



The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2009

Dave Eggers (Editor), Marjane Satrapi (Contributor), Rivka Galchen (Contributor), Anne Gisleson (Contributor), David Grann (Contributor), Denis Johnson (Contributor), Tom Kaczynski (Contributor), Yannick Murphy (Contributor), more... Matthew Power (Contributor), Olivier Schrauwen (Contributor), Nick Twemlow (Contributor), Émile Bravo (Contributor), Castle Freeman Jr. (Contributor), Eula Biss (Contributor), Philip Connors (Contributor), Nathan Englander (Contributor), Nick Flynn (Contributor), Jonathan Franzen (Contributor), Susan Breen, Rebekah Frumkin (Contributor), J. Malcolm Garcia (Contributor), Amelia Kahaney (Contributor), Rebecca Makkai (Contributor), Rebecca Bengal (Contributor), K.G. Schneider (Contributor), Nick St. John (Contributor), Michelle Seaton (Contributor) ...less

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This "great volume" highlights the "very best of this year's fiction, nonfiction, alternative comics, screenplays, blogs and more" (*OK!*). Compiled by Dave Eggers and students from his San Francisco writing center, it is "both uproarious and illuminating" (*Publishers Weekly*).

The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2009 Details

Date : Published October 8th 2009 by Mariner Books

ISBN : 9780547241609

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Format : Paperback 414 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Anthologies, Writing, Essays

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From Reader Review The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2009 for online ebook

David says

This year's volume confirms the status of this collection as my perennial favorite in the whole "Best American" series of anthologies. Whatever you might think of Dave Eggers, he redeems himself on an annual basis with this collection (this year, IMO, he has doubly redeemed himself, with the publication of the extraordinary "Zeitoun", but that's material for a whole 'nother post).

This collection is hard to sum up in a single sentence - one might think of it as an edgier - and more entertaining - version of the "Best American Essays". But a far better collection, because Eggers (and this year's guest editor, Marjane Satrapi) are savvy enough to cast a far broader net. So, for instance, in addition to standbys like "best craigslist ads", "best police blotter items", "best kids' letters to Obama", "best book titles published in 2008 (Baboon Metaphysics? Excrement in the late Middle Ages? anyone?)", "best poem titles of 2008" (A Plea for the Cessation of Fruit Metaphors, I need more Cowbell, What your Dad's Underpants have to do with Space Travel, If my Life were a Radio, lately I would Prefer another Station, Why not Oysters?...), there are such fine contributions as Phillip Connors's "diary of a Fire Lookout", Anne Gisleon's "Your exhausted Heart" (about the Saturn Bar in new Orleans), Denis Johnson's "Boomtown Iraq", Jonathan Franzen's tribute to david Foster Wallace, excellent pieces by Rivka Galchen, Rebekah Bliss, Eula Biss, and Susan Breen.

This partial list doesn't include the three or four charming picture essays, nor the five or six other equally good pieces by authors like Nick Flynn, David Grann and Amelia Kahaney.

I can do no better than to paraphrase what I wrote about the 2008 volume - this is writing that informs me about stuff that I would otherwise not encounter, brilliantly executed by authors whose worldview extends - praise the lord - beyond their own navels. Like a bunch of exotically flavored Dove bars - unfamiliar at first, but reliably delicious. material that takes you outside of your comfort zone, in the best possible way.

4.5 stars, which I think deserve to be rounded up to 5, because the percentage of dross in this collection is very low indeed. As always, if you find yourself in the bookstore, faced with the entire gamut of the "best American XXX 2009" series, and you have only \$14 to spend, there's no question about it - this is the one you should pick.

I don't know what it is we have against Dave Eggers anyway. With this series alone, he has surely exonerated himself from any residual blame that might result from the youthful indiscretion that was - well, you know the one I'm talking about. That staggering book

Bonnie Mattson says

With any collection, some parts stood out more than others. The good:

Marjane Satrapi in a charming illustrated story entitled "Why my mother refused to buy me toys" she explains how, she assumed her mother thought she was ugly when she gave young Satrapi the advice to "never inject in your looks! Invest in your brains!" Jonathan Franzen gives a touching eulogy for David Foster Wallace. In "How to Work a Locker Room," Michelle Seaton manages to handle the difficult subjects

of sexism, the sexual abuse of children, and emotional detachment with an hand that is neither too heavy nor too light.

A few for all the wrong reasons: In "Triplet", by Susan Breen, a woman agrees to have sex with a man with a triplet fetish who has already slept with her identical sisters, felt just plain creepy. Rebekah Frumkin's "Monster", written mostly from the perspective of a six-year-old boy is wrapped in a garbled metaphor that is resolved clumsily.

Over all, An enjoyable collection.

Emily says

My favorite pieces from this collection:

- +Phillip Connors - Diary of a Fire Lookout
- +David Grann - The Chameleon
- +Tom Kaczynski - Million Year Boom
- +Amelia Kahaney - The Temp
- +Nick St. John - Further Notes on My Unfortunate Condition

Jennifer Arnold says

I'm always a fan of this collection. Best bits:

Best American Titles of Poems Published in 2008 (faves: "If My Life Were a Radio, Lately I Would Prefer Another Station," "A Plea for the Cessation of Fruit Metaphors" - and people say poetry doesn't have a purpose. Where else can we express our exasperation with the fruit metaphor?)

Best American Censorship Blunder, wherein a conservative website's filters replaced runner Tyson Gay's last name with the word homosexual, resulting in completely unintentionally funny/slightly naughty sounding passages, such as:

"In Saturday's opening heat, Homosexual pulled way up, way too soon..."
"I'm sore right now," Homosexual said, "but probably from the victory lap."

On a more serious note, Jonathan Franzen's essay on David Foster Wallace's death is a lovely tribute to a writer I truly miss. Best short story - Amelia Kahany's "The Temp." Best essays: Denis Johnson's "Boomtown Iraq" and David Grann's "The Chameleon."

Lindsey says

A decent collection blending comics, non-fiction, short stories, and, oh yeah... craigslist posts, Eggers and his team of teenaged editors (from his reading advocacy volunteer corps 826 National) seemed a bit preoccupied with the sensational. Most of the non-fiction had a political bent, and the hot topics seemed to be race, identity, Iraq, Katrina (still?), gay rights, and anarchy. While some of these themes got to be a bit repetitive,

it made some of the writing itself a little easier to compare and contrast. For instance, Eula Biss's necessary and personal "Relations" was a much more interesting look at racial identity than J. Malcom Garcia's meandering, scattered "A Product of This Town", which at times was even confusing in its narrative and seemed to have no actual thesis. While Nick Flynn's prose was at turns very beautiful in "The Ticking Is The Bomb" it suffered slightly for his confusing infusion of his own childhood memories and the anticipation of his daughter being born into a story about the torture of falsely-accused prisoners of war at Abu Ghraib. Denis Johnson's "Boomtown, Iraq", on the other hand, was unlike anything I've ever read about Iraq and was a much more revealing article. I loved that it was followed by Tom Kaczynski's surreal comic "Million Year Boom" which was supposedly an accident of alphabetizing but really couldn't have been; it evoked this creepy 1984-esque vibe and related it back to corporate America and the green movement. Still, my favorite pieces were the irreverent, nonsensical ones. Nick St. John's "Tell Me Again Why I Can't Be A Manta Ray", a small section of some of his collected comics entitled "Further Notes On My Unfortunate Condition" was brilliant and charming, rendered in a scratchy and intricate style reminiscent of Edward Gorey's drawings. Olivier Schrauwen's hair analysis comic was also wonderful. David Grann wrote so compelling an article about con artist Frederic Boudin that I found myself thinking "This would make a great movie" and then found out one was already in production. Michelle Seaton's "How To Work A Locker Room" was stunning for what it did NOT say, and since its focus was really about journalistic restraint it came off brilliantly (also a nice finish to the collection, once again appearing to be much more than alphabetical coincidence). The fiction within the collection was solid, with stellar offerings by Yannick Murphy, Rebecca Makkai and Rivka Galchen coming out strongest. I wasn't entirely wowed by everything in this volume, but there is certainly a lot included here. Then again, that's supposed to be where editing comes in.

Mabel says

I accidentally stumbled upon this book during my search for the 2010 addition but the 2009 edition proved to be just as good as the next. My favorite section would definitely be the Best American Kids' Letters to Obama. It reminded me of when I was younger and I wanted to write letters to Bill Clinton. The innocence of these children and the level of how heartfelt these letters are, will bring a smile to anyone's face. Though this was one of my favorite sections, I do have another that I thoroughly enjoyed reading. The section of The Best American Anonymous Postcards proved to be extremely humorous.

Although I enjoyed reading the 2009 edition, I have to say that I do, in fact, prefer the 2010 edition instead. The 2010 edition includes several chapters and genres that focus on issues that I find to be interesting and important. Fast- Food Related Crimes, Freedom, and Seven Months, Ten Days In Captivity are some of my favorites and I definitely recommend this book to anyone looking for a laugh or any kind of entertainment.

David says

Just can't get into these. It's fairly obvious, from where I'm standing, that these stories were chosen by a particularly precocious group of youngsters (no, I'm not 70). I mean, in the long run that's actually a good thing; if any little percentage of new readers start reading because of these books, that's well and good. But, from the constant inhibition to resort to recent world headlines, i.e., Iraq, Katrina, economic recession, rinse and repeat, this collection is accustomed to hopping right on the train of eccentricity ad nauseum. Why can't I just read a story about a human being? Why does it always have to be sugarcoated with a bombardment of bellicose peculiarities? Alas, these collections just might not be for me (although, the opening pages are

usually the most interesting and amusing). I just kept on wanting one of these stories to pick up some pace and really spark some life into otherwise neglected literary elements, such as the actual writing. I'm not asking for Faulkner, but just a little creativity beyond character and story; I mean, obviously these stories follow proper writing protocol and are full of blinding white clarity (not always a good thing). But that's just my prerogative. "The Chameleon" was pretty good, anyway.

2010's collection is staring me down on my bookshelf, but it's going on the perpetual back burner. Their otherwise day job collection, The Best American Short Stories, and then, The Pen/O. Henry yearly roundups, seem to be biting at the heels more often nowadays.

Jessica says

I have bored about 10,000 students in my day. God knows why I thought they would enjoy Hamlet, Catch-22, Proof, etc, etc. There I would be, talking endlessly about some wonderful metaphor, and half of the class would be staring out the doorway, the other half staring out the window, one poor lass stuck in the middle having to look at me.

So one semester a couple back, I ordered this book of that year, and it worked. I just ordered and received this edition, and I am full of extreme hope that my students will love it.

I do love it--and I've ordered it up for three classes in the spring, hoping they will love it too!

KAOS says

this one was disappointing. i read every year's edition and have liked the selections a lot more in the past. the front section is getting out of control with its "best american" lists - dave eggers is nothing if not overly precious, and it gets annoying. i only liked 8 of the 21 selections. i was actually blown away by "relations" by eula bliss and "the chameleon" by david grann (which i had actually already read in the new yorker, but it is amazing in how fucked up it is). the cover illustration by banksy is pretty rad. otherwise, a weak edition in a good series.

Justin Difazzio says

This is actually one of the better collections I've read. The pieces on gay marriage, the Abu-Ghraib prisoners (which I think is more about poetry and potential than anything political), drifting down the Mississippi River, and working a locker room (more about humanity than journalism) are amazing. They're the kind of pieces that stop you in your tracks and make you grab a pen to highlight something that you want to be able to find again when the world doesn't make sense anymore.

Great stuff!

Tiny Pants says

I know... I really haven't been reading much lately. I've been crocheting a freakin' *ton* (look me up on Ravelry! Same username) but yeah, my reading has been a bit limited, mainly keeping up with *New York* and the *New Yorker*. But sometime this fall, in a former Borders location, I discovered ... a new Crown Books location! Yes, as of this writing, it's *already* having its going out of business sale, but oh, it was good while it lasted. Amazing deadstock of weird 80s YA (a bunch of the *Cheerleaders* books), wrestlers' autobiographies, all the important stuff.

Shockingly also though, some pretty legitimate trade paperbacks, which is how I wound up buying this, despite my previous avowals that I was *done* with the Nonrequired series and my at least a decade-old hatred of Dave Eggers. Even more shocking -- this one wasn't that bad. Maybe it was the infusion of Michigan teenagers tempering the obnoxiousness of the Bay Area ones (sorry, did I forget to mention I also hate the Bay Area? Because *I frickin' do*), but for the first time in *years*, this collection didn't read entirely like it was chosen by high schoolers who are picking out short fiction and journalism as if they were collecting yearbook quotes. Yes, there's the semi-inevitable over-emphasis on big, important, current events (gotta remember what happened your senior year, right?), but on the whole, this collection was surprisingly, refreshingly readable.

Well played, Eggers. I'm back on board and buying the next one.

Becca says

This book was TOTALLY AWESOME. Deep yet fluffy, reminded me of "This American Life." There are stories about big American issues-- race, war, love, peace, nature-- Big stuff. But every story -- fiction, or non-fiction-- is deeply subjective-- a perspective coming from inside a specific person's head. So it's informative on a level that news can't be. What does it FEEL like to be in Iraq, with billionaires investing in strip malls and oil seeping out of the ground, getting patted down at checkpoints across the desert? Or to be an isolated fire lookout in a windy tower in Southern California? Or a reporter interviewing the Abu Ghraib prisoners? Or a new hire in the World's Next EnviroCorporation that will rule the world? Or on a salvaged corner in New Orleans at the neighborhood bar, waving at a bus of disaster tourists?

Here's some dog-eared bits:

p110- "a world of more mountains than a man could walk in a lifetime. I sit trancelike in the tower and feel myself begin to empty, to disappear almost, in the immensity of the country all around."

168- "you could smell the ozone from the crackling precision of his sentence structure, his effortless and pitch-perfect shifting about ten different levels of high, low, middle, technical, hipster, nerdy, philosophical, vernacular, vaudevillian, hortatory, tough-guy, broken-hearted, lyrical diction."

359- "the state and I, for all our disagreements, agreed on one thing: weddings are powerfully numinous ceremonies, crude talismans to defiantly shake in the face of Thanatos. Perhaps it is not so coincidental that weddings are so weirdly similar to funerals -- the elaborate, stylized preparations, the high formality, the priest incanting blessings, the gathered family, the tears, even the sense of something present, immortal, but

no seen: in one case, a marriage; in the other, a soul."

Philitsa says

David Eggers is never going to top the 2007 edition of this collection. I don't know why I bother reading any others. This one, in particular, was way too depressing -- perhaps it's the economy. All of these were well-written stories, indeed, but they left no impression on me once I moved on to the next story. I can still remember stories from the 2007 edition to this day, though.

Abraham says

Oddly enough, this is probably the first short story collection I've read cover-to-cover. This is cause for celebration, or at least a new "shelf" on Goodreads. I think I'll call it "short-stories." (oooh!)

If you're going to read your first short story collection why not this one? It is part of an annual series that collects a few stories and non-fiction pieces published that year in some of the better magazines and websites. So it's a smörgåsbord -- or perhaps a "mixed bag" if you are a cynic, or if that little circle above the "a" frightens you.

After the Introduction by Marjane Satrapi -- which explains her early reading tastes and devotes not a single word to the works it is introducing -- there follows 30-50 pages of random facts, of the kind commonly found in the "Uncle John's Bathroom Reader" series. So "out-of-place" and "confused" are words sure to come to mind. In other words, between Satrapi's admission to being humbled while reading giants like Dostoevsky, and a list of the "Best Craigslist ads," I was scratching my head (perhaps only metaphorically), wondering just what I was reading. But it's all good. Satrapi is always fun to read, and who *doesn't* like reading a few lists of trivia? Especially me, who once-upon-a-time read almanacs avidly.

Then there are the stories. I find there is no need -- nor am I able -- to write about every single story in the collection. Instead, a general word about the stories as a whole: eclectic and varied; decidedly leftward leaning (doesn't the cover speak that clearly enough?); and, as always with these collections, variable in terms of quality. Tastes vary, although I doubt any story in this collection will cause even the most picky reader to throw the book down in disgust. Nor do I doubt that everyone will find at least one worthwhile story.

And now about some of my personal favorites (Note: Some of these works can be read online, in part or in full, so I will be sure to post a link where appropriate):

The Chameleon by David Grann (non-fiction): about a 30-something French man, Frédéric Bourdin, a serial impostor, who often posed as a young boy. He used to wander around Europe, creating new characters and scenarios, sometimes convincing people for many months at a time. He says he only wanted love and attention. The law enforcement were always unsure of how and for what to punish him. His ugliest hour came when he posed as a missing American boy and hoodwinked the lost boy's family for several months,

though eventually turned himself in. He is now married and has a young daughter, and claims to have given up his old ways.

Wild Berry Blue by Rivka Galchen: A story of an eight-year-old Jewish girl who "falls in love" with a former heroine addict who works at McDonalds -- I'm not making this up. The story is told from the point of view of the girl, all grown up, and we learn at the end of the story that there have been many similarly odd infatuations since.

Diary of a Fire Lookout by Philip Connors (non-fiction): Even with all the exciting works of the collection within the realm of fiction, somehow this simple diary of a man who sits in a tower in Gila National Forest in New Mexico and looks for forest fires is near the top of my list. There are some touching moments (he finds a solitary, dying fawn), and some interesting encounters (with a pair of "smokejumpers," people trained to jump out of planes to combat fires in rugged, otherwise unreachable areas; and with a pair of hikers, who were planning to hike, if not all, then most of the Rocky Mountains). I am a bit miffed that people with degrees from upper-crust universities seem to gravitate towards that kind of job (*sigh* you are *not* Thoreau); still, this an interesting piece of work.

Mississippi Drift by Mathew Power(non-fiction): The writer joins a group of "river vagrants" as they attempt to sail down the Mississippi River. The skipper and primary constructor of their makeshift boat is a guy named Matt, "a dumpster-diving, train-hopping, animal-rights-crusading anarchist and tramp," who runs his ship with an oddly totalitarian grip. During the story we also encounter "Poppa Nuetrino," a kind of grandfather of trash-boat builders and the main proponent of a "Whoa, man -- far out!" kind of "philosophy." There is a biography of this man, *The Happiest Man in the World*, by Alec Wikinson. Regarding Matt and his own trash boat, the other crew members steadily dropped off, until Matt was alone and the boat eventually capsized.

The Temp by Amelia Kahamey: A new woman, a temporary employee, steps into a typical humdrum office and steadily convinces the other employees -- without saying a direct word about it -- to quit their jobs for happier pastures. An uplifter, for sure.

To be frank, this collection is loaded with works taken from magazines that I never read. But it is nice to get an annual look into the world of well-pressed button-down shirts and the soft-spoken voices of NPR personalities. And for the record, there are only two classes of people who use the word "intelligent" when they mean to say "smart": the under-educated and the over-educated.

Aaron says

Again, as in years past, BANR delivers. The lists and short clips in Section 1 read well; my favorite being the letters to Obama. Section 2 started off a bit slow (admittedly, as much as I love this volume every year, some articles miss their mark with me), but ended in a whirlwind of powerful ideas and great writing. Amelia Kahaney's short story "The Temp" may be the funniest story ever contained in this collection, while David Grann's "The Chameleon" kept me glued to the page with rapt attention to the multiple levels of narrative. Tom Kaczynski's graphic short story "Million Year Boom" is a testament that BANR features a variety of different styles and forms without sacrificing quality.

2009 is a VERY good issue of BANR. Enough depth of content to feel good about reading, and enough stylization (pictures, sub-headings, and of course the lists) to keep the reader coming back one article after another.
