



## Otherwise Known as the Human Condition: Selected Essays and Reviews

*Geoff Dyer*

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**Otherwise Known as the Human Condition: Selected Essays and Reviews** Geoff Dyer

**\*Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism\***

**\*A *New York Times Book Review* Editors' Choice\***

**\*A *New York Times* Top 10 Nonfiction Book of the Year, as selected by Dwight Garner\***

Geoff Dyer has earned the devotion of passionate fans on both sides of the Atlantic through his wildly inventive, romantic novels as well as several brilliant, uncategorizable works of nonfiction. All the while he has been writing some of the wittiest, most incisive criticism we have on an astonishing array of subjects—music, literature, photography, and travel journalism—that, in Dyer's expert hands, becomes a kind of irresistible self-reportage.

*Otherwise Known as the Human Condition* collects twenty-five years of essays, reviews, and misadventures. Here he is pursuing the shadow of Camus in Algeria and remembering life on the dole in Brixton in the 1980s; reflecting on Richard Avedon and Ruth Orkin, on the status of jazz and the wonderous Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, on the sculptor ZadKine and the saxophonist David Murray (in the same essay), on his heroes Rebecca West and Ryszard Kapusćin'ski, on haute couture and sex in hotels. Whatever he writes about, his responses never fail to surprise. For Dyer there is no division between the reflective work of the critic and the novelist's commitment to lived experience: they are mutually illuminating ways to sharpen our perceptions. His is the rare body of work that manages to both frame our world and enlarge it.

## Otherwise Known as the Human Condition: Selected Essays and Reviews Details

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## From Reader Review Otherwise Known as the Human Condition: Selected Essays and Reviews for online ebook

### Danny says

So you may notice that I gave 4 stars to a book I also placed on my "didn't finish" shelf. Well, here's the reason for that: It's a book of essays and literary criticism and autobiographical ponderings that probably appeared in publications like The New Yorker.

Therefore, it's not really meant to be read straight through, it's more the sort of book you keep on the shelf to peruse occasionally when feeling cultured (or wanting to) or on your bedside table for months at a time as a way to read yourself to sleep. But the copy I'm reading belongs to the library, so I don't have time for all that.

There was also the matter of my confusing Geoff Dyer for Geoff Ryman, which doesn't really matter except that I found it confusing when I saw the list of books Dyer had written and none of them was the book by Ryman I was expecting to see there. There was, however, another book by Dyer that I remembered I HAD read in grad school, and so it was all very droll and amusing like a cocktail party in my head. My neurons laughing politely at the initial confusion and subsequent coincidence. Do try the canape.

But Dyer's essays are engaging and the writing is clear, even if the allusions and references are often out of the scope of my own reading. (For instance, he repeatedly mentions the writing Martin Amis and John Berger in the essays I did read. I've got a book by Amis that I bought in a used bookstore, but I've never gotten around to reading it. I was SUPPOSED to read a book by John Berger during my freshman year of college but I never did. I'm this close to being able to feel almost as smart as someone who is almost as smart as Dyer, but still so very far.)

The takeaway for you find people is that this is a book of essays for smart people. IS THIS YOU? Also for people who just like to read entertaining, thoughtful essays. THIS IS MORE LIKELY TO BE YOU.

I'm somewhere in between, so I'm taking it back to the library, but I endorse it. (Whatever that means.)

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### Tosh says

I'm a fan of a book of essays by particular writers. Not for the purpose of learning something new, but to be able to spend time with an author and his thoughts. If I don't like the author, I tend not to like the essays. I like Geoff Dyer. Therefore I like his book of essays "Otherwise Known as the Human Condition." What I like about him and his writings is that he has a great deal of interest in the world around him.

Besides being a literary critic, he also writes about photography, travel, and jazz. He's a writer who loves jazz. Boris Vian was a musician who wrote about jazz and was passionate about the subject, but far as I know, Dyer is not a musician. He has incredible insight into the music and is an excellent observer in what makes a jazz recording works or not work. The other great thing about his work is his brief memoirs that are towards the end of this volume. Personal, and very enticing invitation to his social world, and how he places himself in that landscape. There are also signs of his sexuality, not only to his attraction to women but apparently his attention to porn. He wrote a brief essay in this book regarding the hotel room, and how sexy such a room is to a gentleman. He also wrote about porn viewing in the hotel chambers. The fact that a hotel room is so clean (hopefully) makes it even more erotic. Nice observation on the nature of hotels.

The book is large, and usually, I read a book of essays off and on. I tend to read three essays in a row, and put it down, and pick it up a month later. This book, I read from the first to the last page. As I mention, one of his great interests is in photography. And like his love for jazz, he is a viewer of photographs, without being a photographer. He has no interest in taking photos but enjoys writing on the subject. The distance between him and a passionate object is a right approach. At least for him. Nevertheless, Dyer is a fantastic writer. I enjoy dipping into his cosmos.

- Tosh Berman

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## M. Sarki says

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/5251781...>

"If university had taught me anything it was that the world owed me a living" \_\_ Geoff Dyer from his essay, *On the Roof*

I worked from front to back as I am in the habit of doing when reading a book cover to cover. Sure, I skipped around and read a couple essays I noticed that were hiding on me, sort of, further back in the book just because there was no way I could wait that long to get to them and it was also a way for me to test this fellow Dyer's mettle and make sure I was not wasting my time. I remember really wanting to read *My Life as a Gate-Crasher* and for some strange reason I was also interested to read what he had to say about Denis Johnson's long and sprawling novel that I haven't read titled *Tree of Smoke* mostly because I had trashed the latest Johnson title *Train Dreams* which I not only read but owned for a short while before finding another sucker to buy it back from me on *amazon.com*. By reading these two essays ahead of time I became ever more confident to stick with my habitual program of reading a book from front to back. What surprised me most, and even thrilled me to some degree after finishing the book, were the two marvelous essays found at the very end. I was rewarded well for my continued patience and perseverance, though the reading and the time it took were not as difficult as I am making it out to be. The least I can say is this is a very good book.

If I could get my youngest son to read even one essay in this book it would be the one titled *On the Roof*. It is an honest portrayal of a budding artist-type, the twenty-eight year old man in the picture the very same age as my son is now, and with a life-plan he really wasn't meant to teach about, but teach he does and Van could certainly benefit from his thinking on this matter. But, as fathers are want to do, I will allow these thoughts of mine to go on to other deaf ears besides my young photographer. He seems to be doing well enough on his own, even if I think sometimes I anxiously have something so important to say to him that I am willing to risk damaging our loving relationship right here on this very page.

For the first time in my life I am impressed with a working writer who admits his undying love for the leisure class and his indifference to financial success. That is, if success means having to labor hard, and for small wages, as his parents did before him. "Living on the dole" is how Geoff Dyer phrases it. Reading and writing only what he wants to, and doing only what pleases himself, are his only true desires. Myself, having had to work a real job since the age of nine beginning by delivering the morning Detroit Free Press through the freezing rains and snow to overly-particular and miserly Scandinavians in the north country of Michigan I can perfectly relate to the craving of this leisure lifestyle, though I never had this life until after fifty years serving three careers and finally falling off the roof of my summer cabin and disabling myself for good. The fact that Geoff Dyer began his leisure-life immediately and continued on building the basis of this desired lifestyle throughout his first twenty-five years of living, is a testament to his fortitude and stubbornly mastered will. I love and respect his independence and lack of the same fear of what others might think of

him that I certainly felt while growing up in small-town USA. To be more concise it is his audacity that I respect and admire most. It almost makes me want to cheer and yell several smiling and vigorous praises that are dancing like polkas in my head. But the question here rather is whether Geoff Dyer can write well or not, and certainly never about the one who willingly must follow.

It is not so much that Geoff Dyer is miles above most essayists, or that his writing age is closer to mine than the greatest of the already *Mighty Dead*, or even that his personality shines on brighter than, for sake of argument, another favorite writer of mine named Lee Klein. I believe simply that Geoff Dyer is a readable chap and worthy of further study and review. My next reading task will be Dyer's book *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling With D.H. Lawrence*.

But regarding this wonderful collection of essays found here, selected by Geoff Dyer himself because he wanted to, I was not at all interested in the comic book essay or any work regarding his love for jazz. Any historical essay regarding wars or threat of war did not interest me either, but almost everything else did especially when Dyer himself was totally present in it. Family history, growing up as an only child, his love for porno, sex, and drugs, and the many self-examination pieces were not at all bothersome, boring, or cumbersome in any way. Love affairs and his periods of recreational drug use tended to be encouraging for me and enlightening in less obvious ways than I would imagine they are for most readers. What I particularly enjoyed were the essays on photography especially the one about Miroslav Tichy and then the essays on writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Cheever, Sebald, Bernhard, and also Albert Camus. But the personal anecdotes and failed memories are what got to me the most. Titles such as *On the Roof; Sacked; Unpacking My Library; and My Life as a Gate-Crasher*. That is why I am willing to go farther with him. To see what I can see about his wrestling match with rage. I would also go the distance with him and consider reading his book on the many photographers Dyer respects and admires titled *The Ongoing Moment* because I do like his eye for seeing things. The yoga book looks interesting too. But I doubt yet that I can put him up there with the likes of David Foster Wallace or Hunter S. Thompson. Not yet. Maybe for now Dyer can rest comfortably inside my second tier which includes the likes of John Jeremiah Sullivan, Roberto Bolano, and the sometimes Jonathan Lethem. But I am not finished with Dyer, not by a long shot. And I will get back to you on where he finally ranks in my nonfiction world when I am decidedly finished with my work. And like Geoff Dyer, that will be on my time, and obviously in no time too soon. And it is also likely, that is if he even knew, that Geoff Dyer would not even care.

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## Brian says

Good essays, many about artists with whom I was unfamiliar. The author's slacker ethic and dissolute lifestyle were also quite refreshing. Includes a great essay about last year's favourite, Ryszard Kapuscinski.

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## Olivia says

A mix of essays on photography, literature and his personal life, with many great moments. Reading it was almost like reading a memoir, you come away from it feeling like you understand a bit what makes Geoff Dyer tick, what his life experiences have been, and what he's obsessed with (WWII aviation, Doughnut Plant donuts, Burning Man, sex, etc).

But it might be best read intermittently rather than all at once. Some essays were definitely skippable, other bear re-reading.

Hoping he writes another novel soon!

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### **Zara Raab says**

Geoff Dyer shares with John McFee a talent for spinning compelling prose about almost anything: Muhammad Ali, Miles Davis, the Olympic Games on TV, haut couture, or the arts, whether visual or what he calls “verbals.” All are refracted through a highly literate, unconventional, and discursive instrument: Dyer’s own mind. It comes as no surprise, in the essay “My Life as a Gate-Crasher,” that Dyer decries specialism as boring and timid. Over the decades, Dyer has turned his bold, unruly gaze on photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue, the utopian visions of Joel Sternfeld, and the photographs of carnage of Enrique Metinides, the landscapes of William Turner, and Vincent Van Gogh’s relationship with his brother Theo, as depicted by sculptor Zadkine. He has a knack for finding revealing connections, between, for example, the German poet Rilke and the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. As for “verbals,” these include John Cheever’s journals, Rebecca West great, not easily classified work //Black Lamb and Grey Falcon,// and the journals of Edmund and Jules Goncourt. To top it off, he draws on hilarious first person episodes about what it’s like getting sacked from his first job, coming of age in the dope-crazed London of the Seventies, holding out for the right woman and marrying her. Says Dyer, “One of the most important qualities in life is to hold out for happiness.” Holding out for these essays isn’t a bad idea, either. There’s a happiness in reading them that one of a kind.

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### **Mark Field says**

Ok... this got very close to a five star rating. So why not...? I got the last section of the book - the "autobiographical" essays, and they let the book down... well, really, that are a tad self indulgent, Mr Dyer! Not that I can't relate to the excesses of the 1980's, I was there and I lived to tell the tale too. Aside from that I do like, actually love Dyer's writing, and this collection is wonderful. He is at his best when talking about photography and jazz, his insights are incisive, clear and erudite. while reading this I was filling my notebook with comments - photographers work to search out, musical lists being added to etc etc I gave up on adding books to my to read list. I've enjoyed this guy for years, and he just keeps getting better. I look forward to his latest about Tarkovsky's film Zone, even though I ever likely to watch the film ... you don't need to!

And I've just seen that he's just won the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism. Well done!

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### **Neil Griffin says**

Such an amazing book of reviews, essays, and oddisms. He's the best kind of critic: one who doesn't spend all his energy figuring out why something is terrible, but instead focuses on why a photograph or jazz song or doughnut really speaks to him. I find these comparable to DFW's work and would definitely recommend all of these essays.

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### **Gerhard Schoeman says**

Geoff Dyer's *But Beautiful* is an exquisite book on jazz and his *The Ongoing Moment* is a lucid, flowing consideration of photography. But as a 'man of letters', a critic, he isn't in the same league as Walter Benjamin - who he quotes. Dyer is succinct about jazz artists Nils Petter Molvaer and the Necks, and he can coin a good phrase (though his phrases can border on glib rearrangements of words) - but he is never a profound thinker. Of course, he doesn't claim to be. He's too laid back.

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## Michael says

From the beginning essays on photographers to the wide ranging collection of pieces I really loved this collection. It was all a lot more personal than I expected. I found many real jewels buried in here.

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## Claire says

If you're not already a fan of Geoff Dyer, as I most certainly am, then I would look at the categories in the contents to see what might strike your fancy. "Visuals" are essays about photographers for the most part as well as a painter and sculptor or two. Most contain an image or two which lets you see what Dyer's describing, pondering, and deconstructing. I read these and feel we have love for a number of photographers in common.

"Verbals" are reviews of books and authors. It was a bit dry for me since I hadn't read most of the books, and yet it also contained my favorite quote of the book, from John Cheever's *The Journals*. I wouldn't have encountered Cheever's words otherwise.

Then comes "Musicals," a series of musings on jazz, Indian music (must remember to find some Ramamani to listen to), and Def Leppard.

"Variables" tread closer to the humorous, autobiographical travel essays of Dyer's I love. In particular, "The Wrong Stuff," where he relates his experience getting to fly in a MiG-29 fighter jet; his observations during fashion week while on assignment from *Vogue* while knowing nothing about couture in "Fabulous Clothes," and his experience of "The 2004 Olympics" which reminded me so much of my own.

Finally, there is the "Personals" category which is just what it sounds like. My favorites here are "Comics in a Man's Life," "Otherwise Known as the Human Condition (with particular reference to Doughnut Plant doughnuts," and "Of Course."

Overall, the essays flow from one to the next quite well. You'll read an article on one photographer and then may see them referenced in the next. Someone did a very good job of arranging these.

Definitely worth a read, though if you're new to Dyer, I might start with *Yoga For People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It* or *Out of Sheer Rage*.

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## Nicole says

Geoff Dyer may be one of the best cultural critics of our time, but in this collection I also learned that he is a douche.

## **Tuck says**

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, this collection of essays, book reviews, music reviews, and personal writings highlights Dyer's humor, kindness, breadth of knowledge, and paradoxically, a baby boomer sense of slackerness. His reviews make for making lists; of next books to read (Rebecca West, Sebald, Cheever's Journal), music to seek out (ECM Records, Don Cherry, Keith Jarrett), photographs to view and take (Capa, Avedon, Soth, Gedney, Brixton 1984), places to travel (Belgrade, Algiers, NYC), books to look at (Manguel, Berger).

A fun way to tour the turning century.

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## **Jonathan Hiskes says**

Dyer has extraordinary range, writing personal essays funny and somber along with highly learned book reviews and art and photographic criticism. His close studies of single photographs make me want to try the same. I can't think of another writer of whom I've read five books in a year. Maybe Vonnegut when I was 17. Dyer's books are so diverse they don't feel repetitive.

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## **Zaynāb Book Minimalist says**

Take all my money Mr Geoff Dyer, all my fucking money.

This was good, licking ice cream in the scorching sun kinda good.

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