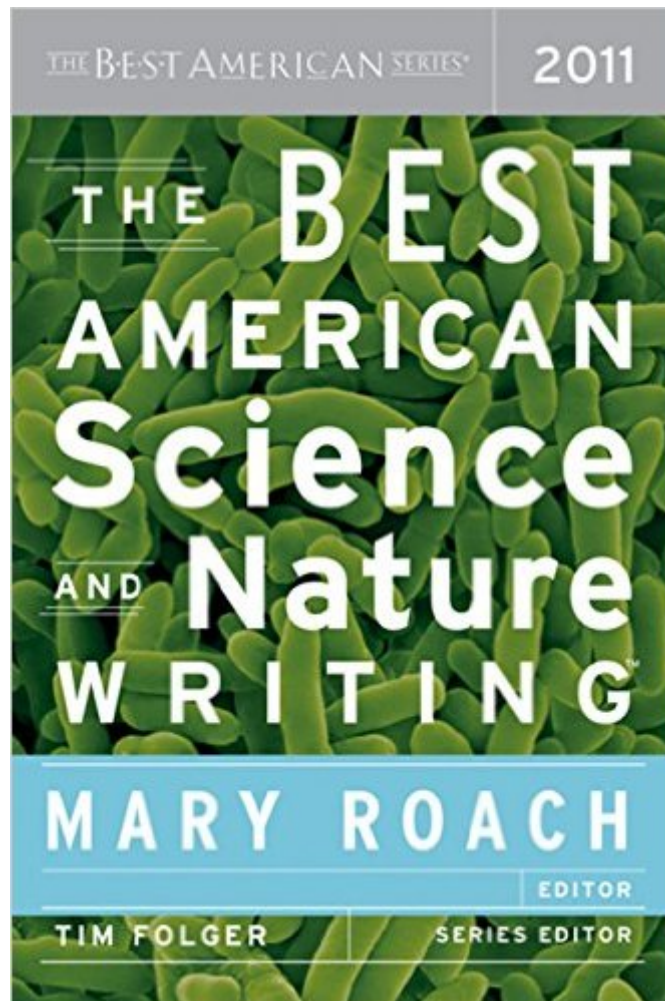


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The Best American Science And Nature Writing 2011



Synopsis

The Best American Series First, Best, and Best-Selling 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 Science and Nature Writing 2011 includes Atul Gawande, Jonathan Franzen, Deborah Blum, Malcolm Gladwell, Oliver Sacks, Jon Mooallem, Jon Cohen, Luke Dittrich, and others

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Customer Reviews

I look forward to reading and reviewing this series every year. These articles undergo a lot of scrutiny and, as you might expect, there's not a single one that's not exceptional. Science journalists have a harder time finding places to publish these days, hard science is less available, and the articles are getting fluffier. That's not really OK with me but it is what it is - and it reflects the scientific literacy of most US readers and is thus inevitable. Like last year, this year's edition is heavy on medical science: "The Organ Dealer" by Bhattacharjee: When the illegal underground market gets hold of something people want, people suffer. This article demonstrates that concept for the worldwide organ transplant business.*One of my favorites - "Nature's Spoils" by Burkhard Bilger: A delightful romp through an alternative lifestyle as you rediscover the symbiotic relationship between humankind and bacteria. The author takes us from "urban squatters" who are not above

dumpster diving to homesteaders living on communes who prefer raw milk and roadkill. Be prepared to "read through" some of the earthier parts of this article while our author drives home the idea that "Modern hygiene has prevented countless colds, fevers, and other ailments, but its central premise is hopelessly outdated. The human body isn't besieged: it's saturated - infused with microbial life at every level." "The Chemist's War" by Blum: During Prohibition people found liquor by whatever means. The easiest way was to procure industrial alcohol and dress it up with a new flavor. Deciding to fight fire with fire, the government poisoned industrial alcohol. By the time Prohibition ended in 1933 this federal program had killed at least 10,000 citizens.

I've been reading this series for more than ten years. It has consistently been the single best way for the harried resident of the 21st century to come up to speed on what is going on in the crazy, achingly beautiful, wonderful world of well done science. This issue....it is simply the best ever. You want thrills and chills? Occasionally like to read something scary enough to give you a tingling spine and goosebumps? Do you enjoy having your mind subjected to a scientific Shock and Awe campaign from time to time? Are you the type that has been known to lapse into a nirvana like state when exposed to repeated "Eureka!" moments, pummeled into bliss by overdoses of intoxicating insights? Well, then. If your answer is yes to any or all of the above questions, drop that trashy beach novel, toss that overly serious mono-topic non-fiction tome that you're dutifully, with all the determination of a nuclear powered icebreaker, forging through, and buy this book. Buy it yesterday, and enjoy it for many tomorrows. I'm not going to list each story's theme. But here's what you can expect: the best contemporary science and nature writers of 2011 allow you to see outward into the universe with the power of the Hubble Space Telescope, look inward with the detail of tunneling electron microscopy, and most importantly of all, allow you to look into an extremely highly polished mirror. And you'll see in this mirror, in exquisite detail, how we humans react when confronted with birth, life, sex. How we act when our desire for gastronomic delicacies threatens the existence of a non-human species.

For someone who might be thinking of buying this book, I discovered a surprising indicator it was worth the money. In the course of reading reviews at various sites, I noted that reviewers seemed to be picking out and recommending their favorite essays almost at random. That there wasn't an ever more predictable agreement on which essays were the best suggests how well-balanced this anthology is, and how uniform its quality. Unlike so many, this one isn't made up of a few gems surrounded by fluff and disappointing also-rans. It really is good all the way through. My own reading

confirmed that one after another of the essays could easily be picked out as a favorite and the best thing one had read in a while. Some of my favorites are ones I didn't see highlighted by other reviewers overmuch -- one on the illegal kidney trade, for instance, and one on people who eat all sorts of home-fermented food, half the time sounding like wise sages brimming with wonderful secrets about tried and true traditional foods and half the time sounding like nutcases. (Thanks, but I'll pass on the health miracle of eating rotten meat.) Then there's the article about mass slaughter of songbirds across a migration corridor in Europe, sometimes as part of a traditional diet, but sometimes as part of "traditions" that just started, and sometimes merely for the apparent joy of slaughtering absolutely everything that moves just because you can, and leaving it to rot. But there's more. Everyone will find favorites. I only disliked one essay, but it was mercifully short. It combined being repetitive with a sort of unfocused New Agey series of segues into borderline poetic language.

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