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The Best American Essays Series as (Partial) Essay History

One morning earlier this year I received an e-mail from my department chair with a subject heading sure to strike fear into the heart of any bibliophile: “Office flood.” Bitingly cold temperatures over the weekend had frozen the pipes in my office. When the heat kicked back on in earnest Monday afternoon, the pipes in the baseboard heater burst. One of my colleagues, walking past my office after I’d already left for the day, noticed the lake forming in the hallway on the other side of my closed door. As a contemporary essay scholar and writer, my shelves are filled with more sentiment than with value, save for some first editions of my favorite women essayists of yesteryear, like Gail Hamilton’s *Gala-Days* (1863) and Fanny Fern’s *Fern Leaves* (1886). To my relief, when I stepped into my sodden office the next morning, I found the books I most treasure high and dry, including all thirty volumes of *The Best American Essays* series, 1986 to 2015. They seemed unfazed by the disaster unfolding in front of them, or were taking mental notes to write about it later. Historically, essays have often been relegated to literature’s basement, but in my office, they get the penthouse suite, and their top-shelf status likely saved them.

I was in high school when series editor Robert Atwan kicked off *The Best American Essays* with the inaugural volume guest edited by Elizabeth Hardwick. I knew very little about literary essays then, but my initiation in college was profound, and I soon joined the revolution. By the time Susan Sontag’s volume appeared in 1992, I was headed off to graduate school for an MFA in nonfiction and calling myself an *essayist*. Shortly after acquiring Joseph Epstein’s volume in 1993, my first, I hunted down the earlier years of the series in used bookstores. (This was the Internet shopper’s Stone Age—no Amazon, no eBay, no AbeBooks). The man who later became my husband wrote a love note alongside Alan Lightman’s name in

my 2000 volume, and three years later, I was lucky enough to appear in the list of Notable Essays in Anne Fadiman's edition. In 2004, the year of Louis Menand, I graduated with my doctorate, having completed my dissertation on the history of women essayists. In many ways, I came of age as an essayist alongside *The Best American Essays* series, enjoying the spoils of the revival Atwan helped to spark.

The Best American Essays series, by its very existence, is both recording and writing a chapter in the long history of the essay—not only for current scholars and practitioners but also for future scholars who may one day comb the pages of the series looking for essay gems or for clues to the essayists and the form as practiced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The series' very name, its use of *essay*, bolsters those of us today who still love that word and will someday remind scholars that not everyone had abandoned *essay* for *creative nonfiction*, the umbrella term that began proliferating the nonfiction world at the turn of the twenty-first century. As a scholar of women essayists, I have spent much of my professional life searching for now-forgotten women essayists in the pages of out-of-print essay annuals and anthologies. It's such collections, particularly those geared for the university classroom, that provide essays and essayists with some degree of immortality. Lynn Bloom notes in her work on "The Essay Canon," a teaching canon compiled from fifty years of composition readers, that the survival of an essay, no matter where it was first published, depends on frequent reprinting in composition readers (401). Regardless of the intended audience, exposure by way of an annual or anthology offers an essayist a better chance of survival by placing that writer in the "orbit of attention," to borrow Barbara Herrnstein Smith's phrase, of current and future readers of nonfiction (10). For the literary historian, the anthology provides an attractive short cut to the orbits of years past. Even the most widely read of essay aficionados, the most dogged of scholars, could hardly cover the amount of material in such wide and varied sources that is read during the selection process, sources themselves that may first come to a reader's attention because they are cited in *Best American*. We allow the editorial team to do the culling for us, and, in the case of *Best American Essays*, the guest editor's status as a respected essayist serves the purpose not only of helping to

sell books but also of cementing the series' ethos, contributing to its brand even. The *Best American Essays* guest editors make up a who's who of American essayists in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Gay Talese, Annie Dillard, Tracy Kidder, David Foster Wallace, Cheryl Strayed, John Jeremiah Sullivan. Just as Walter Cronkite and Peter Jennings once served as trusted gatekeepers to the world news, so, too, we trust Edward Hoagland and Cynthia Ozick to bring us the best of the best essays in a given year.

Since the early twentieth century, popular anthologies like the *Best American Essays* series have not only helped to capture the history of the modern essay, they have shaped it in significant ways, offering forth by way of principles of selection, some stated, some not, the essays and essayists deemed worthy of reading and remembering. Most essay collections that have appeared in the last one hundred years are one-time anthologies rather than essay annuals. *The Oxford Book of American Essays* (1913) is one such anthology, edited by Brander Matthews and offered to readers as proof that American essayists are just as good as British ones, an argument that American literary critics had been making for two centuries, not just about essays (but now, finally, about essays, too). In his introduction, Matthews insists that "American writers are as loyal to the finer traditions of English literature as British writers are" even as "they cannot help having the note of their own nationality" (vi). His table of contents, featuring essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Henry James, is meant to lay out his case. (It does not, however, lay out a case for women participating in the American essay tradition as not a single woman appears among the twenty-eight essayists in the collection. But more on that in a bit.) While they serve different purposes than the annual, which attempts to capture the essay as it is in its moment, the one-off anthologies join the annuals in simultaneously mapping and molding the essay's history, primarily through the voices they choose, or do not choose, to include and the sources they tap, or do not tap, to find those voices.

The closest historical relative to *The Best American Essay* series is the *Essay Annual*, which was published each year from 1933 to 1941 and edited by Erich Walter, a faculty member at the University of

Michigan. In his short introduction to the inaugural volume, Walter writes that he has “for some time felt the need of an annual publication which should give a cross section of the outstanding essays of each year.” As was often the case with essay anthologies in the twentieth century, the intended audience for Walter’s series was primarily university students, teachers, and librarians—just the sort of folks who have been clamoring for such a series, he says. Over fifty years later, writing the foreword to the first volume of *Best American Essays*, Atwan makes a similar start, calling his series “long overdue” (ix). Yet, despite a shared sense of the essay’s neglect, which each editor hopes to rectify by putting forward the best of the best, Walter and Atwan are guided by different objectives. Walter wants to showcase the essay’s ability to define important historical and cultural moments in the United States, to prove, that is, that the essay is up to the task of such heavy lifting. Atwan, on the other hand, in a way few essay editors before him had, wants to celebrate the essay not simply as a means to deliver the goods but as the goods themselves: “This new series calls attention to the essay as a vital and remarkably versatile literary form” (ix). As with *The Best American Essays*, the *Essay Annual* features essays that originally appeared in publications that have long nurtured the essay. In fact, despite the five decades between them, the overlap between publications cited in the *Essay Annual 1933* and *The Best American Essays 1986* is striking. Both volumes feature work that originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The Yale Review*, *The New Republic*, and *Harper’s*. If *The Best American Essays*, like its predecessor, is an archive of how the essay is being written right here right now in the sources that make up the landscape of essay publication, the tables of contents provide a hit list of those magazines and journals where essays are most at home. In almost every volume of *The Best American Essays* is a selection or two from *The New Yorker*, a fact that would no doubt please E.B. White, who did so much to elevate the status of the personal essay in the first half of the twentieth century by way of his contributions both to *The New Yorker* and, after he retired from that magazine, to *Harper’s Magazine*. *The New Yorker* and *Harper’s* have been the most frequent sources for *Best American Essay* picks over the years, followed closely by *The American Scholar*. In fact, from a wider historical perspective, some of the very

magazines that welcomed familiar essayists to their pages in the nineteenth century—particularly *Harper's* and *The Atlantic Monthly*—continue to be important repositories of the essay today, as evidenced by their frequent appearance in *Best American Essays*.

It is vital to note, however, that while *The Best American Essays* plays a significant role in constructing the essay canon of our time, perhaps the essay canon for all time, it does so as imperfectly as anthologies and annuals ever have, particularly when it comes to capturing the history of women essayists. A quick tally of the guest editors of the series seems to indicate an attempt at gender parity, and in fact, my own desires to become an essayist were often buoyed by the number of women essayists/editors adorning the spines of my *Best American Essays* collection. The series launched with a woman and has continued ever since to feature prominent women essayists as guest editors in nearly equitable numbers: Fourteen of the thirty guest editors from 1986 to 2015 have been women. In 2011, however, in an attempt to jumpstart a long overdue conversation about inequity in the contemporary literary publishing world, VIDA: Women in Literary Arts released the first of its annual counts of the number of women represented in top-tier literary publications; that year, the organization also compiled data for the three *Best American* series, in essays, poetry, and short stories. The VIDA authors declared the numbers for the first twenty-five years of *Best American Essays* “dire across the board.” Only 29 percent of the essays that appeared in volumes 1986 through 2010 were written by women (Rebele). In fact, Joyce Carol Oates’ 1991 volume is the only one that comes close to achieving gender parity with eleven essays by women and ten essays by men. Some years are particularly abysmal: Only 10 percent of the essays in Gay Talese’s volume (1987) were written by women; in Stephen Jay Gould’s (2002), 17 percent; and in Hardwick’s (1986), 18 percent.

As I’ve discovered in my own research and recovery work over the years, women are largely absent from the essay canon because editors have often overlooked their work when compiling annuals and anthologies. Remember, the path to essay canonization depends heavily on anthologizing. In fact, if

annuals and anthologies alone are allowed to tell the story of women essayists, then women did not even write essays before the latter half of the nineteenth century, seeming to support Phillip Lopate's hypothesis in the introduction to his seminal anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1994) that there simply "were no female Hazlitts or Lambes" (liii). Indeed, it's hard to find contrary evidence to Lopate's observation in the ancestral pages of the essay anthology. In the preface to his 1939 revised edition of *Century Readings in the English Essay*, editor Louis Wann remarks, and rightly so, that his is "the most comprehensive single-volume anthology of essays in the English language" (ix). Despite its scope, Wann's anthology is typical for the scarcity of women essayists represented in its pages. Of the 111 essayists in Wann's anthology, only four are women, including British poet/essayist Alice Meynell and American essayist Agnes Repplier, two writers who appear more often than any other women in older essay anthologies. In contemporary anthologies, however, Meynell and Repplier are almost always absent, unable to survive the editorial whims of literary history. Instead, in the history of the essay that scholars and editors have passed down to us, Virginia Woolf is more likely to be acknowledged as the first woman essayist with Joan Didion and Annie Dillard following as Woolf's most well-known, her most often anthologized, descendants. Critic John Guillory is right: "the historical process of canon formation, even or especially at the moment of institutional judgment, is too complex to be reduced to determination by the single factor of the social identity of the author" (17). Still, bias against women writers, often unrecognized, certainly accounts for a portion of a neglect that, in the case of essay anthologies, has become something of a self-fulfilling prophesy over the years.

After VIDA released its 2010 count, it reached out to women essayists who had appeared in *Best American* (essays, poetry, and short stories) for reaction. Do you feel conflicted, the writers were asked, "as though you're biting the proverbial hand that feeds or, at least, has praised you?" Cheryl Strayed responded: "I don't feel conflicted at all. In fact, I hope the editors of the Best American series take it as a compliment that we've looked at their numbers when it comes to gender. We counted them because they

count.” Many of the women also noted how much their careers had benefited by inclusion in the series, underscoring the importance of what *Best American Essays*, because of its significance, can do—or not do—for essayists. Strayed said that her appearance in *Best American Essays 2000* was “the biggest thing that had ever happened to me professionally” and “made an actual difference in my career. It gave my work a national audience before I published a book. A lot of opportunities that have come my way can be traced back to my two essays that have appeared in Best American” (King). While the overall number of women represented in *The Best American Essays* remains at 31 percent for the life of the series to date, some progress has been made since the 2010 VIDA Count. In 2011, for example, the year Edwidge Danticat served as guest editor, the volume featured thirteen essays by women and eleven essays by men, the first time in twenty years (and not repeated since) that women accounted for the majority of essays in a *Best American Essays* volume. In 2012, with David Brooks as guest editor, the percentage dropped back to 25 percent. In the last few years, it has risen from there: 38 percent in 2013 (Strayed), 48 percent in 2014 (John Jeremiah Sullivan), 41 percent in 2015 (Ariel Levy).

One of the challenges to better representing, promoting, and celebrating women essayists can likely be found elsewhere in VIDA data, which specifically tracks gender equity in many of the publications that frequently feed material to *Best American Essays*. According to the 2015 VIDA Count, only 28 percent of the bylines in the *Atlantic Monthly*, for example, were written by women. At *Harper's*, significant progress has been made since 2011 when only 17 percent of bylines belonged to women; that number grew to 44 percent in 2015. At *The New Yorker*, women accounted for 34 percent of bylines in 2015. It is important to note here that a number of smaller publications that frequently contribute work to *The Best American Essays* series fare much better in terms of including work by women, among them, the *Gettysburg Review* and *Granta*. The fact of the matter remains, though, in a literary publishing world still largely dominated by male voices, especially in these so-called top tier publications, anthology editors must work harder to tell a more accurate history of the essay: Women write essays; they write *best* essays.

There has been much talk in the last couple of years about women essayists finally coming into their own, or at least being recognized and appreciated for their work. In 2014, Strayed and Ben Moser took up the following question in a Bookends column for *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*: “Is this a golden age for women essayists?” Strayed’s reply: “Probably because I’m of the opinion that as long as we still have reason to wedge ‘women’ as a qualifier before ‘essayist,’ the age is not exactly golden. And yet it’s hard to deny there’s something afoot. Essayists who happen to be women are having a banner year.” And Moser’s: “With its thicket of allusions and the expensive education required to grasp them, the essay has largely been a bourgeois form. It doesn’t have to be. A generation might prove itself worthy of those predecessors who opened the genre to women by opening it to more people, women and men, black and white, gay or straight . . .” (Strayed and Moser). *The Best American Essays* series has an important hand in this welcome project, if not the most important hand of all the hands on the contemporary essay right now. As Strayed notes, *Best American Essays* counts because it counts. Its influence is undeniable—and deservedly so. While publications that invite the work of essayists that eventually will be considered by *Best American* are responsible for opening their pages to as many voices as possible, it’s *Best American* that holds the greatest sway, that ultimately makes the biggest mark. It has a chance to shape the genre’s history—not a partial history but a complete history—that belongs to all of us and in which all of us should be able to find something for, and of, ourselves.

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