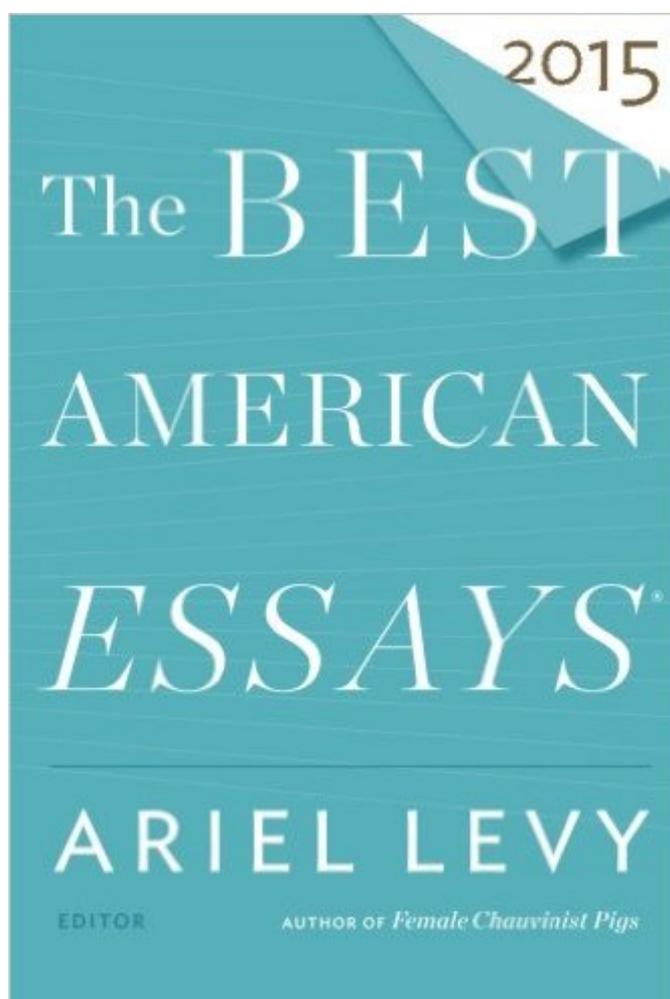


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# The Best American Essays 2015



## Synopsis

“Writing an essay is like catching a wave,” posits guest editor Ariel Levy. “To catch a wave, you need skill and nerve, not just moving water.” This year’s writers are certainly full of nerve, and have crafted a wide range of pieces awash in a diversity of moods, voices, and stances. Leaving an abusive marriage, parting with a younger self, losing your sanity to Fitbit, and even saying goodbye to a beloved pair of pants imbued with meaning are all unified by the daring of their creation. As Levy notes, “Writing around an idea you think is worthwhile” “an idea you suspect is an insight” requires real audacity.”

The Best American Essays 2015 includes Hilton Als, Roger Angell, Justin Cronin, Meghan Daum, Anthony Doerr, Margo Jefferson, David Sedaris, Zadie Smith, Rebecca Solnit and others.

ARIEL LEVY, guest editor, has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2008. She received the National Magazine Award for essays and criticism for her piece “Thanksgiving in Mongolia,” which she is expanding into a book for Random House.

Female Chauvinist Pigs, Levy’s first book, has been translated into seven languages. She teaches at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and at Wesleyan University.

ROBERT ATWAN, the series editor of The Best American Essays since its inception in 1986, has published on a wide variety of subjects, from American advertising and early photography to ancient divination and Shakespeare. His criticism, essays, humor, poetry, and fiction have appeared in numerous periodicals nationwide.

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## Customer Reviews

Received this advance reading copy from Vine. Have read two thirds of the essays and skimmed

several others. While these essays are nicely written, as one would expect, and while some are moderately entertaining, as a group they seem to fall way short of what I expect to find in the collection of the "best" essays of the year. Most of them are personal memoirs, about growing old, growing up, convalescing, and one, (among the best two or three) is about the process of extricating oneself from and leaving an abusive husband ("It will Look Like a Sunset" by Kelly Sundberg). But others -- you have to scratch your head and ask "Why was this essay included in a collection of the 'best'?" For example: Cheryl Strayed is a compelling writer, but why, oh why, was her essay "My Uniform" included in this anthology? \*spoilers ahead\* This brief confessional narrates the author's long sartorial journey with a single pair of black pants, which when they became too decrepit to wear, she finally threw away, save for the crotch, which she cut out and mailed to her husband. Is this the best we can do in a year when we are beset with ISIS, Ebola, the ongoing effects of global warming and species extinction? Seriously??? Why is there not a single essay by Elizabeth Kolbert? or Andrew Solomon? or Adam Gopnik? or Michael Pollan? Just to name a very few among the authors who are writing these days about topics that matter. The essays in this anthology are not awful but wow, I really have a problem understanding why these were selected as the "best"

I try to read each new edition of The Best American Essays, and I like that it brings together great essays from multiple sources. It introduces me to new authors, and I often buy individual books by some of the authors. It's always a worthwhile read, though with each year, your enjoyment will vary depending on how your taste lines up with the editor's. The 2015 edition of The Best American Essays is composed almost entirely of first-person personal essays. The only way I know to review these collections is by the number of essays that left a strong impression on me. There were seven essays that I thought were memorable (though almost all were interesting reads), a number that is in keeping with past editions, certainly enough to make it a worthwhile read, as always. Some high points: Roger Angell's "This Old Man" takes a wry look at old age; Isaiah Berlin's "A Message to the 21st Century" makes a straightforward idea sound revolutionary and essential; Margo Jefferson's "Scenes From a Life in Negroland" is an honest portrait of a side of the African-American experience I don't remember reading about before; Tim Kreider's warm and funny "A Man and His Cat" felt like the definitive portrait of cat "ownership"; Kate Lebo's "The Loudproof Room" was a fresh perspective on a hearing disability; Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's "Reflections on Indexing My Lynching Book" explores the emotional side of an academic undertaking; Zadie Smith's "Find Your Beach" captures a particular aspect of Manhattan perfectly; Kelly Sundberg's "It Will Look Like a Sunset" is a moving account of grim events -- no small feat.

I've been collecting and reading Best American Travel Writing since 2000 and like them so well I began adding Best American Essays to the collection about 4 years later. I look forward to each new edition every October and in recent years I have to say Essays have been consistently better overall than Travel Writing -- until the 2015 edition, that is. This edition is so bad it actually mad me a little angry. I don't know if it was just an off year for essays or, as I suspect is more likely the case, the guest editor has particularly poor judgement and taste. It's not that the wordsmithing is bad, just that the subject matters are boring and the delivery plodding beyond endurance. I was only able to read a few from start to finish, giving up on the rest long before the authors did. Even Cheryl Strayed and David Sedaris, who can usually be counted on to hold your attention, maybe even evoke a smile or two, were weak compared to previous contributions. Really disappointing after waiting all year. Save your time and money, skip this one.

This is a strong anthology of essays that I enjoyed overall. All the essays were short enough to be read in one sitting, which is my preferred way for reading essays. There are a few trusty big name crowd-pleasers in the mix -- Malcolm Gladwell with his cogent, well-argued piece on social status and immigration; Zadie Smith's drifting, whimsical meditation on Manhattan; David Sedaris' self-deprecating tale of enslavement to Fitbit. My personal favorite goes to Solonit's "Arrival Gates," a lyrical essay penned at the Japanese shrine Fushimi Inari-taisha. I am not a stranger to Solonit's prolific writings, many of which lyrical and travel-related, but this essay struck a particular chord with me, its peaceful reverence and acceptance had a lulling, entrancing draw, creating Solonit's own trance, lost in the the presence of time. There are others, who despite their longstanding fame, are new voices to me -- Roger Angell's hugely entertaining essay "This Old Man" has one of the most enduring, memorable opening voice that I can recall. My only complaint, which is also voiced by other readers, is that this collection is heavy on the topic of aging and mortality. This perhaps reflect the corpus of work in 2015, with the aging of the boomer population, and the noteworthy works of writers like Hitchens and Didion circling the imminent passing of life. But as a celebration of the best essays of our time, I wished for a little optimism, a little more color and diversity

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