



The Best American Essays 2010

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The provocative and best-selling author Christopher Hitchens takes the helm of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of this perennial favorite that is “reliable and yet still surprising—the best of the best” (*Kirkus Reviews*).

The Best American Essays 2010 Details

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Download and Read Free Online The Best American Essays 2010 Robert Atwan (Editor) , Christopher Hitchens (Editor)

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Holly says

No wooly-minded gushing ruminations on nature here, no sir!. Maybe Christopher Hitchens thought Mary Oliver's essay selections were too soft last year. I'm not usually one to complain about how many women are included in anthologies, but with just 5 of 21 essays by women, plus all the encomiums from male writers to male writers here, I was getting a definite masculine vibe. Just checked my other editions, though, and they're just as lopsided, although I don't recall noticing this before. [Oliver 2009:7; Gopnik 2008:4; DFW 2007:6; Slater 2006:8 (LOVE her); Orlean 2005:6; Menand 2004:7; Fadiman 2003:10; Gould 2002:4; Norris 2001:8; Lightman 2000:8]. D'Agata's *The Next American Essay* has a better ratio of 13 essays by women/18 by men.

Batuman on attending an academic conference at Tolstoy's home: my favorite piece from her collection *The Possessed*. Hitchens's intro mentions the essay's "quiddity" - and that is a nice word for Batuman's refreshing sensibility. **Bentley** on a bad lion/tourist safari: Her style is strangely jerky; had to read a couple of sentences twice. **Churchon** on pronouncing people dead: yes, okay. **Doyle** on marriage/divorce: nice. **Gamel** on ophthalmology and the "eloquent eyeball": Had to skim lest I were to throw up. **Isaacson** on Einstein and Zionism/**Kramer** on Montaigne: these two essays were more expository than exploratory, despite Kramer's "I think"s. I'd have happily read either one independently in a magazine, but not in this annual collection. **Isenberg** on meetings with Auden, Forster, Empson: pleasing snapshots. **Krystal** on writers' thinking differently/being "smarter" when writing than when speaking: I liked this slight essay and was thinking about it later. Not that the essay itself was so staggering, but just the idea. **Labash** on Marion Barry: interesting. **Lopate** on Brooklyn: SNOOZE. **McEwan** on Updike: Could this really be the best Updike piece published after his death? I'm beginning to realize that most of these essays are so very SAFE. **Pinker** on personal genomics: Good, and dovetails with another book I just read on the invention of race. **Rindo** on living with Meniere's Disease (vertigo, etc.): Okay. Sounds miserable. **Sedaris** on . . . ? I don't know how to paraphrase it. I prefer to listen to him rather than read on the page. **Zadie Smith** on identity and speech: I'd read this before, back when we were all enthralled with Obama. Good. **Starr** on Central Asia's tradition of science and philosophy: Informative. Indeed. -- Let's just say that if I were handed these essays and told to pick out the one from the Wilson Quarterly, I wouldn't have guessed David Sedaris's. **Summers** on Gettysburg restoration: I got excited when Summers set out to look at the changing expectations Americans apply to history, but then it's only lightly explored. **Wideman** on Emmet Till's father and the meaning of race: okay. **Wills** on William F. Buckley: I respect Garry Wills, but this was SO boring. **Wood** on Orwell: A James Wood piece is a fine anchor to any collection.

Dholsten says

here's the thing--what, exactly, is the BEST American Essay? or American Essays? Do I judge, as the edition does, from a rather limited, "well-established" base to republish published works, or ...from sources never dreamed of--i.e. editorials, Ebony, etc.? I was left feeling like I nibbled on sawdust with the numerous Brit/American lit references, the reflective Orwellian slants of "what he got right" (which I did enjoy) to "what he did not" (yes, with British references, again) to the interesting pondering of what does the removal of innocent trees have to do with promoting a more historic Gettysburg?

I wonder if the 2014 collection will be brave enough to contain the police handling of race, the Bill Cosby

scandal, the Republican hatred of all things Obama and...dare I say, Donald Trump's hair. Will there be an essay that deals with the continued Wall Street scandals, the lack of banks rewarding their constituents with a respectable percent (say 9 and up) for having savings accounts/checking instead of their shareholders and management, global warming...etc. I wonder.

Jillian says

I wandered through the library pulling books off the shelves with no design, no intent, just letting the universe guide my first round of winter break reading. We have a small, outdated public library; usually I have to request books in advance or go in with a battle plan to find what I want to read, so this was complete surrender to the contingent. I grabbed this compilation because I missed it last year, and when I got home I found out that Christopher Hitchens had just died.

I didn't know how I felt about Hitchens, so I read a few interviews with him online. I still don't know exactly how I feel about Hitchens the polemic*, but Hitchens the editor wrote a love letter to the essay in the introduction that charmed me:

"When I was very young I lived in a remote village on the edge of an English moorland. Every week, a mobile library would stop near my house, and I would step up through the back door of a large ban to find its carpeted interior lined with bookshelves... (If I live to see retirement, I would quite like to be the driver of such a vehicle, bringing books to eager young readers like a Librarian in the Rye.) One day I took a chance on a collection of science fiction stories. One of these concerned a weary teacher who picked up the scrawled "compositions" of his class after the children had piled them on his desk, and found at the bottom a letter from the future. Bound in luminous green plastic, it was headed in oddly shaped characters: "An Essay. By Jon Grom." I was struck by this simple contrivance and also found myself noticing, as if for the first time, that an essay is really a try, an attempt, even an adventure.

It also holds its meaning as a test, as in its cognate "assay"--which is useful, since the assayer's job is to tell base metals from true gold--and as a trial, or a putting to the proof... the jaunty original French word *essai* still connotes a challenge, a good try, an effort, even a first draft.

We are not likely to reach a time when the need of such things as curiosity, irony, debunking, disputation, and elegy will become satisfied. For the present, we must resolve to essay, essay, and essay again."

The collection is clearly curated by Hitchens: natural wonder at art ("Gyromancy") and writing ("Lunching on Olympus") and science ("My Genome, My Self") and human history ("The Gettysburg Regress") is its unifying force.

I've definitely read better essays, but as a collection this held together. Favorites: "The Murder of Leo Tolstoy," "Irreconcilable Dissonance," "When Writers Speak," "Speaking in Tongues."

*I think I like him.

Andrew Bertaina says

I kind of love The Best American Essays. This particular iteration wasn't as strong as the 2011 edition. However, that's somewhat up to the proclivities of the guest editor, in this case, Christopher Hitchens.

However, it's a collection worth reading. That said, let's take a look at the individual essays.

5 star

The Murder of Leo Tolstoy
Irreconcilable Dissonance (A short and lovely essay on divorce)
The Elegant Eyeball
My Genome, My Self
Guy Walks into a Bar Car (David Sedaris)
Speaking in Tongues (Zadie Smith on Obama)
Gyromancy (Vertigo and Picasso)

lesser lights

The Bad Lion
Me Myself and I (About Montaigne)

Dimmer Things

A Rake's Progress (re Marion Barry)
Brooklyn the Unknowable
Rediscovering Central Asia
The Dead Book
Lunching On Olympus
On John Updike
Gettysburg Regress
Daredevil (about William Buckley)
How Einstein divided america's Jews
Fatherlong
A Fine Rage (about Orwell's politics)

Laura Smith says

This is disappointing! Should be called "mediocre and unremarkable american essays." I normally enjoy essays because I find that they enlighten or offer a window into a different perspective. I find that the best essays take a smaller phenomenon that somehow relates to the larger picture, and you leave feeling like you've learned something important. These were smaller picture essays, that seemed isolated in their scope. If you're dying to learn more about eyeballs and Marion Barry (DC's crook mayor from the 80s, which as a DC res, I didn't even find that interesting), then this is the book for you. One caveat, I haven't read the Zadie Smith essay yet, and the Updike one was interesting. The first one, on a Tolstoy scholar was quirky and at least had some flare. Maybe this is just my personal taste. To give you an idea of what I like, I love David Brooks' essays, especially the most recent one in the New Yorker.

10515 ??? says

When I encountered this book accidentally, I thought this book would be very difficult. Actually, it was very difficult as I expected, but some of the essays were very touching. One of the essays was 'The dead book' by Jane Churchon. In this essay, " the dead book" means a record of deceased people in hospital. The author of this book is a nurse who takes dead patients with honor. For example, when she pronounces someone dead

occasionally instead of doctors, she likes to take time before declaring it. And she describes the morgue in very respectful attitude in the essay. I was very shocked and overwhelmed by the the atmosphere that the essay gave to me. As I've never heard about the procedure after death, it made me think seriously about death. And the most impressing part of the essay was the last sentence; "One day someone else's hands will feel my neck and find no pulse, someone else's eyes will look into my pupils and see no contraction... This made me realize that everyone, including me, will die one day. Death is just disappearing in this beautiful world, and it also means a complete silence. Whether I'll have lived well or not, I'll anyway die in the future. As Steve Jobs said, thinking about death makes us decide what we have to do now. So, I think concentrating in current situation is one straight way for happiness, and if I stick to this principle, maybe I can die with no regrets when I get old.

I was also touched by the essay "the elegant eyeball". The author is a ophthalmologist, and he is a one who handeled hundreds of patient's eyes. He introduces few anecdotes regarding with patients during his career. One of them was an anectode about a patient with macular degeneration. Even though his disease was not totally cured after the surgery, he just said to his doctor " Why so sad, doctor? Who do you think you are a magician, or a god?". I don't know why, but after reading this part, I couldn't help bursting out tears. Maybe the attitude accepting the misery of his life is so touching for me. If I were him, I would take that misery with serious mind, I think.

Anyway, these two essays regarding with lives, gave me a lesson. One day, I'll be ill as I get old, and eventually will die. But there will be a someone who takes my death with honor like the nurse in this essay; and actually I don't have to be so afraid of illness because I'll die one day. Eeverything is just a one procedure...and when I grow up, I want to be a person who thinks about others' death and life miseries like disease with respectful attitude.

N says

According to my checkmark rating system (1 for good essays, 2 for great, 3 for jaw-fractured-from-hitting-the-floor-amazing), this volume contains 7 pieces I'd return for:

1 Checkmark

Toni Bentley's "The Bad Lion"

John Gamel's "The Elegant Eyeball"

Jane Kramer's "Me, Myself, and I"

Steven Pinker's "My Genome, My Self"

Zadie Smith's "Speaking in Tongues"

John H. Summers's "Gettysburg Regress"

2 Checkmarks

Brian Doyle's "Irreconcilable Dissonance"

Of the 21 selections, 5 were by women--not surprising, given the editor.

Overall, while several selections were strong, I was turned off by the Old White Guyness of this BAE--OWG authors writing about other OWG authors. Time for some fresher, varied voices!

Gabriel C. says

This book is definitely not the best American essays of 2010. Rather it is a reflection of the peculiarities and obsessions particular to its guest editor. The foreword talks about active reading, moving forward and backward in a text to find echoes and harmonies. This barely makes sense in the context of a collection of uncorrelated pieces (as this is supposed to be). But by Hitchens' grace, it is so.

There are twenty or so essays here, and roughly half of them are more or less musings on mortality. This is already a bit morbid, but I can make allowances for that. But when we turn to the names that come up in more than one essay, I start to get suspicious. It's 2010 so Barack Obama gets a pass (although it's weird that he comes up as `_author_` twice, with both of his books referenced). And I can accept a few odd classics like Shakespeare and Tolstoy to come up more than once (although I don't necessarily approve). But for the top essays of the year to have more than one hit on Larkin, Auden, Hayek, and Montaigne, and for Pinker, Sedaris, and McEwan to show up both as authors and in the text of someone else's essay, this clubbiness, well, it's just too much Hitchens and not enough quality. While there are some gems here, there are also some awful stinkers, like Garry Wills' lukewarm hagiography of William Buckley. I don't know what the point of the exercise is, but I would not want to give Hitchens free reign with an editorial project after seeing what he has done here.

Billie Pritchett says

This is the best collection of this series' volumes I have ever read. Some of my favorites include: "The Murder of Leo Tolstoy," maybe one of the best or the best essay I have ever read, which speculates that Leo Tolstoy didn't die of natural causes but murder (cue scary music); "Irreconcilable Dissonance," about the seemingly trivial causes for divorce, which incidentally are the most common reasons; "A Rake's Progress," about former New York Mayor Marion Barry; "My Genome, My Self," about the prospects of personal genomics; "Rediscovering Central Asia," about when central Asia was an open, ecumenical, bright place; and "A Fine Rage," an essay about Orwell. Fine, fine collection. I want to chock it up to Christopher Hitchens' keen editing of this volume, but it could have just been a very very good year.

Victoria says

In general, the "Best American" series is more often than not, a mixed bag and gamble. I find that whether or not I find the series successful is solely dependent on the Guest Editor's taste in reading matching up with my own. The way the series is structured, a series editor (in this case Robert Atwan) whittles down a veritable pool of submissions from various publications for the best 100 or so essays from any given year, and the guest editor picks, in his/her own personal opinion, the best 20 for the book. I read the 2005 edition of the "Best American Short Stories" and found that Michael Chabon and I have vastly differing taste in fiction, and therefore found the experience rather uninspired.

I had higher hopes this time around as I generally admire Christopher Hitchens as a writer. Overall, I was pleased, but by no means blown away. All of the pieces are well written, but Matt Labash's "A Rake's Progress" is the only one whose writing really left a lasting impression and reminded me very much of Gay Talese. Essays covered a wide variety of intellectual topics ranging from eyeballs to sadistic necrophiliac lions to a discourse on how Einstein divided America's Jewish population. I'd recommend this book to anyone wanting to brush up on long-form essay writing, or looking for inspiration for creative non-fiction writing with the caveat that some of the pieces will probably be uninteresting for those with no desire to read about sometimes obscure topics such as 18th century French poets or George Orwell's political and literary evolutions.

Ariadna73 says

This is a very interesting collection of essays, and one of its virtues is that it was selected in part by the genius of Christopher Hitchens. This "The Best American..." series is one of my favorite series because it is done with seriousness and it is rarely disappointing.

This is the cover and editorial information of the book I read:

Here is the list of copyrights and stories in the book. As you can see, all the stories come from very reputable sources:

This is the table of contents. When I first read this book, I couldn't guess what I was going to be facing. There are such different topics and fascinating stories. For example, there is one about a wild lion that gave me goosebumps. It is so well written that I felt in the skin of the adventurous person who had the experience.

This is the foreword. So well written that I had to reproduce it here. It deserves to be read several times:

And this is the introduction by Christopher Hitchens. I am conscious of my bias, but I really think this little "scribble" is a masterpiece on its own:

I hope you liked this review. Did you know that I also have a blog? Take a look here:
<http://lunairereadings.blogspot.com>

Wendy Schauben says

This collection was the first non-fiction collection that I've ever picked up. What I found was that non-fiction pieces have a trend; the author knows way more than the reader will ever about the subject, the author uses insane amounts of detail with little imagery, and the author sums up the lesson learned from their various experiences in the last paragraph of their piece. Every story in the collection followed a similar path. What I took from reading the essays is how detailed an author must be while describing a setting. For example, in Phillip Lopate's "Brooklyn the Unknowable" the reader needs exactly what Lopate gives them, setting. For example, Lopate says "Looking south toward Red Hook, there is a parking lot filled with Verizon telephone trucks, in the distance the elevated trestle of the F train, and the Kentile Floors sign, and a factory placard that reads "Alex Figliola Contracting." Some of my favorites were the humorous self deprecating essays like Doyle's "Irreconcilable Dissonance," Labash's "A Rake's Progress and Sedaris "Guy Walks into a Bar Car." I found Churchon's "The Dead Book" very emotional and unfitting in the collection and Gamel's "The

Elegant Eyeball" very hard to relate to.

Chuck O'Connor says

If I could give 2.5 stars I would. This is a middling effort from the "Best of . . ." series.

I really enjoy the "Best American" collections because they seem to be edited towards novel voices and points of view. They have a consistent ability to surprise and delight. The collections often work like an interesting bar-room conversation where cultural finds are endorsed between friends. I had hoped that it would be the case with this collection seeing as it was edited by Christopher Hitchens, but the gathering here seems to be that on an uncomfortable dinner party where exhausted intellectuals rely on talking points to invite conversation.

I don't know if the Hitch was overwhelmed with things while editing this (the publication date was approximate to his cancer diagnosis) but the works here lack a consistent standard one might expect from the famous contrarian essayist.

There are some excellent choices, notably the odd world of Tolstoy scholarship described by Elif Batuman, Jane Churcho's moving look at the documentation of the dead, John Gamel's meditation on the human eye, which leaves the reader to experience an ironic sense of self-awareness when reading about the mechanics of the organ allowing him to read about the mechanics of said organ, and Stephen Pinker's intelligent philosophical consideration of the human genome.

The insight from Brian Doyle that every marriage is pregnant with divorce was excellent and helped me consider the beauty and value of my own marriage, and Ron Rindo's examination of race as a mechanism of belief was a sublime angle on that most human of traits.

But there are equally confusing choices that tend towards unsurprising recapitulation of tired theses.

Do I need to read another homage to the romantic ambiance of Brooklyn as found in Phillip Lopate's "Brooklyn the Unknowable" (a pretentious title for an exposition of obvious observations) or, another examination of Orwell as in James Wood's "A Fine Rage" (sentimental tosh from Hitchens towards his intellectual forebear maybe?)

There is no center to this collection and too often a fine work that offers narrative insight is bounded by something obvious (Zadie Smith on the uncomfortable assimilation of mixed race intellectuals with the too tired allusion to President Obama) or simply offensive in its revisionist homage (Garry Wills eulogy for William Buckley).

I wish there was more here to delight in but unfortunately the finds are too few.

Jennifer says

As with any compilation, some essays were definitely better than others. My favorites blended the personal with the public; Gyromancy by Rindo (about his own diagnosis of Meniere's disease and the possibility that Van Gogh suffered from it as well) and Speaking in Tongues by Zadie Smith (about language, being biracial, and the US President) were brilliant, five-star essays. Go read them now. A few other good, but not great

ones, were The Murder of Leo Tolstoy by Batuman, The Elegant Eyeball by Gamel, and My Genome, My Self by Pinker. These succeeded, though to a lesser degree than the first two because, again, they blended the personal with the science or history and made an engaging read. The essays I really didn't care for didn't do that: How Einstein Divided America's Jews by Isaacson read like a very dry chapter from a very dry history of early 20th century Zionism; Me, Myself, and I's (Kramer) exploration of the father of the essay, Montaigne, was sadly lacking the personal, too (so ironic, I know!). And the essays on Updike, Orwell, and Buckley, though well written, are really only for already-existing fans.

So a mixed bag, but on the whole interesting. Well worth the \$1 I paid for it at the used book sale. :)

David says

Of all the anthologies appearing annually under the "Best American" rubric, the one whose quality appears most highly dependent on the particular choice of guest editor is the "Best American Essays" collection. Just compare the 2007 and 2008 collections, edited respectively by David Foster Wallace and Adam Gopnik, to see just how much difference a guest editor can make (DFW leaves Gopnik in the dust, unsurprisingly). So I was somewhat reassured to see Christopher Hitchens as this year's invited editor. After all, Hitchens can be regarded as a kind of literary Simon Cowell -- someone who projects the image of being way too self-satisfied with his own gleefully obnoxious persona, but who's nonetheless possessed of reasonably good judgment, with a refreshing unwillingness to suffer fools gladly. Although one might be repelled by his personality, the chances of his serving up a plateful of dud essays seemed remote. At the very least, he seemed likely to have high editorial standards and a broad range of interests. So I had high hopes for this year's anthology.

Which were, unfortunately, not quite met. The 2010 collection of "best" essays is not a complete failure. Many of the contributions are excellent, though there are few that I would classify as outstanding (Steven Pinker's "My Genome, Myself" is an honorable exception, though I had already read it twice - in the NY Times when it first appeared, and in the 2010 anthology of Best American Science Writing; James Woods's New Yorker piece on George Orwell, "A Fine Rage", also shines, as does Jane Churchon's exquisite "The Dead Book"). But there were many pieces that simply failed to take off, in that the reader could only observe the writer's passion for his subject, but was never moved to share it ("Brooklyn the Unknowable", "Rediscovering Central Asia", "Gettysburg Regress" all proved too soporific for me to finish). And I remain puzzled as to the reason for including the longest essay in the collection, a 24-page profile of former Washington DC mayor, Marion Barry, whose relevance in 2010 would appear to be non-existent. Retired ophthalmologist John Gamel's beautifully written piece "The Elegant Eyeball" was spoiled for me by being about a decade behind the times as far as available treatments were concerned. I thought Zadie Smith's recent essay collection Changing my Mind was astonishing, but "Speaking in Tongues" is not the essay I would have singled out for inclusion here. Fans of David Sedaris will be more delighted than I was by inclusion of his piece "Guy Walks into a Bar Car", but my Sedaris-fatigue is well-documented, so your mileage may vary.

A breakdown of essay by general topic/type is revealing:

of pieces concerned with writers/writing - 8 of 21

of pieces that are autobiographical - 10 of 21

Even allowing for some double counting between those two categories, that's still an awful lot of navel-gazing for a 250-page volume. And this is ultimately what prevents this collection from being anything more than adequate. Perhaps if writers understood that the world of writers and writing is nowhere near as

infinitely fascinating to the general reader as it apparently is to them, there would be a greater chance of producing an anthology of pieces that are genuinely interesting.

I thought Christopher Hitchens might have the breadth of vision to produce a genuinely dazzling collection this year. I was wrong. The 2010 anthology is not an embarrassment. But neither is it particularly exciting.
