, history, romance, and sex. Each essay is a world of its own, a world so distinctive it resists definition.

Contributors include:

Sherman Alexie

David Antin

Jenny Boully

Anne Carson

Guy Davenport

Lydia Davis

Joan Didion

Annie Dillard

Thalia Field

Albert Goldbarth

Susan Griffin

Theresa Hak Kung Cha

Jamaica Kincaid

Wayne Koestenbaum

Barry Lopez

John McPhee

Carole Maso

Harry Mathews

Susan Mitchell

Fabio Morabito

Mary Ruefle

David Shields

Dennis Silk

Susan Sontag

Alexander Theroux

George W. S. Trow

David Foster Wallace

Eliot Weinberger

Joe Wenderoth

James Wright

The Next American Essay Details

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From Reader Review The Next American Essay for online ebook

Jessica says

A wonderfully inspiring and challenging anthology. I loved how D'Agata made his introductions to each piece create an essay themselves. A great exploration of what's possible with the essay form.

Favorite favorites:

- TOTAL ECLIPSE BY ANNIE DILLARD CHANGED MY LIFE. THIS ESSAY YOU GUYS.
- "Ticket to the Fair" by David Foster Wallace

Other favorites:

- "GIrl" by Jamaica Kincaid, which I'd read before but still love
- "Country Cooking from Central France: Roast Boned Rolled Stuffed Shoulder of Lamb (Farce Double)" by Harry Mathews
- "...and nobody objected" by Paul Metcalf
- "The Intercession of Saints" by Carole Maso

Betsy Wheeler says

there's some incredible beauty and genius in these pages. "Total Eclipse" by Annie Dillard was so moving (and a tiny bit scary, if I remember correctly)... it made me want to write essays (and showed me how it was possible to use a lyric structure to do so). "The Search for Marvin Gardens" by John McPhee blew my mind expertly -- a social commentary by way of lyric impulse. It's definitely a great text to teach from (Graywolf sells that on the website) but only b/c it's a great book to learn from -- the variety of approaches to writing an essay, and the array of topics covered make that possible.

James F says

Another book for a friend's class (maybe someday I'll get to take one myself), this is a collection of "essays", mostly American, one for each year from 1975 to 2003. I put "essays" in quotation marks because the editor says that they blur the distinction between nonfiction and art -- and many of them seem more like poetry or fiction than essays. The selection is very subjective, and emphasizes "literary" writing. Like any anthology this one is very uneven; one or two selections I found boring, and a few were basically incomprehensible, but there were also some I really enjoyed reading. This is the third collection in the editor's *New History of the Essay*; I didn't actually find his comments and introductions very enlightening.

Dave says

There are some wonderful essays in this collection. Joan Didion, Jamaica Kincaid, and David Foster Wallace were all selections I looked forward to, and I wasn't the least surprised at their lyrical mastery, depth of emotion, and flawless delivery.

A surprising number of the selections were (because I can think of no good way to describe this in English) *pessimo* [said with great disgust and Italian accent]. As a genre, the essay in particular seems to lend itself to pretension, and *The Next American Essay* highlights that tendency.

Some thoughts:

1. An essay is not brilliant because it's "done" in a way that's never been done before. Writing an essay entirely of footnotes probably seemed very edgy among the New York artist set, but in practice it's painful to read and rather forgettable.
2. Just because an essay is written about an experience in Europe and contains one italicized foreign word per page (whoops!) does not make it worth reading.
3. Name-dropping French philosophers isn't edgy intertextuality--it's just annoying. We've all read Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida too, and we don't need a "lyrical essay" to show us the tensions of postmodernism.

My vitriol may be heightened by the wretched contrast these bad apples created when smashed up against the elegance and beauty of, say, Annie Dillard's "Total Eclipse." But more than that, the bad apples created a general skepticism towards all unknown authors ["never heard of him, here we go again..."] that I may have missed some diamonds in the rough because I had already spent so much time digging through dung that I couldn't be bothered to exert more than a modicum of patience.

One near miss was Albert Goldbarth's "Delft," which starts slowly (and with the smallest of beginnings) but builds, looking deeply into the world of poetry, love, death, science, and art. If I hadn't been on a plane with little else to do, I very likely may have "cheated" and skipped to the next essay. I'm very glad I didn't, but it makes me wonder what I missed.

In the end, my impatience is my own problem and my own fault. But D'Agata should have performed his gatekeeper duties with a little more sagacity. 60% of the essays are gold, but beware the swathes of mind-numbing pretension you'll need to traverse.

Kelly says

I wish John D'Agata was the editor for the yearly Best American Essays.

Suz Davidson says

Favorites: Marvin Gardens, White Album, May Morning, Marionette

emily says

what a weird little collection of essays. moving from essay to essay, i sometimes got the feeling that d'agata was confused about what he's trying to collect here: essays about essays, quintessential representative examples of the changing nature of postmodernism versus the changing nature of u.s. society, or just a bunch

of pieces he liked? my favorites were the essays that were just good reads, without the self-conscious meta aspect or the weight of representing the mindset of all of u.s. society in a given year. however, the structure of the book, which sets up each essay as representing both a year and a stage in postmodern weirdness, makes a certain weighty narrative inescapable, and the climax of that narrative seems to be that all non-fiction, genre-bending, creative writing is leading up to the Ultimate Postmodern Piece of Writing: an essay composed entirely of footnotes. which left me thinking: how is this not gimmicky.

Joshua Buhs says

Second read: the impression is basically the same; I tried his Halls of Fame in between--though a while ago--and found it far too lyrical for my taste, though it helped me understand better what he was trying to do with this collection.

A very nice collection, and D'Agata's connecting overviews are interesting. They sometimes become too lyrical--to use his phrase--or self-involved--to use mine--and tend toward the obscurity of his own collection, Halls of Fame.

All of which would suggest that I am maybe skeptical of the lyrical version of essays. And I am. But this collection convinced me that although there is some dross, there is some good.

I just could not get into Silk's Marionete Theater or Metcalf's "and nobody objected" for instance (also: no fair to break the structure for that one year, 1992. What's up with that?)

But I saw the poignancy in Davis's Foucault and the Pencil, where the focus is not on Foucault at all, but on what we do as writers. And Country Cooking from Central France was a brilliant re-imagining of what an essay could be--not just the downloading of experience, but lyrical and beautiful.

The collection also did something else, showing me essays I had read before in a new light. I gulped down all of Didion's non-fiction in one sitting, and her cool chippiness became wearying. Seeing the White Album in this historical context, though, restored its shine. Also, after reading so much about DFW recently, coming to his "Ticket to the Fair" I could see his stretching (and often it was stretching) for earnestness without (too much) sentimentality.

There were clearly some made up bits in some of these essays, which didn't bother me, I guess, because they were so clearly made up. But I am uncertain I am willing to go as far as D'Agata in removing facts as an important part of the essay. He makes a good case that since the 1970s we've moved past Tom Wolfe and his new journalism, with a melding of subjectivity that is important. But unless the essay is just about one's self--like the Diaries of Anais Nin, I guess--it can't be all subjectivity.

Essays are experiments, they are prose poems and lyrical and musical, but they are also reportage, and it is important to keep those things in mind.

Kristen Suagee-beauduy says

I would use this book in an Experimental Creative Nonfiction course for advanced writers. Highlights below.

From "The Raven" by Barry Lopez:

"The instrument will be black but no longer shiny, the back of it sheathed in armor plate and the underside

padded like a wolf's foot....You will see that the talons are not as sharp as you might have suspected. They are made to grasp and hold fast, not to puncture. They are more like the jaws of a trap than a fistful of ice picks....He can weather a storm on a barren juniper limb; he can pick up and examine the crow's eye without breaking it" (25).

From Joan Didion's "The White Album":

In the essay, Didion uses her doctor's notes to inform the reader that she was a patient who "experienced an attack of vertigo, nausea, and a feeling that she was going to pass out. A thorough medical evaluation elicited no positive findings...The Rorschach record is interpreted as describing a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress....Emotionally, patient has alienated herself almost entirely from the world of other human beings. Her fantasy life appears to have been virtually completely preempted by primitive, regressive libidinal preoccupations many of which are distorted and bizarre....In a technical sense basic affective controls appear to be intact but it is equally clear that they are insecurely and tenuously maintained for the present by a variety of defense mechanisms including intellectualization, obsessive-compulsive devices, projection, reaction-formation, and somatization, all of which now seem inadequate in their task of controlling or containing an underlying psychotic process and are therefore in process of failure. The content of patient's responses is highly unconventional and frequently bizarre, filled with sexual and anatomical preoccupations, and basic reality contact is obviously and seriously impaired at times. In quality and level sophistication patient's response are characteristic of those of individuals of high average or superior intelligence but she is now functioning intellectually in impaired fashion at barely average level. Patient's thematic productions on the Thematic Apperception Test emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure" (49-50).

From Annie Dillard's "Total Eclipse":

"The Crab Nebula, in the constellation Taurus, looks, through binoculars, like a smoke ring. It is a star in the process of exploring. Light from its explosion first reached the earth in 1054; it was a supernova then, and so bright it shone in the daytime. Now it is not so bright, but it is still exploding. It expands at the rate of seventy million miles a day. It is interesting look through binoculars at something expanding seventy million miles a day. It does not budge. Its apparent size does not increase. Photographs of the Crab Nebula taken fifteen years ago seem identical to photographs of it taken yesterday. Some lichens are similar. Botanist have measure some ordinary lichen twice, at fifty-year intervals, without detaching any growth at all. And yet their cells divide' they live./ The small ring of light was like these things--like a ridiculous lichen up in the sky, like a perfectly still explosion 4,200 light-years away: it was interesting, and lovely, and in witless motion, and it had nothing to do with anything./ It had nothing to do with anything. The sun was too small, and too cold, and too far away, to keep the world alive. The white ring was not enough. It was feeble and worthless. It was as useless as a memory; it was as off kilter and hollow and wretched as a memory./ When you try your hardest to recall someone's face, or the look of a place, you see in your mind's eye some vague and terrible sight such as this. It is dark' it is insubstantial' it is all wrong./ The white ring and the saturated darkness made the earth and sky look as they must look in the memories of the careless dead. What I saw, what I seemed to be standing in, was all the wrecked light that the memories of the dead could shed upon the living world. We had all died in our boots on the hilltops of the Yakima, and were alone in eternity. Empty space stoppered our eyes and mouths' we cared for nothing" (105).

The editor, on Emerson's discovery of the essay as the new literature he had been seeking:

"Here everything is admissible--philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, fun, mimicry, anecdotes, jokes, ventriloquism--all the breadth and versatility of the most liberal conversations, highest and lowest personal topics: all are permitted, and all may be combined into one speech" (252).

The editor, revealing a centuries-long distaste for genre-bending among critics:

"Moby Dick was especially dishonorable. Why? 'The author has not given his effort here the benefit of knowing whether it is history, autobiography, gazetteer, or fantasy,' wrote the New York Globe in 1851" (279).

From Susan Griffin's "Red Shoes":

"Writing of his experience of torture, Jean Amery recalls that 'one never ceases to be amazed that all those things one may...call his soul, or his mind, or his consciousness, or his identity are destroyed when there is cracking and splintering in the shoulder joints.' It is this that is humiliating and, as Amery writes, 'The shame of destruction cannot be erased'" (309).

The editor, on genre:

The "essay's innate intoxication with the mathematics of language--the multiplication of data, evidence, argument--distinguishes the genre as much as it taboos it. Its occasional focus on the list as a formal device, for example, eschews the comforting narratives of fiction, the intimate lyricism of poetry, and the sensational admissions of memoir, allowing its writers to make art out of the gossip and noise and rubble and minutia that often get overlooked in literature, fashioning instead a bawdy, relentless, user-unfriendly art that is not comforting, not intimate, not sensational at all, but suspicious, messy, and stubbornly unresolved" (317-8).

From Carole Maso's "The Intercession of Saints":

"The long bones of illness, her tuning forks" (399).

From Thalia Field's "A Therefore 1":

"A moth saw a flame and thought what it saw was its heart and it said, 'What is my heart doing over there, away from me?' And believing that it could not be whole without an organ it had never even used, the moth dove toward it, hoping to reabsorb it in open surgery, but instead there was a sound as empty as a lit match extinguished on water, and in an instant the heart that had stood away from the moth became the central unimagined ecstasy the moth couldn't live without" (415).

"In the mind, words are heard bone-dry without the benefit of breath" (420).

"In many ways we are as gothic as the thick illogical spaces between stars, between good ideas, between motel rooms" (421).

The editor, defining the lyric essay:

"The lyric essay inherits from the principal strands of nonfiction the makings of its own hybrid version of the form. It takes the subjectivity of the personal essay and the objectivity of the public essay, and conflates

them into a literary form that relies on both art and fact, on imagination and observation, rumination and argumentation, human faith and human perception. What the lyric essay inherits from the public essay is a fact-hungry pursuit of solutions to problems, while from the personal essay what it takes is a wide-eyed dallying in the heat of predicaments. The result of this ironic parentage is that lyric essays seek answers, yet seldom seem to find them. They may arise out of a public essay that never manages to prove its case, or may emerge from the stalk of a personal essay to sprout out and meet 'the other.' ...Facts, in these essays, are not clear-cut things. What is a lyric essay? It's an oxymoron: ...an argument that has no chance of proving anything" (436).

Julia Conrad says

I am so happy this is a book. Oh my god. This anthology is like literature pornography! And, as in sex, sometimes you have to stop because it becomes too much. The downside of it is that re-starting 40 or so essays is really a slog and the book is very heavy to bring on the train.

But otherwise: a fiesta of form and technique! Multiple essays that were literally unbelievable, as in I just read them with my eyes wide whimpering "How?" to myself.

Elizabeth says

Still in the process of reading all the essays. Unlike most collections, as I dip into this book, there's not been a bum note. There are many writers I know, some I've been introduced to, others I've seen new sides to. And D'Agata's intuitive, smart, poetic intros to each essay (he's chosen an essay / year since 1978(?)) add momentum and connections with a skill which is rare in an editor, and shows really that he's a writer who loves words, truly: the sound and shape and meanings, as much as he finds ideas and expansive possibilities crucial to ensuring a piece of writing excels, doesn't just do a job, but elevates our expectations of what writing can be, should be.

Lenora Good says

This is a marvelous collection of essays, all kinds of them. D'Agata has arranged them chronologically, after his introduction to the book, beginning in 1975 with John McPhee's The Search for Marvin Gardens. You remember Marvin Gardens, don't you, from Monopoly? I learned a great deal about the game from his essay.

Every year until and including 2003 contains one essay representative of that year. And the book finishes with an Epilogue.

Do I have a favorite? Oh, yes, I'm sure I do. However, they are so different, one from the other, that it's really hard to choose. I found Erato Love Poetry the 1985 selection by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha so intriguing, I ordered Dictee. Kinds of Water by Anne Carson enthralled me. Black by Alexander Theroux now has several passages underlined. And The Body by Jenny Boully. Oh, what can I say about that essay? A whole, complete essay in footnotes. I love footnotes (I consider end notes to be the Unforgivable Sin) and to find a

whole essay written in them? Oh, I all but swooned.

Yes, there are several different kinds of essays in this collection. Some serious, some playful, all very well written. If you like essays at all, I strongly urge you to buy and read this book. I loved every word of it.

César says

John D'Agata's collection, *The Next American* essay should be a good companion piece to Phillip Lopate's anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Where Lopate's collection focuses on a clear, almost historical, overview of the best essays in literature, D'Agata instead selects more experimental or often over-looked writing. You'll have the masters of the essay, Didion or McPhee, but you'll also have Maso, and Wallace in the mix. Great book, but I was quite surprised that D'Agata left out many distinguished essayist of color—and I wonder, are there just not any experimental ethnic writers?

Mark says

Paperback.

DFW: ticket to the fair, Mary Ruefle: Monument, Sherman Alexie: Captivity, Harry Mathews, Jamaica Kincaid: Girl

M Casteel says

This book made me want to be a writer.
