



## The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2015

*Adam Johnson (Editor) , Wells Tower (Contributor) , Victor Lodato (Contributor) , Shane Bauer (Contributor) , Joshua Fattal (Contributor) , Sarah Shourd (Contributor) , Christopher Myers (Contributor) , Anders Carlson-Wee (Contributor) , more... Daniel Alarcón (Contributor) , Rebecca Curtis (Contributor) , Sheila Heti (Contributor) , Heidi Julavits (Contributor) , Leanne Shapton (Contributor) , Ammi Keller (Contributor) , Claudia Rankine (Contributor) , Paul Tough (Contributor) , Tom McAllister (Contributor) , Paul Salopek (Contributor) , Joan Wickersham (Contributor) , Emily Carroll (Contributor) , Inés Fernández Moreno (Contributor) , Corinne Gorla (Contributor) , Box Brown (Contributor) , Sarah Marshall (Contributor) , Rachel Zucker (Contributor) , Lesley Nneka Arimah (Contributor) , Paul Crenshaw (Contributor) , T.J. Jarrett (Contributor) , Katie Coyle (Contributor) , Kawai Strong Washburn (Contributor) , Bryan Stevenson (Contributor) , Alex Mar (Contributor) ...less*

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For the past year, a group of high school students met at a publishing house in San Francisco every Monday night to read literary magazines, chapbooks, graphic novels, and countless articles. This committee was assisted by a group of students that met in the basement of a robot shop in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Together, and under the guidance of guest editor Adam Johnson, these high schoolers selected the contents of *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2015*. The writing in this book is very essential, if not required, like visiting the Louvre if you're in Paris. In any case, nothing in this book takes place in Paris, as far as we can recall, but it does feature an elephant hunt, the fall of a reality-TV star, a walk through Ethiopia, and much more of what Johnson calls "the most important examinations in life."

*The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2015* includes

LESLEY NNEKA ARIMAH, DANIEL ALARCÓN, BOX BROWN, REBECCA CURTIS, VICTOR LODATO, CLAUDIA RANKINE, PAUL SALOPEK, PAUL TOUGH, WELLS TOWER  
*and others*

Adam Johnson, guest editor, teaches creative writing at Stanford University. He is the author of *Fortune Smiles*, *Emporium*, *Parasites Likes Us*, and *The Orphan Master's Son*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. He has received a Whiting Writers' Award and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. His work has appeared in *Esquire*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Playboy*, *GQ*, the *Paris Review*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, the *New York Times*, and *The Best American Short Stories*.

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# **From Reader Review The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2015 for online ebook**

## **Karen says**

The essays, poems and short stories in this particular anthology are always picked by young people - high school aged. Because of that it's a unique look at what interests them -- but also means that the picks can have a limited appeal. What I found that most of the writing here shared was an intensity and vividness, but also an episodic quality that didn't always satisfy. The short stories seemed to share a tendency to be about a whole life encapsulated, instead of a moment - which kind of flies in the face of how most short stories are constructed. More like mini memoirs instead of something looked at deeply. (A result of lack of concentration among this generation? A lack of patience? Difficulty with subtlety?). What is nice is the way the interests were multi-cultural and worldly. The best pieces were mainly those that appeared in The New Yorker, The NY Times, and National Geographic -- all of these containing the most mature writing, shape, form.

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## **Pat Pujolas says**

Every once in a while, this series gets it absolutely right. Such is the case for 2015. This is a crazy eclectic blend of fiction and non-fiction that feels like it was chosen by a diverse audience whose only goal was seeking superior quality of writing and stories. The collection petered out for me towards the end, but the first 60-70% was enough to warrant five big stars. Find this edition at your local library. I promise you won't be disappointed.

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## **Charlie says**

This book defies categorization since it contains poetry, graphic novellas (if that is a thing), fiction and non-fiction pieces. I didn't enjoy all of the pieces equally, of course, but none of the works left any doubt about why it had been included, demonstrating clear command of language, novel perspectives or treatments, fascinating topics, and other clear signs of literary merit in various combinations. Overall the non-fiction pieces seemed to slightly surpass the fiction pieces, but that is partially a function of my taste in subject matter. I especially liked "A Speck in the Sea" (nonfiction about a fisherman lost in the North Atlantic), "You Are in a Car in the Dark . . ." (non-fiction? about identity), "What the Sea Eats" (fiction about a father-daughter relationship), "Who Wants to Shoot an Elephant" (non-fiction about hunting elephants), "Out of Eden Walk" (non-fiction about a walking trek to recapitulate human migrations from Africa), "wish you were here you are"(poetry about . . .), and "An Oral History of Neftali Cuello"(non-fiction about a tobacco farm worker). I could name others, and maybe would have on a different day. I have not read the earlier installments of this series, but if the current edition speaks to their overall quality, I will certainly be checking out the older editions in the future.

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## **Erika says**

As others have said, the stories published in bigger publications (NYT magazine, NatGeo, etc) were of a much higher quality. Some others were just plain strange, with writing mistakes that made them hard to finish. But overall an interesting experiment in letting kids choose.

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### **Melia says**

This book is really good because the stories in here are all stories that I doubt I ever would have read otherwise. It's a good way to see what else is out there.

We didn't read all of the stories in this book, just a selection for class discussions, but each one was interesting in its own way and I'm happy to have read them. None of them felt like a waste of time. But the stories in here were also mostly odd, like very strange, but, at the same time, it felt right.

I will probably read the rest of the stories in this at one point, maybe even pick up the different editions. :)

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### **Jeff says**

This was an interesting selection. It was not as strong as some of the other collections I have read, but there were certainly worthwhile stories.

Highlights include :

Wells Tower : Who Wants to Shoot an Elephant in which the narrator travels to Africa with an American woman, a trophy hunter, who seeks out an old bull elephant to have the " experience." Whatever position you had on elephant hunting before the article is most likely your opinion after.

Daniel Alarcon : The Contestant tells of a popular game show in Peru. The show called Moment of Truth has individuals hooked up to a lie detector machine while they are asked embarrassing and or humiliating questions. One young woman's experience on the show and how it changes her life in a very negative way is our story

Writing in The New York Times Magazine Paul Tough tells of " A Speck in the Sea." In this we follow a Lobsterman who falls off his boat and lands in the cold Atlantic. Spending too much time in the water, he survives by his calm thinking, his follow through, and the heroic efforts of The Coast Guard.

Tom McAllister writes a unique, and I do mean unique story, about a man, a husband, who becomes obsessed with the people living in his bathroom drain. When, hearing the almost constant parties and goings on down there, he tells his wife he would like to join them she decides enough is enough and proceeds with the Drano.

The best story in the book is from Paul Salopek. Called " Out of Eden Walk " we follow the author as he begins his journey walking, as our ancient ancestors did, from the Fertile Crescent in Ethiopia into the Middle East and across the Far East, with eventual plans to walk down the length of the west coast of the Americas. The author had a selection of posts posted in the Best American Travel collection this year, these ones are different but just as interesting. I have, since, reading, checked out the author's website where all of his posts on his continuing journey are posted.

Joan Wickersham contributes " An Inventory " which is just that. She takes us through all the boys and men she has been in love with, from kindergarten through her first sexual experiences up to today. Told in a wry, self depreciating manner.

An excerpt of a graphic comic of Box Brown's about the life of Andre the Giant is quite interesting.

In The Oxford American Alex Mar published " Sky Burial " which explains the process of body farm burial. Taking place in a few locations in the Southwest primarily dying individuals leave their body to science to be left exposed in the dry fields. Their bodies do what all of our bodies do in the ground, only in an accelerated, exposed, above ground manner. Bugs, maggots, vultures, all you can imagine. Scientific knowledge is found however, there is a method to the madness beyond the simple repelling of the awful cost and foolishness of the the American burial system. We follow a couple of individuals and their families who go through the process. Very interesting.

Katie Coyle writes Fear Itself in which we meet three high school girls on a visit to The American History Museum. They are a click of their own but they are not popular outside of themselves. The story and the girls lives takes a very strange turn when one of the girls becomes separated from the others and runs into a wax FDR in a wheelchair who is only too happy to talk to her in a mix of romantic whisperings and derogatory insults.

Sarah Marshall, in the story Remote Control, revisits the whole sordid Nancy Kerrigan and Tanya Harding debacle. The story is the same, though the author does provide some backstory and context that we might not have had the first time. What comes across most is the fact that, while we never know for certain, Harding might well have been innocent of any of the conspiracy charges leveled against her. What is also clear is the Kerrigan / Harding story was as much about class as anything else.

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## **Grady McCallie says**

Every year, the pieces included in the Best American Nonrequired Reading are selected by a team of high school students. While the selections are almost always pretty good - and this year's is the strongest entry in this series that I've read - the Nonrequired Reading is almost always dominated by pieces in technicolor, with strong, unsubtle themes. Stories in this edition involve a man overboard at sea; addiction; the decay of corpses; child sexual abuse; domestic violence (x2); PTSD; and the graphic killing of an elephant. So many of the pieces this year are high quality that it is hard to pick out favorites, but a short list for me would include '780 Days of Solitude', describing the experience of being held captive in Iran; Paul Tough, 'A Speck in the Sea', about man's efforts to survive after falling overboard off a New England commercial fishing vessel; Joan Wickersham, 'An Inventory', of boy friends and boyfriends; and Leslie NNeke Arimah, 'The Future Looks Good', looking at the long roots of domestic strife. But some of the others that I didn't enjoy so much were still incredibly proficient, including Paul Crenshaw, 'Chainsaw Fingers', a surreal take on PTSD; and Ammi Keller, 'Isaac Cameron Hill', a powerful but sad short story.

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## **Stuart Lutzenhiser says**

Very solid anthology this year with a wider range of subjects than previous years. An interesting graphic novel excerpt about Andre the Giant next to a long Inventory of potential and real love interests from a women from age 5 to effectively the present. Fiction is intermixed with non-Fiction - a great piece of Lion hunting and another about the body farms (Forensic Anthropology Research Facility). A bizarre story about a teenagers love life with the wax figure of FDR probably wins for oddest story. Worth reading as an anthology curated by high school seniors and all profits go back to the 826 program.

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### **Debbie says**

When I first heard that these Nonrequired Reading compilations were determined by the 826 Valencia students, I was immediately intrigued, and I've bought several of the collections (or asked for them for Christmas) for the last decade.

This 2015 edition is the one I've read the most from, ever. I don't know if my reading interests are briefer, as the rest of my life is chaotic and I don't have a lot of extra bandwidth to read a long novel, but these selections were also just really good.

I was pulled in with Wells Tower's account about elephant shooting, held there with the excerpt from 780 Days of Solitude (which I had read about), laughed and cried during "The Christmas Miracle," told other people about the interesting results of "Wear Areas" (and want to construct my own), get sympathy for "Isaac Cameron Hill," added Brown's graphic novel about Andre the Giant to my to-read list, and sat on the edge of my seat while reading "Fear Itself."

I admit I tried but turned out skipping a few of the excerpts, for various reasons. But overall, really liked the compilation and look forward to reading the 2016 edition.

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### **Britta says**

Major disappointment. I was going to mark this as just 2 stars, but considering the actual writing is high-quality, I bumped it up one. Call me generous. The reason I was planning on rating it so low, however, is the absolute lack of variety I am used to seeing in a volume of The Best American Nonrequired Reading. I need that variety! This editor did a seriously poor job of representing the broad array of topics, styles, and interests one can normally find in an edition of this series, and for that the book just couldn't cut it for me. And it was all exceptionally dark. Stories in this edition involve a man overboard at sea; addiction; the decay of corpses; child sexual abuse; domestic violence (x2); PTSD; and the graphic killing of an elephant. Even the stories I really enjoyed, like the spooky graphic novel snippet by Emily Carroll and the chapter about sky burials and body farms were both dark in nature. Good writing, bad book on the whole. Sad.

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### **Kristen says**

Can I give it 6 stars? Please?

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## Justin Ferguson says

"The Best American Non-required Reading" is an anthology of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and graphic novels that is selected by a committee of high school students. As a high school teacher, I was curious to see what high schoolers would select as the best literature. I found their picks interesting and surprising.

Wells Tower's "Who Wants to Shoot an Elephant?" was eye-opening as it was shocking to read about the account of big-game hunting. Tower is open about his bias (anti-elephant hunting) but is objective in his portrayal of the wealthy Americans who do participate in the hunt. He doesn't villainize them, but he does ask important questions.

Victor Lodato's "Jack, July" takes us into the mind of an addict much like "Requiem for a Dream."

"780 Days of Solitude" is the account of the three Americans who were held in Iran on charges of espionage. It's written by the three young people and was a take on the story I hadn't read before. I'm interested to read their entire book this was excerpted from.

Paul Salopek's "Out of Eden Walk" shares his journey walking from Ethiopia through Russia tracing the route of human migration. The selection in the anthology covers his time in Palestine, Jordan, and Turkey.

There's so many more I want to highlight, but I'd basically be recommending 80% of the book. Go check it out for yourself.

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## dirt says

The Dang-Troys always give me a copy of the latest Best American Nonrequired Reading and I repeatedly feel bad because it takes me so long to finish (I still haven't finished the 2014 edition). I get caught up in other books, but I am always delighted when I finally get around to my nonrequired reading. I continuously learn something new (about body farms in Texas), am inspired (by moments of time passing in *Wish You Were Here You Are*), or have my imagination captured (by *Fear Itself*).

The story *Isaac Cameron Hill* by Ammi Keller was notably thrilling. There was an underlying happiness in the saga of the characters that radiated out of the story and put a smile on my face.

The selections from Paul Salopek's *Out of Eden Walk* were insightful and educational. I look forward to reading more dispatches from him.

I am thankful for the high school students at 826 Valencia for doing a terrific job finding such exceptional writing.

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## Trent Mikesell says

I give the concept more than 5 stars, but I just didn't happen to love all their choices. A few groups of high school students get together and go through journals, magazines, and more to find the "best" American nonrequired reading. I love that idea. I also enjoyed reading what they had chosen, but I was perhaps slightly



biased knowing it was high school students because I felt like their choices tended to lean toward high school topics (complicated emotions and sex). Still, great book and I plan on buying next year's. I also am thinking about making a few of these essays "required" reading for my students.

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## **Justin says**

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