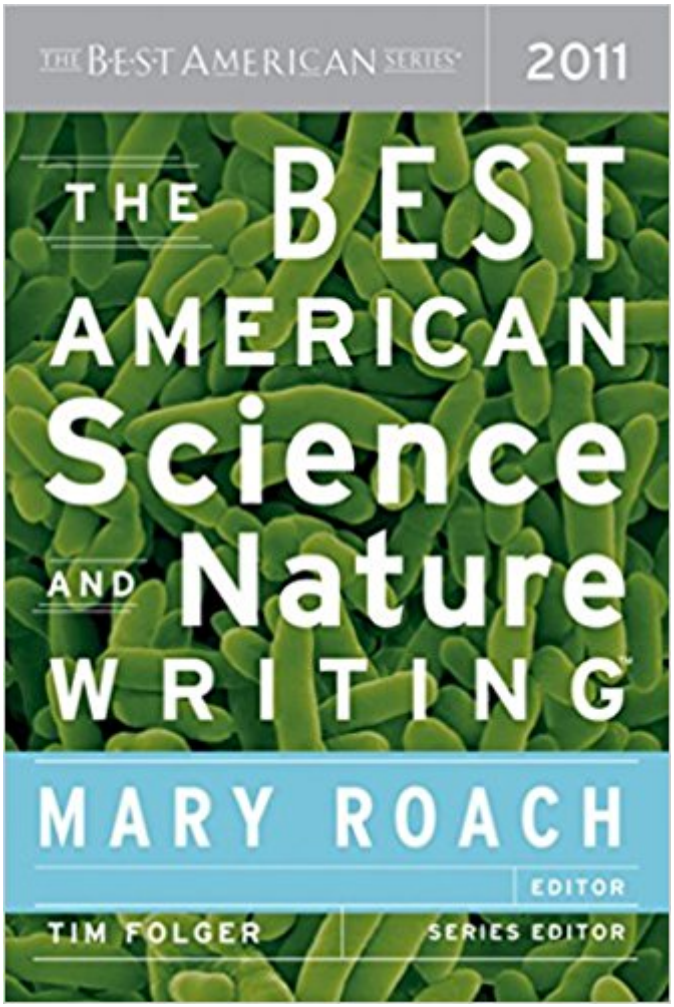
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The Best American Science And Nature Writing 2011



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Synopsis

The Best American SeriesÃ Â® First, Best, and Best-Selling The Best American series is the premier annual showcase for the countryÃ¢â ¬â„¢s finest short fiction and nonfiction. Each volumeÃ¢â ¬â„¢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 respectedÃ¢â ¬â •and most popularÃ¢â ¬â •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

"[A] uniformly excellent series." (Publishers Weekly) --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

The Best American Series(r)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 othersMary Roach, editor, is the author of the New York Times bestsellers Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void, Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers, and Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex. She has written for National Geographic, Wired, New Scientist, the New York Times Book Review, the Journal of Clinical Anatomy, and Outside, among others. She is a member of the Mars Institute's advisory board and a winner of the American Engineering Societies' Engineering Journalism Award, in a category for which, let's be honest, she was the sole entrant. More at www.maryroach.net. Look for the other best-selling titles in the Best American series: The Best American ComicsThe Best American EssaysThe Best American Mystery StoriesThe Best American Nonrequired ReadingThe Best American Short StoriesThe Best American Sports WritingThe Best American Travel Writing "

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."Fertility Rites" by Cohen: While humans miscarry up to 50% of all conceptions, chimps rarely lose an embryo or fetus. Scientists study chimp sperm samples to determine why."The Brain That Changed Everything" by Dittrich: Only in the last few decades have we needed "informed consent." In 1953 the author's

famed neurosurgeon grandfather excised Henry’s hippocampus to treat intractable epilepsy. Henry lost not only his seizures but most of his memory. Re-meeting anyone after a lapse of only a few minutes was like meeting someone entirely new. His situation made it obvious how important memory was just for basic living. Henry’s fame spread among neurologists studying memory and his life became a series of interviews, under heavy seclusion and protection. He died in 2008 and slides of his brain tissue were published on the internet. They are now pored over by scientists all over the world."Emptying The Skies" by Franzen: Songbird trapping by fluorescent perches laden with glue, for profit, or just shooting them out of the sky, for fun, threatens various species in Europe. Meanwhile, the contraband delicacy is readily available in European restaurants."Fish Out of Water" by Frazier: A fascinating, crazy article about Asian carp that have been growing prolifically in the upper Mississippi tributaries. They have become a huge nuisance on the Illinois River just below the great lakes. When irritated by the noise of an outboard motor they jump out of the water, sometimes up to 15 vertical feet - check them out on the internet. The newest sport is netting them in the air. That beats the hell out of being hit in the head by an up to 60 pound fish and has spawned the Redneck Fishing Tournament, first held in 2003. The winning team this year netted 188 fish within their 2 hour time limit. There is a serious side to this article - the sale of millions of these fish to China for food, the effort to keep carp and other fish out of the great lakes by electrocution, and the danger exotic species pose - upsetting the ecological balance of our rivers and lakes.*One of my favorites - "Lies, Damn Lies, and Medical Science" by David Freedman: Epidemiological studies are notoriously hard to adequately perform and to interpret - there are too many variables and complexities. This article exposes the ease by which corporate money can tilt the bias of medical articles in their favor - and earn them billions in sales of, for example, pharmaceuticals. Nowadays when a speaker at a medical meeting starts his presentation, he or she always starts with a disclaimer about whether anyone has paid them. Money now owns medicine in the US the same way it has long since wrapped up politics.*One of my favorites - "Letting Go" by Atul Gawande: Faces the very real problem surrounding the treatment of our loved ones at the end of their lives. Along the way our author puts in a plug for hospices - organizations that sometimes work by housecall and allow our loved ones to die at home. The old-time family physician used to handle the death of a patient with grace and common sense. Nowadays, modern medicine extends life and uses tons of dollars and cents but too little sense. Having discussions conducted by professionals about what a patient wants from the last vertiges of life are not death panels. They provide what most people don’t get otherwise from a for-profit health system that views death as the ultimate enemy. It may be, but it is also the benign dictator that releases our loved ones from the pain and

suffering that becomes worse in an ICU - a situation that frequently prevents our loved ones from dying with their dignity intact. Withholding reasonable degrees of heroic "care" leaves them with a chance to say goodbye and with last words that are remembered always. That's hard to accomplish with an ET tube in place."The Treatment" by Gladwell: In 1955, Emil Freireich arrived at Bethesda, Maryland National Cancer Institute to fulfill his military obligation. I said, "I'm a hematologist, Freireich recalls." The director said, "Then I've got an assignment for you. Cure leukemia." He and others tinkered with combinations for the commonest form of childhood leukemia for ten years. The patients all died and the treatments made them sick, to the extent that some of the other docs didn't even want to treat them. He finally found a combination that worked, called VAMP - the V being the addition of Vincristine. In 1965, he and one of his associates published one of the landmark papers in oncology. Almost 3 decades later, Janice, his second patient to get the combo, graced the cover of the journal "Cancer Research," perfectly healthy. This excellent 20 page article catalogues many recent significant advances in the treatment of cancer.*One of my favorites - "Cosmic Blueprint of Life" by Andrew Grant: The latest version of how life may have begun, with evidence: "Carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and other atoms knock about in nebulas, sometimes freely and sometimes bound up with ice and dust. They arrange themselves into elaborate molecular structures. Meteorites abound with organic compounds, which rain down on any nearby planets."*One of my favorites - "The Elusive Theory of Everything" by Stephen Hawkings and Leonard Mlodinow: Beautifully written with a cameo appearance by a goldfish in a curved bowl, this short article suggests we'll never find that one all-encompassing theory. "It might be that to describe the universe we have to employ different theories in different situations.""Spectral Light" by Irvine: Bear chases rancher, rancher fights back story - in exquisite prose. Also, environmentalist versus frontiersman and recognizing when you have one foot in each camp."The Spill Seekers" by Jacobsen: Sail the Gulf of Mexico July 2010 right into the oil spill with a couple of authentic locals on the official business of monitoring the clean-up. "I'm always struck by the energy of coasts: the friction of two worlds colliding draws so much life, like us, to hug the edges...."New Dog in Town" by Ketcham: Wild coyotes have settled in or around every major city in the US, including Central Park in NYC. There are now more coyotes than at any time since records have been kept. They are like weeds, cockroaches, rats, crows, kutzu, and ragweed - species that slip through major extinctions almost unchanged."Taking a Fall" by Koeppel: Many people have survived falls from airplanes. After falling 1500 feet, one maxes out from friction and doesn't go any faster - about 120 mph. Of course, that's plenty enough speed to kill you, but you could land on a slanted snow-covered slope, or be slowed by a rain-forest canopy, like the guy in Avatar. If you are hanging on to a piece of airplane

that slows you down even more, that’s a good thing. All in all though, survivors are a pretty exclusive club."The First Church of Robotics" by Lanier: Someday, maybe soon, the Internet will morph into a super-intelligent AI network that will take over the world. These are ideas with tremendous currency in parts of Silicon Valley. The author urges enthusiasts to slow down on their religious fervor.*One of my favorites - "The Love That Dare Not Squawk Its Name" by Jon Mooallem: Every year a group of about 120 7-foot wingspan albatrosses gather to breed. They wander around like airline passengers in a baggage claim area looking for their mate - the same one every year - then they breed and share the care of that single egg. They appear to be the epitome of monogamy except for one thing. One third of the pairs are both female. You’ll have to read it for the details of that!"Could Time End" by Musser: If you think you understand quantum physics...this is the article for you. Full of theoretical musings about black holes, singularities, Kant, Newton, & Einstein. Of course, if time ends for the astronaut who is sucked into a black hole because his atoms don’t get recycled, what difference does it make to him. His particular brand of consciousness is just as non-existent either way. A fine article about the arrow of time. I feel I need to read one at least every 2-3 years.*My favorite - "Sign Here If You Exist" by Jill Quinn: One observation that caused Darwin to question the existence of a benevolent god was his study of the life cycle of a certain parasitic wasp. Its larvae ate its host’s organs from the inside-out, less vital ones first, until the host finally died, just before emergence of the wasp for its first flight. Quinn alternates this story with the history of - and her own life’s experience with - the idea of an afterlife. The alternate stories seem misplaced, at first, but metamorph - not a verb according to the internet dictionary but I like it anyway - into a natural fit at the end. "When Edward Abbey died, his body was buried in nothing more than an old sleeping bag in the Arizona desert. He said, ’If my decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a juniper tree or the wings of a vulture - that is immortality enough for me’....we’ve had it backward all along: the body is immortal - it is the soul that dies." If you’re curious about her clever title you’ll have to read the article.*One of my favorites - "Face-Blind" by Oliver Sacks: Any writings by Oliver Sacks are superb, trademarked by extreme readability and lack of use of superlatives - he lets the strangeness of his subject matter speak for itself. In this article he highlights prosoprognosia - the lessening or almost complete lack of the ability to readily recognize faces. Naturally, this can lead to social blunders. Sacks should know because he and his brother both have it, as did Jane Goodall - for both people and chimps. Those who are face-blind, unlike those with dyslexia, have not until recently been recognized. That is changing with the existence of websites for those afflicted. They now know they’re not alone. One victim posts in his office and on his website, "Recent eye problems and mild prosoprognosia have made it harder for me to

recognize people I should know. Please help by giving your name if we meet. Many thanks.""Waste MGMT" by Schwartz: NASA and the equivalent Russian space agency used to think the satellite atmospheric zone was so vast, they could inhabit it with limitless satellites. When Nasa's Kepler disagreed in 1978 they created the Orbital Debris Program and put him in charge. Just recently the "Kepler Syndrome" has come of age - several times the ISS has even been threatened by flying debris."The Whole Fracking Enchilada" by Steingraber: Despite glorious and patriotic ads on TV, extraction of natural gas by fracking contradicts every aspect of environmental thinking - a topic that deserves at least a book. This article verified what I suspected and I wanted more."The New King of the Sea" by Tucker: They caused an abrupt power blackout for 40 million people on Manilla's island in the Phillipines. They've halted diamond mining off the coast of Namibia. They have contributed to the disappearance of commercial caviar from sturgeon, closed nuclear plants, disabled the USS Ronald Reagan, capsized fishing trawlers, and cleared beaches. It could be because of overfishing, pollution, global warming, unknown trends of nature, a combination of the above, or some unknown entity. Whatever it is, jelly fish - a misnomer, because they aren't the consistency of jelly and aren't fish - are taking over the oceans."The Killer in the Pool" by Zimmerman: The inside story of the use of orcas, killer whales, in water parks throughout the world - including Tilikum, who killed his trainer in Orlando's Sea World in 2010.The more articles I read the better I liked this issue.

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 scientifc 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. What we do when long held assumptions shatter into a bazillion little bits, like the safety glass in car windows, when new evidence explodes, or implodes, a more comfortable and more familiar way of looking at life. Does this all sound too melodramatic, too grandiose? Well then. You'll also found out why eating slightly ripe, or very ripe, food out of dumpsters might actually be good for you. And cheap, to boot.Sometimes, just once in a while, artists (in this case, writers), lift science out of the dry text book pages, out of the logical march of mathematical equations, and hold the nature of this world that we live in up for inspection with such clarity, such luminescence, that awe is the only response one feels capable of. Which this book does, 25 different times in a row.

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