The Best American Essays Study Guide

The Best American Essays

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of essays contains a selection of writing from a number of distinguished, contemporary American writers. The topics range greatly, but generally cluster around three broad categories. The first part of the book focuses on the theme of personal identity. It is followed by a collection of what might be called descriptive essays, essays which are more reflective than persuasive in nature. The final third of the book is comprised of political and philosophical essays which aim to convince the read of some particular argument.

"The Personal Voice," the book's first section, considers the notion of identity from a variety of perspectives. Since a large component of personal identity is race, especially in a nation as diverse as America, many of these essays reflect on the experience of being a minority. In "Silent Dancing" Judith Ortiz Cofer recounts her experience as a Puerto Rican immigrant to New York City. Through the lens of an old video camera, she reflects on how the desire to be part of "white culture" divided the Puerto Rican community. "In the Kitchen" addresses the same problem of assimilation, but this time from an African-American perspective. Gates uses the stubborn nature of black hair as a symbol for the indelible mark blackness has on one's identity. Tan considers the problem of assimilation from the perspective of language in "Mother Tongue." Though she herself was able to learn to speak and write English proficiently, her mother, a Chinese immigrant, had her own, unique brand of the language, which was often a source of difficulty for the family. As gender is also an important part of personal identity, this section also includes several reflections of femininity by female authors such as Marcia Aldrich's "Hair," Lucy Grealy's "Mirroring," Rebbecca McClanahan's "Book Marks."

"The Attentive Mind" contains essays which focus on describing some personal experience. A number of these are straightforward attempts to give the reader a better understanding about a certain person or historical event. "Turning Point," for example, focuses on the life and art of Philippe Petit, the French acrobat and performance artist who became famous for tightrope walking between the two towers of the World Trade Center. In light of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, his art has a new, bittersweet significance. Likewise, "Ali in Havana" is the story of Muhammad Ali visiting Fidel Castro in Cuba. The essay's intent is to capture the personalities of those two figures, both of whom were among the most famous icons of the era.

"The Public Sphere" is a collection of argumentative essays. The topics of these essays range widely. Some of the essays deal with very contentious topics. Vicky Hearne's "What's Wrong With Animal Rights" attempts to philosophically undermine the philosophy behind animal rights by distinguishing between the nature of an animal and the nature of a human. Joy Williams' "The Killing Game" takes the opposite attitude toward animals. She denounces as "malevolent" those hunters who kill for sport and attempts to expose the various contradictions and barbarities that take place in modern hunting. Other essays focus on less contentious issues. For example, in "Think About It," Frank Conroy reflects on the sometimes complex process of learning. Learning even

a single fact can sometimes take years; other times, a topic can be so immense that learning could go on seemingly indefinitely.

The Personal Voice: The Telephone, Hair, and Silent Dancing

The Personal Voice: The Telephone, Hair, and Silent Dancing Summary and Analysis

The Telephone by Anwar F. Accawi: Accawi recalls growing up in a small town in Jordan and pleasantly remembers the quaint virtues of village life. He remembers, for example, how events were dated by their proximity to other events. When Accawi asked his grandmother how old a certain woman is, she did not give him a date; instead, she said that she was born the same year that a big snow caused the mayor's roof to cave in, which was the same year that an earthquake damaged their kitchen. Though born decades after those events, Accawi immediately understood how old she was. This style of history, as it were, speaks to the closeness of the community, for it was only possible because everyone shared the same experiences.

Village life was not meant to last, however, and the beginning of the end is symbolized by the installation of the town's first telephone. Before then, other than shouting, no one could communicate over any kind of long distance, which made their world quite small. However, with the ability to talk to people not only in Jordan, but around the world, the village became part of a global economy and society. There were certainly advantages to this: Many people got jobs that paid better than anything they could get in town and educational opportunities became available that could not have been imagined before—the author, undoubtedly, is a beneficiary of the latter. Yet, becoming part of a global network often meant people leaving the village for a better life—a better life, Accawi laments, they have yet to find.

Hair by Marcia Aldrich: Aldrich considers the connection between a woman's hairstyle and her personal identity. She recalls her mother's obsession with hair. After she married, her mother never did her hair on her own; she always paid to have it done, once every few weeks, at a nice hair salon. She seemed to be in a state of perpetual unrest about it, constantly dying, cutting, curling, and straightening, perhaps thinking that the perfect hairstyle—which may be, after all is done, a thing only of legend—will somehow complete an incomplete soul. Aldrich's older sister was the opposite of their mother. Her refusal to change her hairstyle was almost an act of defiance. She wanted to define herself by what she did and how she treated others. The youngest sister was cursed with the worst hair of the entire family, a fact which obviously made her quite self-conscious. Try as she might, she could do little to disguise it. For her, hair was a burden and a stigma that she could never escape. Aldrich herself was torn between these views, seeing some merit in each, until she met Rhonda, whom Aldrich admits might be her own bit of imaginative fiction. Rhonda was a decidedly unconventional hair-stylist who emphasized the transitory nature of a hairstyle. Hair, she said, is like life—there is no need to be bound by the past because it can always be changed.

Silent Dancing by Judith Ortiz Cofer: Cofer reflects on growing up as a Puerto Rican immigrant to New York City through the medium of an old home video of a party. Her family moved to New York when when her father, hoping to provide a better life for his family, took a job in the Navy based in Paterson, New Jersey. Though he made more money than a lot of immigrants, they were still forced to live in a poor part of town dominated by Puerto Rican families like themselves. For everyone except her father, this fact made the transition easy: they could continue to speak their native language, shop at grocery stores that sold Puerto Rican food, and interact with others who shared their culture. Her father, however, always desired to escape the barrio; it was almost as if he was ashamed to be a minority. As it turned out, this division in her family was a division that ran through all Puerto Rican families. Many were quite content to live in a Little Puerto Rico, but just as many were desperate to be assimilated into "white" culture.

The Personal Voice: Westbury Court, In the Kitchen, and Mirrorings

The Personal Voice: Westbury Court, In the Kitchen, and Mirrorings Summary and Analysis

Westbury Court by Edwidge Danticat: Danticat reflects upon the nuances and inconsistencies of childhood memories and, in particular, a fire that ruined the apartment down the hall from her family's. It was not until fireman entered the apartment to evacuate her and her siblings that she even knew there was a fire; she was too engrossed in watching television to notice. She recalls seeing the lifeless corpses of the children being taken out of the apartment and the horror on the face of their mother. The mother was later arrested and charged with child neglect and the apartment remained vacant for a long time afterward until a group of Haitian musicians moved in. Later in her adulthood, she questioned the fidelity of her memory—did the children die or just move away? She asked her mother and the questioned seemed to renew a dormant grief over "those poor children" and "their poor mother" (65).

In the Kitchen by Henry Louis Gates Jr.: Gates considers black hairstyles and reflects upon them as a symbol of black culture and identity. When he was growing up, everyone was obsessed with straightening their hair out, but one could never completely eradicate the "kinks" from one's hair, a symbol for how a person's black identity will always be a part of who they are, no matter how much they try to change it. Usually, Gates and his community could not afford to have professional "process" to straighten their hair and had to improvise by greasing their hair and forcing it to lay flat by wearing a stocking or a rag on their heads for a few days. Nat King Cole, a famous black musician, was admired for his immaculate hair. When Gates left America, he forgot all about Nat King Cole until he heard one of his songs on a radio in Zanzibar, which reminded him both of the King's immaculate hair and his African-American heritage.

Mirrorings by Lucy Grealy: Grealy writes on living through childhood and adulthood with a severely disfigured face. When she was very young, doctors discovered a tumor in her cheek. After surgery and several torturous months of chemotherapy, the cancer was cured, but the lower portion of her face was caved in. During her fight with cancer, she had constantly been praised for being brave, though sometimes the pain of chemotherapy would conquer her bravery. As a result, she developed an idea that the proper way to react to pain, whether physical or emotional, was to simply hide it—that is, after all, what she had been praised for doing. She invented all kinds of ways to repress the social isolation of her disfigurement; in particular, she built her entire self-worth on her intellect and looked down on others who, she thought, prided themselves only on their looks.

Despite this seeming contempt for looks, Grealy was still desperate to have a normal face like everyone else. This desperation only worsened as she matured and found herself almost completely deprived of any positive attention from boys. She knew she was ugly and could never imagine any man would ever want her. She went from doctor to doctor hoping to find one who could reconstruct her face and almost invariably the operations would end with failure or, at best, short-lived success. She never gave up, however, and actually achieved some success at the hands of a Scottish surgeon. Not only did she look better, this time the surgery would actually be permanent, but contrary to her expectations, it did not make her happy. She could not recognize herself when she looked into the mirror and, for nearly a year, decided to avoid seeing her reflection at all, a resolution which turned out to be surprisingly difficult. During this period, she really had no self-image, which normally is such an enormous part of a person's identity. She decided to end her mirror boycott when she was having lunch with a male friend of hers and realized that he was not disgusted by her. At that moment, she realized that what had oppressed her for all those years was not really her appearance, but her anxiety over it.

The Personal Voice: The Blue Machinery of Summer, Book Marks, and Silk Parachute

The Personal Voice: The Blue Machinery of Summer, Book Marks, and Silk Parachute Summary and Analysis

The Blue Machinery of Summer by Yusef Komunyakaa: Komunyakaa recalls a summer job he had working in an electronics factory in Phoenix between semesters of graduate school. He fit in well because he had worked in factories for years and could easily get along with blue collar workers, but he knew that his education and professional ambitions separated him from them. He would work there only for the summer; they would probably work there his entire life. Not wanting to provoke any resentment among his coworkers, he decided to keep his education a secret for as long as possible and just blend in with the crowd. He developed a number of friendships, especially with his co-worker, Frank, who had worked in the factory for twenty years. He was captivated by a Vietnamese woman named Lily who worked in the wiring department. It is unclear whether he fancied her romantically, but at the very least her ethnicity represented his mixed feelings about his involvement in the Vietnamese War. When he gave notice that he would be leaving soon for school, one of his co-workers, Maria, chastised him for keeping it a secret, likening him to a man who seduces a woman with promises of love only to leave after he gets what he wanted.

Book Marks by Rebecca McClanahan: McClanahan sees the story of her own life in the marginalia and underlinings left by a previous reader of a library book. The reader, evidently a woman, seemed to focus on the morose parts of the poetry collection. It reminds her of her first marriage, a marriage her mother's friend had predicted would end with sadness and McClanahan saw plenty of signs to confirm that prediction. Even before they were married, her husband got another girl pregnant and McClanahan helped pay for the girl's abortion. His infidelity continued into the marriage and only become more painful. He eventually left her for another woman and she wound up trying to commit suicide. Years later, when the pain returned, she contemplated suicide again, but decided against it after reflecting upon everything she had to live for. She sees her old despair in the margins of the poems and begs their imagined author to reconsider.

Silk Parachute by John McPhee: McPhee reflects on his relationship with his marriage. He recalls the trouble he got into as a child and the scoldings he received as a consequence. He remembers how devoted his mother was to him and the sacrifices she made to make him happy. As a child, he was fascinated by airplanes and she once bought him a silk parachute. He was amazed by how the elegant and beautiful

parachute would always steadily and unwaveringly return to him, no matter how high he tossed it into the air, and saw in it a symbol of his mother's devotion.

The Personal Voice: Merced, The Inheritance of Tools, and Mother Tongue

The Personal Voice: Merced, The Inheritance of Tools, and Mother Tongue Summary and Analysis

Merced by Danielle Ofri: When Ofri was finishing up her residence in preparation for becoming a doctor, she had a patient named Mercedes who was experiencing unusually strong headaches. All of the other doctors were baffled by her condition, but Ofri was sure that it was aseptic meningitis, a non-serious and easily treated condition. She sent her home with some mild medication and patted herself on the back for her medical acumen. For the sake of scientific thoroughness, she sent a vial of Mercedes' spinal fluid to be tested for, among other illnesses, Lyme disease. Ofri was shocked to find Mercedes back the next day, sprawled on the floor in a bout of temporary madness. Ofri was disappointed that her diagnosis had been wrong but was shocked to discover that the Lyme disease test had come back positive. Though Ofri had not really suspected Lyme disease and only requested the test on a whim, she once again praised her incisive analysis. The entire medical school was abuzz with the story; Lyme disease was incredibly rare in an urban setting. Mercedes, who seemed to be totally recovered, even came to a seminar to discuss it. Ofri felt on top of her profession and completely in control over the forces of health and sickness.

It would not last, however, as a few days later Mercedes returned in much worse shape. She was inexplicably brain-dead and would not survive for more than a few days and already she was entirely dependent on hospital machinery to breathe. Her family was heartbroken at how quickly and unexpectedly her condition deteriorated; so was Ofri. She tried to maintain her professional demeanor but she could not hold back her grief. Mercedes looked like a perfectly healthy young woman sleeping peacefully and it was difficult to fathom that she would last only a few days longer. Ofri broke down in tears in front of the family and escaped to a conference room to sob alone. She realized at that moment how little control she had. She thought of herself as a master over death, but Mercedes' inexplicable condition had proven how powerless she really was.

The Inheritance of Tools by Scott Russell Sanders: Sanders reflects on his relationship with his father through the symbol of the carpentry tools he inherited from him. A tool, he explains, is different from a machine because a tool relies primarily on the skill of who wields it. That skill he learned in long hours working side-by-side with his father who, in turn, had learned from his grandfather. When Sanders' father died, he coped with the grief by returning to a carpentry project, the best way he could think of to spiritually reunite with him.

Mother Tongue by Amy Tan: Tan notes how, as a writer, she has always been fascinated by language. Her linguistic development, however, is unusual among writers. As a child of Chinese immigrants, she learned to speak different forms of English in different

contexts. Her mother had never really mastered English and could only speak a kind of pidgin-version of the language. No matter how ungrammatical it was, it always made sense to Tan; it was what she was used to. Others, though, often could hardly understand her mother. Sometimes, it would even be a basis for discrimination: people would not take her mother seriously because she could not speak "proper" English. Tan was embarrassed by the way her mother talked and dedicated herself to learning how to speak like everyone else. In time, she was successful, and became a renowned writer, but as she matured, she realized that her mother's English was no less legitimate than anyone else's.

The Attentive Mind: Turning Point, The Stunt Pilot, and Spring

The Attentive Mind: Turning Point, The Stunt Pilot, and Spring Summary and Analysis

Turning Point by Rudolph Chelminski: Chelminski is a journalist who interviewed Philippe Petit, a French man who became famous for tightrope walking between the towers of the World Trade Center in the 1970s. Petit had been fascinated by tightrope walking as a performance art since his youth and had enjoyed some mild fame for tightrope walking between the towers of Notre Dame in Paris. He loved the physical challenge presented by these acts, but there was a deeper significance: He was trying to make a statement with his acts. He wanted to expand the boundaries of art by creating art in a way no one had ever imagined before. Though he could have made himself a millionaire with performances, books, and endorsements, Petit was truly interested in art only for art's sake and turned down every opportunity to profit. His tightrope act took on a new significance when the Twin Towers were destroyed by September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. He took so much pride in his accomplishment that he felt as if the terrorists had attacked him personally and he hoped that when people remembered the towers, they would remember his tightrope act and not the day when they were a burning pile of rubble.

The Stunt Pilot by Annie Dillard: Dillard recalls a stunt pilot she once knew named Dave Rahm. Rahm was technically a geologist by trade and he used his amazing aeronautical abilities to take pictures of mountains that other pilots could not. He was also an artist, though, a fact which Dillard discovered at an air show which, to that point, had rather bored her. She was amazed by his skill: He flipped his plane in every direction, dove at impossible speeds, only to veer up at that last moment; the exhaust trail of his plane seemed like the careful stroke of a painter's brush. It was a strange kind of art, though, in that Rahm could never appreciate it; unless someone filmed him, he could never see what he was doing. Some time later, Dillard had the opportunity to ride along with him. Ostensibly, the purpose of the trip was to look at some mountains and travel to an island off the coast of Washington, but it was obvious to Dillard that Rahm just took pleasure in flying. He was not flying a stunt plane and he probably would have killed his passengers if he performed most of his tricks anyway, but he still was able to fly close enough to the mountains to make Dillard's heart flutter. At her request, he even performed a few barrel rolls. They produced such a severe physiological effect on her that it made her marvel all the more that he could maintain enough concentration to pull off all his tricks in an air show. Of course, Rahm knew his trade was dangerous and he probably knew that he would eventually die, but it never seemed to bother him. Some years later, he was performing a show for the King of Jordan and was not able to pull out of a dive. His plane crashed into the ground and exploded, killing him instantly.

Spring by Gretel Ehrlich: Recovering from pneumonia, Ehrlich has a very profound and even somewhat surreal spring in Wyoming. Fascinated by random physics facts, she sees the universe broken down into its component parts. Beneath an apparently still and peaceful appearance, she sees a melee of particles violently shaking and jiggling. She reflects on the insignificance of human existence in the light of the enormity of the universe. She thinks with regret about how she rejected a boy named Joel when she was younger. A few years later, he died in a car accident. Morality and chastity now seem so inconsequential to her and she imagines meeting Joel again and taking him into her bed.

The Attentive Mind: Mail, A Lovely Sort of Lower Purpose, Heaven and Nature

The Attentive Mind: Mail, A Lovely Sort of Lower Purpose, Heaven and Nature Summary and Analysis

Mail by Anne Fadiman: In this essay, Fadiman reflects on the history of communication, from the Victorian mail system to modern electronic mail. In 19th century England, sending mail was a very expensive business, only made worse by the fact that the recipient and not the sender was forced to pay for it, thus putting the expense out of one's hand. Eventually, the system was completely overhauled and the so-called "penny post" was introduced. The hope was that revenue would increase by reducing the price and thereby increasing the volume handled. In fact, it succeeded, but there was likely a hidden cost: When the recipient was forced to pay for the letter (and often pay dearly) there was added pressure to make sure that the letter was worth it. It was easy to be considerably more lax if postage was a mere penny. With the introduction of electronic mail, this tendency swung to the extreme. Communication was easy, instantaneous, and free. It is not surprising, then, that the quality of e-mail is generally quite bad. People often forgo using proper grammar and punctuation and abbreviations—"LOL," "ROTFL," etc.—abound. The messages are usually short, rarely longer than a few minutes. Fadiman considers the published collections of letters of various historical personages and reflects with horror on what the modern equivalent might be: a book filled with hundreds of ungrammatical, nonsensical emails?

A Lovely Sort of Lower Purpose by Ian Frazier: Ian Frazier mourns how the modern world has lost the ability to just do nothing; today, everything must be somehow productive. He recalls being a child and spending hours in the woods with his friends, exploring, building, and playing. As they aged, however, they found that something new hovered over all of their activities: They felt guilty for not doing something more worthwhile. And thus, the woodland adventures came to an end. Even when adults recreate, there is a difference—it still lacks the kind of idleness that characterized childhood fun. Recreation is often obsessively goal-oriented—like hunting or fishing, for example—and it is all permeated with the "busy" lives that one is trying to get away from. Personal drama always finds a way in: complaining about wives or girlfriends, complaining about work, discussing children, and so on. Tragically, society simply has lost sight of the value of idleness.

Heaven and Nature by Edward Hoagland: Hoagland reflects upon the phenomenon of suicide and tries to understand the various statistics that surround it and the psychology that inspires it. Men, for example, make up an incredibly disproportionate number of suicides. When he asked a female friend, she said it is because men are so goal-oriented that they cannot stand the feeling of failure, and suicide is an easy escape. Women, on the other hand, tend to be more patient and accept suffering passively. It is

a bit surprising that the motivation for suicide is rarely some brutish, environmental one—poor people actually kill themselves at lower rates than rich people. People seem to commit suicide more to escape their own minds than to escape their circumstances. Hoagland has to conclude that suicide is almost always the result of mental illness, excluding, perhaps, cases of severe and perpetual pain. Man instinctively wants to preserve his life, and it must be a powerful psychological force which can overcome that.

The real solution to the problem which causes suicide is love, an emotion which is singular in its ability to transform a gloomy psychology into a sunny one. Love does not necessarily have to be of the romantic sort; simply loving the world, or parts of it, is enough to make a man happy. If suicide, then, is the result of a lack of love—or, in a sense, the abandonment of love—then it should be cause for those who choose not to take their own lives to reconsider how they live them. Life can end suddenly, even if the end does not come suddenly, and therefore one ought to take advantage of it while it is still possible to do so.

The Attentive Mind: No Wonder They Call Me a Bitch, The Stone Horse, and They All Just Went Away

The Attentive Mind: No Wonder They Call Me a Bitch, The Stone Horse, and They All Just Went Away Summary and Analysis

No Wonder They Call Me a Bitch by Ann Hodgman: In this humorous essay, Hodgman reports the results of an experiment in which she ate various kinds of dog foods. Not surprisingly, the results were generally negative. The dry food was generally quite tasteless and the beef or chicken flavors were all but undetectable. Wet food was slightly more tasty, but its tastiness was overwhelmed by the often disgusting textures. At one point, she even discovered a large vein in one of the morsels; this was too much, even for the sake of science. Snacks, fittingly, were the most tolerable and tastiest of all the kinds of food, though once again the textures were somewhat disturbing.

The Stone Horse by Barry Lopez: Lopez recounts a visit he made to Quechan stone monument in the middle of the California desert. There are actually many such archaeological sites, but many of them have been vandalized by the random passerby. The Quechan stone horse, however, has probably been spared this fate by mere chance; it is not so noticeable that one would immediately recognize it as a monument and decide to maliciously destroy it with a shotgun or rifle blast. He received directions to it from an apprehensive archaeological official and made his way there. The road there was blocked by boulders and so the last, small leg of the journey had to be traveled on foot.

His study of the horse had an almost religious aspect and lasted several hours. The work of art was constructed by laying stones in an outline which formed the outline of a horse that was about four times larger than a real horse. Many people believe that this kind of art—known as intaglio—is best viewed from the air, but Lopez disagrees. The Quechans, after all, had no access to such technology and he notes that the horse actually looks rather distorted and bizarre from above. From the ground, one must consider it from several perspectives, each reflecting a different aspect of a real horse. He recalls feeling a kind of timelessness looking at the horse, as if he were united simultaneously with all of history. As night approached, he was forced to leave. He concludes the essay by expressing the hope that the horse's inconspicuous character will continue to protect it from harm, but notes that archaeological sites like it continue to disappear at a steady, tragic rate.

They All Just Went Away by Joyce Carol Oates: Oates recalls traveling among old, abandoned, decaying houses as a child and reflects on the difference between a house

and a home. A house, of course, is merely the physical structure which is subject to the same laws of decomposition as anything else in the physical world. It is only a home when it is inhabited by a family, much like a body is a corpse unless it is suffused with a soul. Homes are, by their nature, temporary things—like a body, the soul will eventually leave and it will become a corpse.

With the symbolism in mind, Oates considers her neighbors, the Weidels, who lived next door when she was a child. The father was a complete degenerate who abused his daughters both physically and sexually. His wife, Mrs. Weidel, was the only one in the household who had an income and that income was rather modest. The family, therefore, depended upon welfare checks from the county to get by. Oates recalls hearing screams and fights from the house the entire time the Weidels lived there, until the house burned down—Mr. Weidel had decided to burn it down, though it was unclear whether he meant to kill everyone else inside of it. The house was destroyed in the act but so was the home: Mr. Weidel was arrested and sent to jail, and the children were taken away from Mrs. Weidel who, evidently, had taken part in the abuse, too.

Years later, Oates recognized one of the children, Ruth, attended her school. She made a point of befriending her and only brought up the topic of her old house gradually. She asked Ruth several times if she would like to visit—which would mean seeing the decayed ruins of her house, which the country refused to clean up. Ruth always seemed to be tempted by the offer, but ultimately declined each time.

The Attentive Mind: Matriculation Fixation, Ali in Havana, and The Disposable Rocket

The Attentive Mind: Matriculation Fixation, Ali in Havana, and The Disposable Rocket Summary and Analysis

Matriculation Fixation by Joe Queenan: Queenan reflects on the American obsession with universities and the status which a top-tier university bestows, both on the young people who attend and their parents who send them. There is a tacit assumption that going to a good university is some guarantee of subsequent professional success. Of course, many people succeed who go to middling universities and many people fail who go to elite universities.

Ali in Havana by Gay Talese: Talese recounts accompanying boxer Muhammad Ali on a trip to visit Fidel Castro in Cuba. Ali was a worldwide icon and was seen as a leader of the black community. He was an important player in the civil rights movements. Castro, though despised by many conservatives and disliked by the United States government, was admired by many liberals for his commitment to socialism and progressive stance on race relations. It was, therefore, natural that the two would meet. Ali was a soft-spoken man and generally only talked to those very close to him.

The Disposable Rocket by John Updike: Updike reflects on the nature of the male body and how it differs from the female body. The female body is delicate and forms a significant part of a woman's identity. The man's body on the other hand is quite utilitarian and is, to the man, something very forgettable. He is willing to subject it to abuse and danger without fear of it being marred or tainted.

The Public Sphere: In Distrust of Movements, Think About It, and Shouting Fire!

The Public Sphere: In Distrust of Movements, Think About It, and Shouting Fire! Summary and Analysis

In Distrust of Movements by Wendell Berry: Berry criticizes those who think that the environmental problems facing America can be solved by addressing only small facets of it: cleaner water, more efficient manufacturing processes, or better landfill management. While these things are certainly problematic, they are only symptoms of the more fundamental problem. The entire structure of the economy is flawed and as long as it remains, it will continue to exploit and destroy the world's natural resources. The primary problem with the economy is a lack of knowledge; people no longer understand how the goods they depend upon reach them. They do not realize that there is a farmer who has to tend his crops to produce the wheat that gets turned into the bread they use to make their sandwiches. Perhaps, in some abstract manner, they realize this, but there is such a separation that, for all practical purposes, they have forgotten it. If people only realized how utterly dependent upon nature they are they would probably not be so willing to exploit it. A person who is conscious both of nature's generosity and the destructive effects of the economy would be compelled by conscience to no longer patronize certain corporations and try to make as little footprint on the environment as possible.

Think About It by Frank Conroy: Conroy considers the sometimes complicated process by which a person learns. Oftentimes, the seed of knowledge will be planted but will only blossom years later, when some experience or fact enlightens it. For example, he recalls once asking a jazz musician how he produced a certain kind of chord; the musician responded briefly: "Sixths." Conroy left, confused, and never understood what he meant until he accidentally plucked a peculiar-sounding chord on his own guitar years later. He realized that he had a played a chord in which the notes were separated by six steps and finally understood the advice he received years ago.

Another case proved to be more complex. When he was a college sophomore, completely by chance, he became friends with William O. Douglas, a Supreme Court Justice. The two ate lunch together for weeks and discussed all sorts of topics. When Conroy mentioned he would be having dinner with the famous Judge Learned Hand, his girlfriend's grandfather, Douglas began to discuss the Dennis case. It was a case regarding the First Amendment. A group of communists had been arrested and charged with public endangerment. The prosecution had argued that the men were exempt from First Amendment protection because they represented a "clear and present danger." Douglas thought this argument was weak, however; the FBI was monitoring everything

they did, so they hardly could have presented much of a danger to anyone. If they tried anything, federal agents would swoop in and put a stop to it. He asked Conroy to relay the argument to Learned Hand, but Conroy was reluctant. Douglas' argument seemed quite decisive and he did not want to embarrass Judge Hand. As it turned out, the topic came up without Conroy's initiative and he meekly relayed Douglas' argument to the Judge. The Judge scoffed at it—he asked why Justice Douglas, who was normally so suspicious of the FBI, was suddenly so trusting. Conroy was now quite confused and torn between the two arguments. He hoped to find some kind of understanding by seeing what Justice Douglas thought, but he never saw him again. The affair taught him a lesson that some issues are too complicated to be entirely exhausted with one or even several arguments; sometimes the substance is so deep that debate can go on practically forever.

Shouting "Fire!" by Alan M. Dershowitz: Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once famously outlined an exception to the First Amendment's protection of free speech: Free speech, he said, would not protect a person who shouted "Fire!" in a crowded theater, for the exclamation could cause panic and even physical injury to those swept up in the ensuing stampede. He notes that this legal precedent has been distorted to cover many cases which bear no relation to the original example. Indeed, it did not even make sense in the case Holmes first applied it in. In that case, a man was being tried for distributing pamphlets which opposed the draft. Holmes argued that, given the circumstances—this was during World War I—the pamphlets would, or potentially would, instigate others to violent, unlawful acts. In fact, this was not true; the pamphlets only advocated peaceful, lawful opposition to the draft. It is fitting then, in a way, that the result of Holmes "Fire" example has continued to be applied to cases to which it is really irrelevant. Rev. Jerry Falwell, for example, claimed that "Hustler Magazine"'s parody of him was equivalent to shouting "fire!" in a crowded theater. Even a judge fell prey to this fallacy; he argued that it was acceptable to prevent a peaceful Nazi demonstration because it presented the same threat as shouting "fire" in a theater.

The Public Sphere: Who Shot Johnny?, Who We Are, What's Wrong With Animal Rights

The Public Sphere: Who Shot Johnny?, Who We Are, What's Wrong With Animal Rights Summary and Analysis

Who Shot Johnny? by Debra Dickerson: Dickerson's nephew, Johnny, was shot and paralyzed one night for innocently waving at a car that was driving by. Since Johnny was a young black male, everyone assumed that it was drug- or gang-related, but it appears that Johnny really was just the victim of random and unprovoked violence. Though Johnny's assailant was never identified or caught, Dickerson feels like she already knows him. He is the prototypical black male who continues to bring down the entire black community with him. He disobeys his parents, he dresses like a gangster, he gets involved in crime at a young age, he has no respect for women, and, for most of America, he is the quintessential African American.

Who We Are by David Halberstam: After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Halberstam reflects on the resiliency of the American government and the historical track it took to get where it is today. In World War I, Americans were almost stubbornly isolationist and only entered the war when non-intervention became impossible and the conflict began to take American lives. However, immediately after, the public foolishly returned to its old ways and rejected Woodrow Wilson's attempts to permanently involve the country in foreign affairs with the League of Nations. The nation was awoken from its slumber by World War II and was forced to remain vigilant throughout the Cold War. When the Berlin Wall fell, though, Americans were only too eager to return to isolationism and remained in that same complacency until the terrorist attacks on September 11.

What's Wrong With Animal Rights by Vicki Hearne: Hearne, an animal trainer, argues against animal rights on a conceptual level. Beneath the animal rightists' philosophy is an assumption that the foundation of all rights is the ability to suffer, a flawed philosophical premise borrowed from the philosophical school of utilitarian philosophy. This philosophy ignores the full dimensions of human existence and reduces all human affairs to the mundane question of physical pain. In truth, rights emerge from relationships and a knowledge of those relationships. Dogs, however, are limited in their ability to know; certainly, they cannot think in any kind of systematic or rational manner. The dog is unable to conceive of rights in the same way a human can, and, therefore, cannot be said to possess those same rights.

The Public Sphere: On Seeing England for the First Time, Exquisite Corpse, The Singer Solution to World Poverty

The Public Sphere: On Seeing England for the First Time, Exquisite Corpse, The Singer Solution to World Poverty Summary and Analysis

On Seeing England for the First Time by Jamaica Kincaid: Kincaid, a native of Antigua, reflects on how England is part of her identity and her nation's identity. Antigua is a British colony and she was always taught, from a young age, that British things were simply better than Antiguan things, and the styles and fads of her childhood all confirmed that. In school, she was forced to memorize the contours of the British isles and the location of all of the major British cities. Though most Antiguans fell in line with this love for Britain, Kincaid recalls feeling hatred for the country when she first was able to visit it.

Exquisite Corpse by Ashraf Rushdy: When lynching was prevalent in the late 19th century and early 20th century, taking pictures was almost a point of pride for the lynchers. However, as lynching declined, the significance of photographs reversed. When Emmett Till was brutally murdered by a group of racist white men in 1955, his mother insisted that his coffin was open during the funeral so that everyone could see what he had suffered. Photographs of the boy's ravaged corpse circulated around the entire nation and were a catalyst for the growing civil rights movement. The culture had gone through another change by the time of James Byrd's brutal lynching in 1999. No photograph was ever published of his corpse, though the barbarity of the act was crucial the prosecution's case against his murderers. This change probably only reflects America's squeamishness; the country has not moved far beyond where it was at the time of Till's murder. Circulating photographs of Byrd's corpse could have had the same effect and sparked the same righteous outrage that helped advance relationships between the races in 1955.

The Singer Solution to World Poverty by Peter Singer: Singer argues that anyone who has an income which is more than sufficient for basic necessities is morally obligated to donate the surplus to the poor people in developing nations. The basis for this argument is a philosophical and ethical system known as utilitarianism. According to utilitarianism, an action is good or bad based upon its consequences and the goal is to increase the amount of overall happiness in the world. One must look at this collective happiness from an unselfish perspective; there can no be preference for oneself over a poor child living in India. Considering the case of American influence, it follows rather directly from this that there is an enormous obligation to donate a significant portion of one's wealth to the foreign poor since they need the money more; if it were not donated—to provide

food and basic medical care to those in desperate need—it would be spent on luxuries like a new car or expensive clothing.

The Public Sphere: On Being Black and Middle Class, The Killing Game, and The Dramaturgy of Death

The Public Sphere: On Being Black and Middle Class, The Killing Game, and The Dramaturgy of Death Summary and Analysis

On Being Black and Middle Class by Shelby Steele: Steele considers the tension between two of the largest components of his identity: He is both black and middle class. In the sixties, the black movement defined itself along class lines; the prototypical black man was the poor black living in the ghetto. The middle class was seen as the black man's exploiter and oppressor. Naturally, this perception caused a great conflict in Steele, for he was simultaneously cast as both victim and victimizer.

The Killing Game by Joy Williams: Williams denounces the cruelty of modern hunting practices which, she says, revolves around a barbaric delight in killing another living thing. She systematically refutes all of the various excuses hunters produce for their "sport." For example, they say that if hunters do not hunt then populations will grow out of control. They use this excuse to bring many species to near extinction and cause untold amounts of environmental damage along the way; whatever questionable environmental benefits they produce (and, in truth, they probably produce none—deer only become overpopulated because they killed all the wolves that hunt them) are more than outweighed by the costs.

The Dramaturgy of Death by Garry Wills: Wills considers the various justifications given for the death penalty and sees in them a basic common element: redressing a grievance. This justification was used to justify such extreme forms of brutality as drawing and quartering or burning at the stake. While the modern world has abandoned these barbaric practices, it continues to justify its own use of capital punishment with the same barbaric philosophy.

Characters

Lucy Grealy

Lucy Grealy is the author of "Mirrorings," in which she reflects on her experience as a woman who is forced to live with facial disfigurement. At the age of nine, doctors discovered a malignant tumor in her cheek and the surgery to remove it left that side of her face hollow. Traces of the cancer remained and she was forced to undergo months of painful and difficult chemotherapy. Through all of this, she was constantly praised for her bravery—which she identified with simply with hiding the pain. As she grew older, she continued to try to be brave and, concretely, this meant hiding the emotional toll her facial disfigurement took on her. She tried various ways to psychologically overcome it. She was a naturally bright young woman and tried to use her superior intellect to elevate herself above her peers, but such arrogance was bound not to truly solve her spiritual wounds. Life only became more difficult when she went through puberty and began to want a boyfriend, something she assumed she would never have. She began to think that if she could just get a man to have sex with her, she would be happy, but experimentation to this end proved to have the opposite effect.

Grealy endured numerous attempts to reconstruct her face with plastic surgery and they almost invariably failed, and with each failure came a renewed desperation. One surgery, however, was mildly successful but, though it did make her look better, she looked so different that she could not recognize herself. For nearly a year afterward, she resolved not to look into a mirror because the sight disturbed her so much. Grealy finally came to terms with her condition when she realized that her face was only a problem if she made it one.

Philippe Petit

Philippe Petit is a French acrobat and performance artist who from a very young age was fascinated with trying to tightrope walk between well-known structures, never using any safety precautions like a net. His first such act was a walk between the towers of the famous Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. When he heard about the construction of the World Trade Center in Manhattan, he was fascinated by the prospect of tightrope walking between such enormous towers; there was no similar opportunity anywhere. The feat proved to be more difficult than he anticipated. The gap was so large that he required help to string the cable across and he knew that if anyone noticed what he was doing, the entire enterprise would end abruptly. Dressed as construction workers, he and his friend went up the towers while they were still being constructed and stretched a wire between them. He brought with him an abnormally heavy balancing pole which would help his stability but also would be a much larger physical burden then he was used to. Furthermore, the stability of the cable itself was not perfect and he was forced to adjust to the occasional wobble. Nonetheless, despite all of these difficulties, he successfully walked back and forth between the towers, to the awe of thousands of

spectators. When he got off the cable, he was arrested by police for public disturbance, but his "sentence" was to perform a tightrope cable for children in Central Park.

As physically impressive as Petit's performances are, he hopes that the viewer will take away a greater significance. His point is to show how expansive art is—it is not confined only to paintings or sculptures; art can even be found, as his acts prove, in the most practical thing imaginable: an office building.

Nat King Cole

Henry Louis Gates remembers Nat King Cole, a famous black musician, known for his perfect hair.

Mercedes

Mercedes is the young woman whom Danielle Ofri treated in her last years as a medical student. Ofri misdiagnosed her twice and Mercedes wound up dying of an unknown illness.

Dave Rahm

Dave Rahm was a stunt pilot whose skill impressed Anne Dillard. He wound up dying while practicing his art for the King of Jordan.

Mr. Weidel

Mr. Weidel is the abusive, probably insane father that figures into the story Joyce Carol Oates recounts in "They All Just Went Away." He was eventually put in prison for setting fire to his house.

Ruth Weidel

Ruth Weidel was one of the daughters of the Weidel family in "They All Just Went Away." Though the nature of the abuse is unclear, she was probably abused both sexually and physically. Joyce wound up befriending her years after the Weidel house burnt down.

Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali was a famous boxer who become an important part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

Oliver Wendell Holmes was a Supreme Court Justice who outlined an exception to freedom of speech with the famous example of shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater.

Emmett Till

Emmett Till was a young black man who was brutally lynched for, supposedly, looking at a white woman. Photographs of his mutilated corpse were widely circulated and the outrage they caused helped catalyze the civil rights movement.

Objects/Places

Magdaluna

Magdaluna is Anwar Accawi's Jordanian hometown. He fondly recalls the tightly knit community and laments its dissolution.

The Silk Parachute

John McPhee uses the silk parachute to symbolize his mother. He notes how both always came back to him, no matter how hard he threw them away.

The World Trade Center

The World Trade Center is the group of buildings constructed during the 1970s in Manhattan. Philippe Petit famously tightrope walked between them. They were destroyed in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

E-mail

Anne Fadiman laments the fact that e-mail, because it is free and easy, has reduced communication to the lowest possible quality.

The Quechan Stone Horse

In "The Stone Horse," Barry Lopez travels into the California desert to see a stone intaglio built by the Quechan Indians.

Cuba

In "Ali in Havana," Gay Talese recounts Muhammad Ali's historic trip to meet Cuban president Fidel Castro.

The First Amendment

In "Shouting 'Fire!'" Alan Dershowitz discusses how many people try to circumvent the First Amendment by musing Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes' famous example of shouting "Fire!" in a theater.

England

For author Jamaica Kincaid, England represents the worst of Western Imperialism. She adopts the same attitudes toward it which she believes the English adopt toward her native country of Antigua: disdain and even hatred.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the ethical philosophy according to which one's actions are good or bad depending on how beneficial the consequences are. Such a philosophy is the basis of Singer's argument in "The Singer Solution to World Poverty."

Capital Punishment

Capital punishment is the subject of Garry Wills' essay, "The Dramaturgy of Death." He argues that capital punishment is a vestige of a barbaric philosophy that humanity ought to have surpassed.

Themes

The Experience of Immigrants

Several of the essays in this collection consider the perspective of someone who was born outside of the United States and the role their nationality plays in their identity. In "The Telephone," Anwar Accawi reflects on the simple, poor life in his village in Jordan. Though they went for a long time without a lot of modern conveniences, they were a very tightly knit community. The community dissolved when globalization drew his village into the global society. People began to leave for better jobs or, in Accawi's case, left for a better education. He reflects how everyone thought they would be better off as a result of participating in the global economy but laments that, so far, they are not.

In "Silent Dancing," Judith Ortiz Cofer recounts her experience as an immigrant to New York City from Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican community was quite large in New York City but it was divided: one portion wanted to remain true to their Puerto Rican traditions and culture, while the others wanted to be assimilated into mainstream, "white" culture. This division affected even her own family. Her father was almost ashamed by their nationality and desired all of his life to move his family out of the barrio; it was only by necessity that they moved there to begin with. Part of this shame is related to money; Cofer's father made considerably more than most of the other people in the barrio and so he felt that he was, in some way, above them. A similar kind of racial self-hatred suffuses the attitudes of those who wished to leave Puerto Rican culture behind. It is reasonable to think that this self-hatred comes from adopting the racist beliefs which permeated the United States as a whole at the time, as many people assumed all Latinos were poor.

In "Mother Tongue," Amy Tan considers the problem of assimilation through the medium of language. When her family moved to the United States, she was young enough to easily pick up on the language and speak it fluently (though, she notes, there were times when she had more difficulties than others). Her mother, however, was never able to fully master it and spoke a kind of pidgin language her entire life. While Tan was young, this was a source of considerable embarrassment for her. She hated when her friends saw how foolish her mother appeared; people, she notes, tend to judge intelligence largely on the basis of how one expresses oneself. As she grew up, she realized that there was a certain amount of legitimacy to her mother's language and even used her mother's "broken" language as the basis for her acclaimed novel, "The Joy Luck Club."

The African American Experience

Many of the writers in this collection consider various facets of being a black man or woman living in America. In "In the Kitchen," for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. uses black hair as a symbol for how being African American influences a person's identity.

Black hair is stubborn and "kinky" and it naturally resists attempts to mold or straighten it into styles which are more typical for white hair. In a similar way, one's black identity can never really be lost. The author himself, though he find himself away from his home in Zanzibar, was immediately recalled to his black roots when he heard Nat King Cole play on the radio.

"Who Shot Johnny?" uses the tragic paralysis of the author's nephew to reflect on the problems facing African American communities throughout the world. Her nephew, a young, black male was shot in the back simply for waving at a car that was driving by. The assailant was never caught, but Dickerson felt immediately like she knew who it was. Her nephew's assailant was that prototypical violent, lawless, disobedient, womanizing black male whose loud actions attract the attention of the entire country. In the eyes of many Americans, he stands for all blacks and Dickerson notes that until he is gone, he will continue to stand in the way of blacks improving their lot in society.

"The Exquisite Corpse" traces the history of photography in relation to lynching. When lynching was popular, taking a photograph was a kind of trophy. The lynch mob was proud about what they did and they wanted to memorialize their accomplishment, much like a hunter will take a picture of a deer he slays. As society become less barbaric, photography's role reversed. In 1955, Emmett Till was brutally murdered by a gang of racist, white men. His mother refused to have his body covered up during the funeral and photographs of his mutilated body spread across the country. The subsequent horror and outrage catalyzed the civil rights movement. In recent times, however, the pendulum has swung back in the other direction. When James Byrd was murdered by being dragged behind a pickup truck, no photographs were ever published of his brutalized corpse. Obviously, since Byrd was lynched, many problems still exist, and the author laments that the photographs cannot be used to the same good end they were after Till's murder.

The Role and Perception of Women in Modern American Society

The changing perception of women has been one of the dominant themes of the 20th century and remains an important topic in the modern world. As such, many of the essays in this collection are written by women who reflect on various aspects of being a woman in modern society. In "Hair," Marcia Aldrich uses hairstyle to point out how a woman's physical appearance affects her personal identity and even self-worth. Some women, like her mother, are obsessed with hair and are on a perpetual quest to find a perfect hairstyle. It would seem that they hope that if they could only perfect their hair they would finally be happy. Such an attitude is perhaps reflective of the objectivized perception of women in modern American society; insofar as a woman is only valued for her physical appearance, it is only natural for a woman to be obsessed with getting it "just right." Each of Aldrich's sisters had different experiences. Her older sister perhaps reflects a feminist perspective on hair. She never bothered with it and kept basically the same hairstyle throughout her life. It was almost an act of defiance; she demanded that people form their opinion of her based on her words and actions, not on something that

she thinks is so trivial. Aldrich's youngest sister was afflicted with particularly bad hair and the effects of this were rather significant. She tried all sorts of hairstyles to try to distract attention from her poor hair, but always seemed to be uneasy and self-conscious about it. Aldrich finds herself in the middle of all of this, but realizes that, ultimately, a person is what she makes of herself.

In "Mirrorings," Lucy Grealy considers the same problem of the perception of women, but from the perspective of a woman who has had to struggle with a physical deformity almost all of her life. When she was nine years old, Grealy had cancer removed from her cheek which left her face severely disfigured. Grealy struggled for years with her face and found various ways to cope with the unhappiness it caused, including developing her intellect so that she could feel superior to the rest of society. However, as she grew older, she realized that a person need not be defined by what they look like and decided that her face was only a burden to her because she made it one.

Style

Perspective

As many of the essays included in this collection deal with issues of personal identity or reflecting on the author's experiences, it is important to understand the author's perspective. In "The Telephone," for example, the author reflects on simple village life in Jordan and the negative effects that globalization had on his community. Globalization caused many people to leave the community to find better jobs or, in Accawi's case, to leave the country to seek higher education. In order to understand the import of Accawi's lament that he has not found a better life, it is crucial to understand that he is writing from the perspective of a highly educated, affluent, and successful writer. None of the comforts of being in the upper-class, he argues, can make up for losing a community.

In "On Seeing England for the First Time," Jamaica Kincaid writes as an Antiguan native about the effects of English culture on Antigua. Antiguans learned, from a very young age, that their culture was inferior to English culture, but Kincaid refused to fall in line. When she finally visited England—a country that was almost legendary in the minds of Antiguans—Kincaid adopted the same attitude the English adopted toward her country. She looked with disdain on all of England's cultural achievements and made sure everyone around her was aware of her disdain.

Tone

The tone each author takes varies greatly depending on their particular subject matter. Many of the essays in this collection are of a personal, reflective nature and have little interest of convincing the reader of any universal argument. For example, in "Mail," Anne Fadiman reflects on the evolution of communication from the time of 19th century mail systems to the modern day. She notes that as the ease of communication has increased, the quality of communication has generally decreased. It has perhaps reached its low point with e-mail: most messages are only a few lines, are usually ungrammatical, and often contain a number of acronyms which would be completely unintelligible to an outsider.

However, other writers use their personal experiences as a way to reflect on a larger point. In "Mirrorings," for example, Lucy Grealy uses her experience as a woman afflicted with a facial disfigurement to point out that one's identity is only what one makes of it. She overcame the grief her face caused her by focusing on the other positive aspects of her personality. Likewise, Danielle Ofri, in "Merced" reflects on her experience as a young doctor to show how limited human control really is. Ofri, while still in medical school, felt her education prepared her for everything and confidently diagnosed one patient, Mercedes, with a mild, easily cured illness and sent her home. As it turned out, the diagnosis was wrong and Mercedes wound up dying not long after.

Ofri was never unable to determine what exactly caused the young woman's death and has used the experience as a source of professional and personal humility.

Structure

The collection of essays is divided into three loose sections. The sections are not related directly to the content of the essays, but rather to the form of the essay. The first essays are what might be called reflective essays and tend to focus mainly on issues of personal identity, with a special, but not exclusive, emphasis on the experience of women and minorities. Many of these essays are related to the issue of femininity in modern society. Marcia Aldrich's "Hair," for example, considers the relationship between a woman's self-worth and her physical appearance. She reflects on the various ways women deal with these issues. Some, like her mother, are obsessed with having a new hairstyle all the time, which, perhaps, reflects society's attempt to reduce the value of women merely to their physical beauty. If so, then Aldrich's older sister has what might be a called a feminist philosophy of hairstyle. Despite her naturally beautiful hair, she defiantly spends almost no time styling it. Instead, she wants to be judged on the basis of her accomplishments.

The next section deals with descriptive essays. In these essays, the author recreates a certain personal experience they had. In some cases, the author is intentionally transparent and merely wants to relay the facts as they were. "Ali in Havana" and "Turning Point" would be examples of this style; in both cases, the author is a journalist trying to give the reader insight into the life and personality of some important figure. In other essays, however, the author's own judgments and beliefs are as important as the subject matter that is considered. For example, in "Matriculation Fixation," Joe Queenan reflects on the American obsession with educational status in order to justify his own disdain for such elitism by pointing out that many people who attend top-tier universities wind up being failures and many people who attend second-rate universities wind up being quite successful.

The final section of the book is comprised of argumentative essays—essays which are all trying to convince the reader of some specific point. The topics discussed in these essays range greatly in terms of seriousness. For example, Frank Conroy's "Think About It" is a light, though profound, reflection on the processes of learning. He reflects on how understanding a fact is often not instantaneous but can sometimes extend over years; sometimes, it never ends. Other essays confront issues that are hotly debated in modern society. In "The Singer Solution to World Poverty" Peter Singer argues for his extreme position that a person is obligated to give away whatever wealth he has that is not required for basic survival. In "What's Wrong With Animal Rights," Vicky Hearne argues against the concept of rights inherent to animal rights. She argues that the conception is one that reduces life merely to the question of suffering and ignores the role of relationships and personal fulfillment.

Quotes

"Three years later, having won a scholarship, I left Lebanon for the United States. Like the others who left Magdaluna before me, I am still looking for that better life." (41)

"She said, 'Nothing is permanent, nothing is forever. Don't feel hampered or hemmed in by the shape of your face or the shape of your past. Hair is vital, sustains mistakes, can be born again. You don't have to marry it. Now tip back and put your head into my hands.'" (49)

"Even now, I question what I remember about the children. Did they really die? Or did their mother simply move away with them after the fire? Maybe they were not even boys at all. Maybe they were two girls. Or one boy and one girl. Or maybe I am struggling to phase them out of my memory altogether. Not just them, but the fear that their destiny could have so easily been mine and my brothers'." (65)

"If there was ever a part of our African past that resisted assimilation, it was the kitchen." (69)

"Into that universal lie, that sad equation of 'if only . . . ' that we are all prey to, I was sure that if only I had a normal face, then I would be happy." (85)

"Folded just so, the parachute never failed. Always, it floated back to you—silkily, beautifully—to start over and float back again. Even if you abused it, whacked it really hard—gracefully, lightly, it floated back to you." (120)

"Dave Rahm was a stunt pilot, the air's own genius." (167)

"A ferocious loneliness took hold of me. I felt a spring-inspired desire, a sense of trajectory, but no interception was in sight. In fact, I wanted none. My body was a parenthetical dash laid against a landscape so spacious it defied space as we know it—space as a membrane—and curved out of time." (183)

"I've sometimes wondered why people who know that they are terminally ill, or who are headed for suicide, so very seldom have paused to take a bad guy along with them. It is lawless to consider an act of assassination, yet hardly more so, really, than suicide is regarded in some quarters (or death itself, in others)." (213)

"I was not eager to move. The moment I did I would be back in the flow of time, the horse no longer quivering in the same way before me." (236)

"One way we could describe the task ahead of us is by saying that we need to enlarge the consciousness and the conscience of the economy. Our economy needs to know—and care—what it is doing. This is revolutionary, of course, if you have a taste for revolution, but it is also a matter of common sense." (294)

"Getting America to change directions and attitudes from one era to another sometimes must seem like trying to change the direction of an aircraft carrier by trailing your hand behind it in the water." (330)

Topics for Discussion

What is the significance of Accawi's educational background to the point he is trying to make in "The Telephone"?

What is the significance of Rhonda in "Hair"?

Why does Cofer's father want so badly to move out of the barrio in "Silent Dancing"?

What lesson did Ofri learn from Mercedes in "Merced"?

What is Petit's artistic or philosophical point in his high-wire acts in "Turning Point"?

Why does Lopez say that the stone horse ought to be viewed from the ground, and not from the air, in "The Stone Horse"?

Why does Rushdy think that the photographs of James Byrd's ravaged corpse ought to have been circulated in newspapers in "The Exquisite Corpse"?