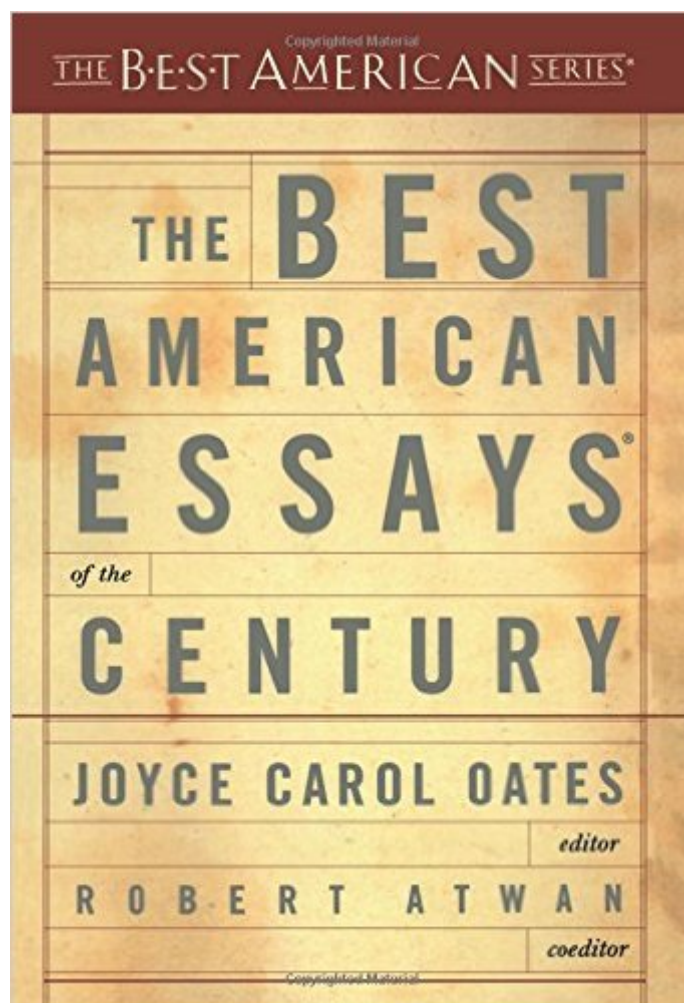


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# The Best American Essays Of The Century (The Best American Series)



## Synopsis

This singular collection is nothing less than a political, spiritual, and intensely personal record of America's tumultuous modern age, as experienced by our foremost critics, commentators, activists, and artists. Joyce Carol Oates has collected a group of works that are both intimate and important, essays that move from personal experience to larger significance without severing the connection between speaker and audience. From Ernest Hemingway covering bullfights in Pamplona to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," these essays fit, in the words of Joyce Carol Oates, "into a kind of mobile mosaic suggest[ing] where we've come from, and who we are, and where we are going." Among those whose work is included are Mark Twain, John Muir, T. S. Eliot, Richard Wright, Vladimir Nabokov, James Baldwin, Tom Wolfe, Susan Sontag, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Joan Didion, Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow, Stephen Jay Gould, Edward Hoagland, and Annie Dillard.

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## Customer Reviews

This is a wonderful collection of essays that gave me several hours of reading pleasure. I take strong exception, however, to the use of "Best" in the title. Another Amazon reviewer says it is the only book of essays one need ever buy. Both claims greatly exceed the load-bearing capacity of the 55 essays included. It is an impossible task to reduce a century's worth of essays down to a handful that are "best". If Joyce Carol Oates and her co-editor Robert Atwan had called it "Some of the Best American Essays of the Century" I would have no quarrel with them. Some of the selections strain the definition of "essay", but are marvelous pieces of writing, nevertheless. Mark Twain's "Corn-pone

Opinions" leads off. "You tell me whar a man gits his corn-pone, en I'll tell you what his 'pinion is". Ms Oates says Twain is making a "ringing denunciation of cultural chauvinism". I read Twain as saying we are all captives of the conformity we accept as the price for the approval of our peers. Either way the editors are as guilty of "corn-pone opinions" as any of us. More than a third of the pieces are by famous authors -- best-known for their fiction and poetry rather than for their essays. Writers who worked primarily in the essay form are badly under-represented, e.g. Hannah Arendt, Dwight McDonald, Roger Angell, Jaques Barzun, AJ Liebling, MFK Fisher, Lewis Lapham, Noel Perrin, Nati Hentoff, Walter Lippmann, VS Naipul, Calvin Trillin, Andrew Tobias, and Gary Wills. Atwan appends a bibliography of 200 "notable" authors excluded from the collection. Oates says her collection's theme is the "...expression of personal experience within the historical".

Many would regard the task of selecting "The Best American Essays of the Century" as a most daunting honor, to be approached with much nail biting and trepidation. Whatever you choose, dissenters will howl. Oates, no shirker when it comes to hard work and firm opinions, offers her choices with confidence. "My preference was always to essays that, springing from intense personal experience, are nonetheless significantly linked to larger issues." Arranged chronologically, the essays lean heavily toward reflections on the human condition within American culture. The writing is, without exception, eloquent and insightful. Race is a pervasive theme and inspires the most powerful pieces. The best essay in the book is James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son;" visceral and intimate, full of pain, bewilderment and searing honesty, whole of heart and intellect. Pieces by Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, Martin Luther King, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Langston Hughes, no matter how familiar, still shiver the soul with the conjunction of powerful intellect, soul-searing experience and the intimacy of an articulate voice. My second favorite essay could hardly be more different. John Muir's "Stickeen," has it all: adventure, peril, pathos, the passion for nature and exploration, and the curious relationship between man and dog; a rousing good story. Other themes place the writer in his contemporary culture; F.

Joyce Carol Oates is not simply a prolific writer, she is also a tremendously 'prolific' reader. In this selection of the best American essays of the century, she and her co- editor series editor Robert Atwan choose many of the most important American essays of the century. If I just think of those I know beforehand there is William James famous 'The Moral Equivalent of War' which talks about the place of sport in American life. There is perhaps the most well- known literary essay of the century T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in which he argues that each new literary

work of significance redefines the whole Tradition, makes us see it all in a new way. There is F. Scott Fitzgerald's tremendously moving personal essay on his own breakdown, 'The Crack-up' in which he tells us 'in the dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning. There is James Baldwin's searing essay, 'Notes of a Native Son' and Mark Twain telling us in 'Corn-pone' that where the person gets his core- pone is where his opinions is. It is a typical humorous and brilliant Twain attack on the common-sense conventional mind, and a call for the kind of independent thinking he in his work so exemplified. There are a considerable number of essays on race, on the condition of the blacks in America. Richard Wright, Zola Hurston, Baldwin, Maya Angelou. There are outstanding essays on science by Lewis Thomas, Stephen J. Gould, Oliver Sachs. There are literary explorations and explorations of the American landscape and mind. Among the other writers included are Eudora Welty, Susan Sontag, Tom Wolfe, Donald Hall, Cynthia Ozick, William Manchester, John Updike, Saul Bellow, James Agee, John Jay Chapman, John Muir, Nabokov, Edwin Hoagland, William Gass, Hemingway, Elizabeth Hardwick, S.J.

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