

The Best American Essays of the Century (The Best American Series)

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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.

The title *The Best American Essays of the Century* seems transparent enough, but don't be deceived. What Joyce Carol Oates has assembled is not so much a diverse collection as a sonorous march through what keeps getting called the American century. Read this not as a collection to dip into but as a history--a history of race in America. Oates says it best herself in her introduction: "It can't be an accident that essays in this volume by men and women of ethnic minority backgrounds are outstanding: to paraphrase Melville, to write a 'mighty' work of prose you must have a 'mighty' theme." The mighty pens at work here belong to, among others, Zora Neale Hurston ("How It Feels to Be Colored Me"), Langston Hughes ("Bop"), and James Baldwin ("Notes of a Native Son"). Oates has opted not for the most unexpected but for the most important and stirring essays of our time.

Other chords sound repeatedly as well: the problem of our relationship with nature (Annie Dillard, John Muir, and Gretel Ehrlich); the difficulty of identity in disrupted times (F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joan Didion, and Michael Herr). In her essay "The White Album," Didion famously declares: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." The stories Oates has collected are not easy. Here is the hard-won truth, from writers unwilling to forgive even themselves. Even Martin Luther King Jr. doesn't let himself off the hook, as he writes in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail": "If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me." --Claire Dederer

JOYCE CAROL OATES is the recipient of the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction and the winner of the National Book Award. Among her major works are *We Were the Mulvaneys*, *Blonde*, and *The Falls*.

ROBERT ATWAN has been the series editor of *The Best American Essays* since its inception in 1986. He has edited numerous literary anthologies and written essays and reviews for periodicals nationwide.

Other Books

John Updike. This definitive guide to materials by and about this prolific American author consists of a printed first volume and a second volume on CD-ROM. The A and B sections of Volume I, concern separately printed works by Updike and books to which he has

contributed. The volume also features over 500 grayscale images of book covers, jackets, broadsides, and many seldom seen items. It includes comprehensive listings of Updike's short fiction, poems, articles, essays and reviews, as well as extensive documentation of letters, speeches, dramatic works, manuscripts, interviews, and blurbs. Volume II contains entries for material about Updike and his work (reviews, commentary, and theses), several appendices (media appearances, work read by others, works in translation, exhibits and catalogs), and full-color versions of images appearing in the printed volume.

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