



The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2012

Dave Eggers (Editor)

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The Best American series is the premier annual showcase for the country's finest short fiction and nonfiction. Each volume's series editor selects notable works from hundreds of magazines, journals, and websites. A special guest editor, a leading writer in the field, then chooses the best twenty or so pieces to publish. This unique system has made the Best American series the most respected — and most popular — of its kind.

The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2012 includes

Kevin Brockmeier, Judy Budnitz, Junot Díaz, Louise Erdrich,
Nora Krug, Julie Otsuka, Eric Puchner, George Saunders,
Adrian Tomine, Jess Walter, and others

The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2012 Details

Date : Published October 2nd 2012 by Mariner Books (first published January 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9780547595962

Author : Dave Eggers (Editor)

Format : Paperback 432 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Writing, Essays, Anthologies

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From Reader Review The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2012 for online ebook

Jessica says

I read this anthology every year, usually over the holidays. It is hands-down some of the best prose I read all year, especially since I am so bad at keeping up with publications. Many thanks to the intrepid group of high school students that put together such a kick-a** book, making it so convenient for me to access this essential, relevant literature, journalism, graphic arts, and so forth. As far as I'm concerned, this is required reading.

Patty says

"I pondered all of these things because of books, I asked big questions because of books. I dreamed because of books.

...I imagine that each young person who has poured his or her heart into this edition has been changed as a result.

The caterpillar sprouts wings.

And I know that, as with reading any book, you, dear reader, will change too.

Now go off and fly."

Ray Bradbury

I really like the Best American Series. I have read volumes of the best American essays, short stories, science and nature writing. I have never picked up any of the unrequired reading collections before. I plan to find some more since I enjoyed the 2012 edition.

There are over thirty different pieces of writing in this collection. There are essays, short stories, letters and a comic – all of which were interesting reading. I especially enjoyed "Paper Tigers", "The Love Act" and "Tin Man." There were very few pieces that I found difficult or boring.

The most amazing thing about this collection is that it is collated by high school students from California and Michigan. I am stunned by their long distance collaboration and their abilities to come to consensus. I don't think that 29 adults could do a better job than these 29 students. I wish them a great deal of success as they go on to college.

Theomaniac says

Reading this book was painful. I'm shocked to see I've only been reading it for a month; it feels like at least a year. I've read these collections before and liked them but wow did this one miss the mark in all kinds of ways.

First, lots of stuff on Occupy Wall Street made it so dated. It seems obvious to me that the editor should have realized that this stuff would not age well. So many things can be read out of their time and still be relevant.

This was just boring and sad.

Second, it seemed to be almost entirely non-fiction. I haven't read any of the newer ones, so is this the way they are now? I really dislike it, and I've always disliked this postmodernist thing of not labeling what is fiction and what isn't. Context matters. But as a rule, it's always been the fiction I've read in these collections that I've enjoyed. The non-fiction is just okay, for the most part.

Third, so many of the essays included were just not good. Most were not bad, I guess, but only one or two were at all interesting and not self-indulgent. Speaking of, the last essay in the book was a lot. Shocker, racism exists. I understand that some people don't believe that, but if not, this essay is not going to convince them. And was the part about endorsing "The Game" for Asians ironic? It didn't seem ironic.

I enjoyed "A Fable For Living", "Tin Man", and "Tenth of December" (though I'd read that last one before). The essay about Phoenix Jones was kind of interesting. Maybe there were a couple other things that got lost in the muck of intense boredom. For those three stories I bumped up the rating, but I was seriously considering going one star, and if anything I usually rate books rather generously.

Tuck says

first let us praise a bunch of damn kids who have anthologized an exciting and entertaining "best of 2011" corpus (take note viacom/houghton mifflin/penguin/randomhouse/.....) , then let us acknowledge that 826 valencia and www.826national.org is a working, grassroots way for people passionate about art and writing volunteer with kids to keep this spirit alive. really, this is the antithesis of "hunger games" or james patterson, this is where future dalkey archive, national book award, two dollar radio, graywolf authors are coming from (NOT nicolodian (sp?)). let us say that the 2012 iteration of nonrequired reading is the best edited, and best chosen, of this series that started in i think 2002.

then point out that ray bradbury, on his death bed practically, wrote a fantastic introduction and bittersweet epitaph to reading and writing.

then also point out alexie's cutting sonnet of indians and popculture.

then broad, somewhat coherent (if also bittersweet, as it is as dead as bradbury?), overviews of occupy wall st movement.

then short fiction and nonfiction by all the usual suspects and some new ones, junot diaz, budnitz, erdrich, otsuka, michale poore, eric puchner, ryan rivas, jon ronson, jess walter, john jeremiah sullivan, wesley yang, mona simpson, and more.

so for your nonrequired reading, read this.

ps: to editors, more music next time, come on.

Avid Reader says

Compiling a composition of the "best" is a daunting task especially as it pertains to the written word. Readers are a very opinionated bunch so you'd better be spot on and bring it.

Luckily for me this years reader did just that! Was blown away by the wide array of perspectives, ingenuity and magical stuff all in one place!

I've committed to picking 3 such pieces (not an easy task, my original list had 8) and giving my two cents on each. Wanna hear it? Here it goes....

History of Olivia Hamilton

from Inside This Place, Not of it: Narratives from Women's Prisons

Here I'm a little biased, I've read the book that this true account came from and am still haunted by it. Additionally one of the editor's, Ayelet Waldman is one of my favorite people and that makes me a bit impartial (plus did you know she's married to Michael Chabon?) I digress.....

This is a moving first person account of a young pregnant woman from the south who was sentenced to prison and the vile, inhumane and possibly illegal way her and subsequently her child were treated.

I really don't want to add any quotes or give too much away here because it is better served in its full form. I highly suggest that you also pick up the book in its entirety. Eye opening!

Beautiful Monsters

Eric Puchner

This is a crazy crafty short about a time where traditional human beings are almost extinct and have been purposely replaced by immortal adult like children called Perennials. The few mortal humans left (who are like giants to this new race) are the only ones remaining who procreate and exist in our current traditional family unit. The mortals do this in fear and exile from the Perennial children.

This story is all about two Perennials who harbor one mortal and all of the conflicting emotions that ensue as a result of having something, albeit briefly, that they've only heard of in folklore.

This story is thought provoking and beautiful. I teared up (admittedly I'm a sucker and cry at Disney movies) but it was well worth the read.

The Amazing Adventures of Phoenix Jones

Jon Ronson

Wowzers!!!!!! LOVED this. I'd never heard about this story (guess it got a lot of press at one point) but don't watch much TV and am new to Twitter so my pop culture exposure tends to be limited.

This is a story of a real life super hero from Seattle. It comes complete with some of the best pictures I've ever seen attached to an article.

Basically there is an actual band of real life superheros scattered throught the US. This article focuses on one in particular: Phoenix Jones (not his real name). I ended up both falling in love with this dude and being supremely concerned for his mental well being.

The best part is this tense stand off between Jones and his "team" confronting some drug dealers all with the poor reporter (Jon Ronson) in tow. One of the things I appreciated most about the writing was the author's candor and witty observations. This is a must read!

I'm interested in hearing which pieces stuck out to others.

Happy Reading

Mary says

Every year a group of students gather weekly with Dave Eggers as their leader and mentor. They comb through journals, magazines and websites to find the best writing of the year. The end result is this book. It is always fabulous, this year is no exception. I look forward to this book every year.. There is no other compilation of diverse, humorous, tragic, and relevant reading to be found in one bound edition. If you want to give yourself a great gift, buy this book.

meyamashi says

Eclectic is the word for this kind of collection of magazine and journal writing compiled as a volunteer project by high school students in the Bay Area (California) and Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti (Michigan). This edition of the popular series is edited by Dave Eggers and has a unique introduction by Ray Bradbury that was dictated just weeks before his death at 91. His wit and insight are definitely as enlivening as any of his celebrated science fiction classics. The cover illustration is by Brian Selznik. Both were chosen by the students. Dave Eggers does get in his two cents in a very short story in the Editor's Note.

This volume has the usual "Front Section," described as the place to put items not easily classifiable and some that naturally belong there. Sherman Alexie's always trenchant "Sonnet, with vengeance" begins this section. For those not familiar with his work, I'll let you discover it here. Junot Diaz then offers up a very short memoir that had first appeared in the New Yorker. Several submissions related to the Occupy Wall Street Movement, including the Declaration of the Occupation of New York City and Minutes from the General Assembly of Occupy Wall Street, followed by Best American Observations at a Modern Protest Movement by Said Sayrafiezadeh and its companion pieces, Best American Reflection of Historic Protest Movements by Adam Hochschild and Best American Reflection on a Modern Protest Movement by Robert Hass, originally printed in the New York Times. An unusual idea for writers, Best American Letters in the Mail represent offerings by 4 writers mailed on a monthly basis to subscribers of The Rumpus. Then, The Best American Palindrome, from The Believer, all 407 words of which can be read front-to-back and vice versa. It's even topical (a celebration of the Cambridge eco-boutique Greenward), including a lexicon of acronyms, references, and abbreviations. The Best American Tweets Responding to the Death of Osama bin Laden needs no explanation. My favorite: @whitegirlproblem: "Osama's been dead to me for a long time #whitegirlproblems." And bless their hearts, they didn't forget to include The Best American Lonely Guy, either.

Section II presents longer pieces of fiction (Kevin Brockmeier, Judy Budnitz, Louise Erdrich, Phil Klay, Anthony Marra, Julie Otsuka, Michael Poore, Eric Puchner, Mark Robert Rapacz, Chaz Reetz Laiolo, George Saunders, Jess Walter), nonfiction (Olivia Hamilton, Robin Levi, and Ayelet Waldman; Wesley Yang), graphic novella/comics (Nora Krug, Jon Ronson, Adrian Tomine) and a eulogy (Mona Simpson, for her brother). Sometimes without knowing more information about a piece it isn't always obvious what is fiction and what isn't.

The densest section of the volume consists of Endnotes: Contributors Notes, The Best American Nonrequired Reading Committee (with photos!), Notable Nonrequired Reading of 2011, About 826 National (the youth literacy project that receives the proceeds from the book, with satellite locations --more photos!-- and Scholar Match.

A thoroughly enjoyable read from first page to last. And free from a library near you. I'd recommend purchasing this one, though. It's that good.

Will Kent says

Dark, dark, dark.

"The Book and the Butterfly" is the most direct and beautiful piece in the book. Ray Bradbury introduces this compilation with the wonder and effortlessness that define him as an author.

Part I - Weighed down by several Occupy pieces, the first half of this year's edition is not as playful, creative, or self-aware as other years. One bright spot is the Best American Letters in the Mail. People are wonderful correspondents, turns out.

Part II - Similar to the first half of the anthology, the second half focuses on distopias, personal loss, ego, and meandering narratives. Highlights include:

"Tin Man" - Judy Budnitz - This is what it is like to have your heart removed. Cold, empty, afraid are the feelings that make this piece one of the best.

"Palace of the People" - Anthony Marra - Where violence and destruction fall flat in other works, here it is effective, making a distinction between the individual and the system. Marra weaves desperation, frustration, and the weight of society together in an upsetting narrative about drugs in St. Petersburg.

"Beautiful Monsters" - Eric Pucher - Of all the distopias imagined in this book, Pucher's is grounded in humanity, character, and compassion. The rest are distant, and not nearly as urgent. This is one of the best.

"Outlaw" - Jose Antonio Vargas - The Occupy pieces did little to persuade in this anthology, however, Vargas' "Outlaw" spends page after page, making a cohesive, dignified argument. By the end it realizes itself as self-evident, concluding as compelling, justified, and expertly delivered.

"Paper Tigers" - Wesley Yang - Although the details of this piece are interesting, the real meat of "Paper Tigers" is the commentary on a globalizing society. Sometimes eluding to an argument is all an author needs to do. Exploring the tension between cultures would have made this work even better, but the questions Yang introduces makes this a smart choice to bring the collection, and 2012, to a close.

Preethi says

This book turned out to be a very pleasant surprise. Short stories or essays is not a genre I enjoy, but I know I miss out on gems published in online magazines, written by authors I love. Books like this are perfect in such cases.

I discovered short gems by Junot Diaz, Anthony Marra and Julie Otsuka. There were a few articles I had read and shared earlier in this book, reading them again was another pleasant surprise (Jose Antonio Vargas' essay on how finally decided to expose his immigration status in Outlaw and Mona Simpson's almost tearful eulogy for her brother Steve Jobs). And discovering new writers with heartening stories like The Years of my birth by Louise Erdrich, Eric Puchner's dystopian story beautiful Monsters, Mark Robert Rapacz's Bellwether, Jess Walter's dystopian sci-fi Don't eat cat and Wesley Yang's essay on Bamboo ceiling Paper Tigers.

Am going to look out for more latest versions of this series, in the hope of unearthing more such gems.

Chris Kargel says

I eagerly search out this series every year (about the time January looms its head and the obsessions with year round-ups reminds me that the books exist). But once I remember it, I'm excited to dive into works I otherwise wouldn't have encountered (except for usually one piece, which this year was the article on real-life superheroes, in case it's pertinent). Of course, this collection remains enjoyable, if filled with a little less whimsy, especially in the front section than prior editions. I'm always a little jealous regarding the experience these high schoolers have culled in putting this together, but I'm grateful to them for doing it.

Melissa says

This collection didn't seem as light-hearted as previous NR's that I read. The "Front Section" bits are usually more light-hearted, in my opinion, and in this collection many of them are about the Occupy Movement (manifestos, minutes, essays) or have an undercurrent of exasperation underneath them (Alexie, Diaz, Ragsdale).

The short-story/essay section is amazing. Just amazing. Short fiction from Louise Erdrich, Julie Otsuka (wow, just wow), and Jess Walter. Essays from Olivia Hamilton/Robin Levi/Ayelet Waldman (makes me mad), Jon Ronson (who knew there were actual people dressed up as superheroes), John Jeremiah Sullivan, and Wesley Yang.

I got a little sniffy over the transcription of a eulogy given at Steve Jobs's funeral by his sister, Mona. And I'm not a Jobs acolyte, so she said beautiful things.

I hope Jose Antonio Vargas gains his citizenship. If you need evidence why the Dream Act should be passed then you need to read this article.

Ben Miller says

More filler than killer.

Nancy says

Excellent compilation. Loved the entire first part which is rare. Interesting and varied essays on the Occupy Wall Street movement. There were only two pieces that I skimmed, but the rest was great. Just ordered my Best Nonrequired 2017 which arrives tomorrow. Perfect timing. My favorite was "The Years of my Birth" by Louise Erdrich.

Jennie says

Wow. What an awesome collection of writing. I loved this one from beginning to end. Not only did they pick pieces from excellent writers, they picked writing on a diverse variety of topics that really captured the 2012 zeitgeist. I am sometimes dismissive of anthologies because they're so hit or miss, but this really proved me wrong. These stories are strong, emotional, passionate, clever, intelligent, illuminating and heartbreaking. It's a great snapshot of where we were culturally this year and I think anyone could find something in the book that resonates. The only ones that left me scratching my head were the long palindrome - I found it gimmicky, annoying and unreadable (but I also can see why they wanted to include it)....the letters from Stephen Elliot and others, he is certainly a nation treasure, but I couldn't get into those rambling reflections....and the comic about Horticulture. That last one in particular was terrible and so antiquated in its humor, I really really didn't get it. But those are small complaints about a real gem of literary excellence.

These were my favorites:

The Money by Junot Diaz - He can do no wrong in my eyes.

The Years of My Birth by Louise Erdrich - I loved this one so much that I believed it! She did such an awesome job describing the process of meeting her mother for the first time. I didn't realize it was fiction until I looked it up.

Notes from a Bystander by Said Sayrafiezadeh - observations on the Occupy protest. Pitch perfect.

Redeployment by Phil Klay - Painfully good.

An Oral History of Olivia Hamilton - an appalling case of prison abuse considered "standard practice."

Tenth of December - This one was my overall favorite, something about it really disarmed me. I went back and reread it as soon as I finished.

Steve Jobs eulogy - a powerful account of his life and death by his sister.

Peyton's Place by John Jeremiah Sullivan - an incredibly weird story about a rather typical American family in a bizarre situation. I love the Twilight Zone quality of it, and the mashup of pop culture entertainment and suburban family life.

Outlaw by Jose Antonio Vargas - Might be the most important piece in here. I wish it were required reading

for all Americans. There has never been a better case for immigration reform than the soul crushing story of what this talented, inspiring man has been through.

Paper Tigers by Wesley Yang- a great closing piece regarding the Bamboo Ceiling and other aspects of Asian American life. Whether you agree with his observations or not, I found it fascinating. Living in Tokyo has made me aware of a lot of these social differences and I can appreciate his observations. Also there's something about his cantankerous rage, his insight and self awareness, that I love. Consider this passage:

"In lieu of loving the world twice as hard, I care, in the end, about expressing my obdurate singularity at any cost. I love this hard and unyielding part of myself more than any other reward the world has to offer a newly brightened and ingratiating demeanor, and I will bear any costs associated with it."

So listen, just go read this, you won't regret it.

Sarah says

I can't tell if I'm getting tired of this series, which I've been buying since the beginning, or if it's just in a slump. The last few have felt lackluster, and this one in particular. Or maybe lackluster isn't the word. Somber. High school kids are supposed to be picking these stories! I feel very bad for them if they feel their work needs to be this serious to be good. Usually at least the first section is funny, and then the second section is a mix of short stories and non-fiction pieces and comics, and I can't tell which is which (except for the comics, of course.)

But yeah, somber. The first section was mostly about the Occupy movement, and a good portion of the second section was made up of war stories and hospital stories. There was an excellent piece about the experiences of a woman who gave birth in prison, and a compelling piece about a soldier's return from war that I am pretty sure (but not positive) was fiction. And I liked the Louise Erdrich story. But other than that, I found myself skimming a lot. There were pieces in the "recommended reading" also-ran section at the end that I think would have made this a more varied experience. But, y'know, I'll probably buy the next one when it comes out.
