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## Foreword

"CAN A COMPUTER evaluate an essay?" a *New York Times* reporter asked me shortly before we wrapped up this year's book, the fourteenth in the series. The reason for the question: a new computer program called e-rater that will be used to grade essay questions on the Graduate Management Admissions Test. I take it that the "e" stands for essay.

I replied that a computer could very easily score the results of the essay questions, assuming that all anyone wanted to know was whether the writing conformed to standard English usage and reflected a few other elements of style, like syntactic variety, that could conveniently be machine-measured. In fact, most popular word processors already provide some version of this (mine immediately questioned the use of *e-rater*). But could a computer, even one as enlightened as e-rater, detect humor and irony, evaluate metaphor, or discern a writer's tone of voice or attitude? E-rater's developer honestly admitted to the *Times* that it couldn't: "It's not designed to score Montaigne," she said. "It's designed for a specific purpose, to score the kinds of essays we see on standardized tests."

Which brings us to the heart of the matter: what do we talk about when we talk about essays? Montaigne's term for his eccentric and digressive meditations is now employed so broadly and indiscriminately that its traditional literary meaning is all but forgotten. An essay, it seems, is anything we want it to be. Our dailies, weeklies, and monthlies are chock-full of nonfiction prose, but very little of it is either creative or literary. Most of it is informative, functional, or advisory, and that's as it should be. Produced with built-in

## Notable Essays of 1998

SELECTED BY ROBERT ATWAN

- OPAL PALMER ADISA  
Lying in the Tall Grasses, Eating  
Cane. *ZZZZYVA*, Spring.
- DOROTHY ALLISON  
Mama and Mom and Dad and Son.  
*Harper's Bazaar*, March.
- DONALD ANDERSON  
Luck. *Epoch*, vol. 47, no. 1.
- DORIE BARGMANN  
Lionbird. *Manoa*, vol. 10, no. 2.
- HELEN BAROLINI  
The Shadowy Lady of the Street of  
Dark Shops. *The Virginia Quarterly  
Review*, Spring.
- JOCELYN BARTKEVICIUS  
Hat Check Noir. *The Hudson Review*,  
Spring.
- MIRA BARTOK-BARATTA  
The Oracle Bone. *The Kenyon  
Review*, Winter.
- RICK BASS  
The Bad Shot. *Sports Afield*,  
September.
- JUNE BEISCH  
The Wolf. *The Virginia Quarterly  
Review*, Summer.
- HEIDI BELL  
Afraid of Men. *Black Dirt*,  
Fall/Winter.
- JANE BERNSTEIN  
The Black Dog. *Prairie Schooner*, Fall.
- SVEN BIRKERTS  
When First I Knocked. *Dissent*, Fall.
- GREG BOTTOMS  
1967. *Alaska Quarterly Review*,  
Fall/Winter.
- CHRISTOPHER BROOKHOUSE  
Self Story. *The Gettysburg Review*,  
Spring.
- JANE BROX  
The Wilderness North of the  
Merrimack. *The Georgia Review*,  
Winter.
- BILL BUFORD  
Thy Neighbor's Life. *The New Yorker*,  
January 5.
- EDWARD CHAMPLIN  
Nero Reconsidered. *The New  
England Review*, Spring.
- CAROL CLOOS  
Dangerous Men. *The Missouri  
Review*, vol. 21, no. 1.
- JAMES CONAWAY  
How a House Restored a Family.  
*Preservation*, July/August.
- CHARLES CONNER  
My Best Sister. *The Chattahoochie  
Review*, Spring.

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- BERNARD COOPER  
Blank Canvas. *Mid-American Review*,  
Fall.
- STANLEY CROUCH  
A Tragic Optimist. *Forbes, ASAP*,  
November 30.
- JASON CURRAN  
Air Disasters. *The Chattahoochie  
Review*, Fall.
- CLAIRE DAVIS  
Breathing the Snake. *Shenandoah*,  
Summer.
- ALISON DEMING  
The Value of Experience. *Sonora  
Review*, Spring/Summer.
- ANNIE DILLARD  
The Wreck of Time. *Harper's  
Magazine*, January.
- ANDRE DUBUS  
Digging. *Epoch*, vol. 46, no. 3.
- TONY EARLEY  
Somehow Form a Family. *Harper's  
Magazine*, March.
- GERALD EARLY  
Performance and Reality: Race,  
Sports and the Modern World.  
*The Nation*, August 10 and 17.
- GERALD M. EDELMAN  
Building a Picture of the Brain.  
*Daedalus*, Spring.
- JOSEPH EPSTEIN  
I'm History. *The American Scholar*,  
Winter.
- WILLIAM H. EPSTEIN  
Tryouts: A Memoir. *Critical Inquiry*,  
Autumn.
- ANN FADIMAN  
The Unfuzzy Lamb. *The American  
Scholar*, Summer.
- STEVE FAULKNER  
Common Water. *DoubleTake*, no. 11,  
Winter.
- GARY FINCKE  
Subsidence, Mine Fire, the Tomb of  
Eve. *Southern Humanities Review*,  
Summer.
- RICHARD FORD  
Good Raymond. *The New Yorker*,  
October 5.
- CASTLE FREEMAN, JR.  
The Memory Tree. *Yankee*,  
November.
- HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.  
The End of Loyalty. *The New Yorker*,  
March 9.
- DAVID GELERNTER  
Unresolved Evil. *The Weekly  
Standard*, April 6.
- ADAM GOPNIK  
Man Goes to See a Doctor. *The New  
Yorker*, August 24 and 31.
- STEPHEN JAY GOULD  
In Gratuitous Battle. *Civilization*,  
October/November.
- NICOLE GRAEV  
Tight Jeans. *The Hudson Review*,  
Summer.
- GORDEN GRICE  
Bat Country. *Granta*, no. 63.
- PAUL GRUCHOW  
A Long Day's Night: Discovering  
the Mississippi. *Ascent*, Fall.
- JOHN HALES  
Falling. *The Hudson Review*, Winter.
- BARRY HANNAH  
Why I Write. *The Oxford American*,  
no. 20.
- DANIEL HARRIS  
The Kitschification of Princess  
Diana. *Salmagundi*,  
Spring/Summer.
- STEVEN HARVEY  
High Lonesome. *The Florida Review*,  
vol. 23, no. 2.
- DEWITT HENRY  
Wide Awake. *The Missouri Review*,  
vol. 21, no. 1.
- EMILY HIESTAND  
Neon Effects. *The Southwest Review*,  
vol. 83, no. 2.

- Maps. *Orion*, Spring.
- KATHLEEN HILL  
Avesnes: Reading in Place. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Winter.
- SARAH E. HINLICKY  
Subversive Virginité. *First Things*, October.
- KATHLEEN HIRSCH  
Making. *The Georgia Review*, Summer.
- EDWARD HOAGLAND  
I Can See. *Granta*, no. 62.
- MOLLY MAGID HOAGLAND  
Greenwich Village Now: A Letter. *The New England Review*, Winter.
- PRISCILLA HODGKINS  
Einstein Didn't Dream of My Mother. *Creative Nonfiction*, no. 9.
- JOSEPH HOLLEY  
What Happened in Miss Hattie's Parlor. *Southwest Review*, vol. 83, no. 1.
- DIANE HORTON  
Undertow. *Puerto del Sol*, Spring.
- ANDREW HUDGINS  
Royal Ambassadors for the Lord. *Shenandoah*, Fall.
- CLAIRE HYNES  
Black British. *Essence*, April.
- JOANNE JACOBSON  
My Father, Reading. *The New England Review*, Fall.
- DENIS JOHNSON  
Why Write? *Seneca Review*, Spring.
- FRANCESCA KAZAN  
Sites of Remembrance. *The Gettysburg Review*, Autumn.
- JAMAICA KINCAID  
The Little Revenge from the Periphery. *Transition*, no. 73.
- JUDITH KITCHEN  
Distance and Direction. *The Georgia Review*, Spring.
- GEORGINA KLEEGER  
Blind Rage: An Open Letter to Helen Keller. *Southwest Review*, vol. 83, no. 1.
- KATE KRAUTKRAMER  
Psoas. *The North American Review*, November/December.
- LEONARD KRIEDEL  
Fathers, Sons, Brothers, Strangers: A Meditation on Courage, Memory, and Belonging. *Partisan Review*, Winter.
- KEN LAMBERTON  
Of Swallows and Doing Time. *Manoa*, vol. 10, no. 2.
- LAWRENCE L. LANGER  
Pre-empting the Holocaust. *The Atlantic Monthly*, November.
- BARBARA F. LEFCOWITZ  
Wandering and Serendipity. *Under the Sun*, Summer.
- NATON LESLIE  
I'll Tell You What. *High Plains Literary Review*, Fall/Winter.
- BARRY LOPEZ  
The Whaleboat. *Outside*, May.
- DEBRA MARQUART  
Failures of the Heart. *North Dakota Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 1.
- SUSAN MARSH  
Words from the Sky. *North Dakota Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 2.
- MARK MATOUSEK  
The Art of Losing. *Common Boundary*, September/October.
- NANCY MCCABE  
Hanging On. *The Massachusetts Review*, Spring.
- JOHN MCCORMICK  
In the Mean Time. *The Hudson Review*, Autumn.
- ERIN MCGRAW  
Bad Eyes. *The Gettysburg Review*, Spring.
- JAMES MCKEAN  
One on One. *The Gettysburg Review*, Summer.
- SMOKEY MCKINNEY  
Kansas Came Late. *Flyway*, Spring.

- JOHN MCPHEE  
Swimming with Canoes. *The New Yorker*, August 10.
- JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON  
Grant Hall. *DoubleTake*, no. 11, Winter.
- JAY MEEK  
Floods. *The Ohio Review*, no. 57.
- CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON  
Thoreau's Arrow. *The Threepenny Review*, Winter.
- MICHAEL MILBURN  
Chance of a Lifetime: On Being a WASP. *Another Chicago Magazine*, no. 34.
- MARGARET MILES  
Looking at Distant Places As If They Were on the Palm of Your Hand. *American Letters & Commentary*, no. 10.
- BRENDA MILLER  
Basha Leah. *Prairie Schooner*, Fall.
- KATE MILLETT  
Out of the Loop and Out of Print. *On the Issues*, Summer.
- ED MOONEY  
Postcards Dropped in Flight. *Terra Nova*, Spring.
- TIM MORRIS  
Puzzlement. *The American Scholar*, Autumn.
- MIKE MOXCEY  
How to Write a Personal Essay. *The Georgia Review*, Fall.
- SPENCER NADLER  
An Old Soldier. *The Massachusetts Review*, Spring.
- JOSIP NOVAKOVICH  
A Place in Between. *New Letters*, vol. 64, no. 3.
- KATHLEEN NORRIS  
Annunciation. *Image*, no. 18.
- KEVIN ODERMAN  
Troglodyte Nights: In Cappadocia. *North Dakota Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 2.
- VINCE PASSARO  
Who'll Stop the Drain? *Harper's Magazine*, August.
- MICHAEL PATERNITI  
The Last Meal. *Esquire*, May.
- ELIZABETH POWERS  
Table Manners and Morals. *Commentary*, May.
- JEDEDIAH S. PURDY  
Age of Irony. *The American Prospect*, July/August.
- SUSAN KUSHNER RESNICK  
Tag Team. *Under the Sun*, Summer.
- DALE RIGBY  
The Dead Skin Scrolls. *The Iowa Review*, vol. 28, no. 3.
- ALBERTO RIOS  
The Chicken and the Box. *The Connecticut Review*, Fall.
- EDWARD RIVERA  
Impure Thoughts. *Culturefront*, Winter.
- KATIE ROIPHE  
The End of Innocence. *Vogue*, January.
- TACEY A. ROSOLOWSKI  
White Shirts. *Salmagundi*, Fall.
- DORIEN ROSS  
Rescue: Warsaw 1989. *Tikkun*, November/December.
- MIKE SAGER  
Smoking: A Love Story. *Esquire*, February.
- SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS  
Skill. *The Georgia Review*, Summer.  
Simplicity. *Audubon*, July/August.
- REG SANER  
My Grandmother's House. *High Plains Literary Review*, Fall/Winter.
- LUC SANTE  
Memory: A Madeleine on Wheels. *The New York Times Magazine*, December 13.
- F. E. SCHWARTZ  
A Bay of Gentle Waves. *Baybury Review*, no. 2.

- MIMI SCHWARTZ  
Memoir? Fiction? Where's the Line?  
*Creative Nonfiction*, no. 10.
- ALIX KATES SHULMAN  
A Marriage Disagreement. *Dissent*,  
Winter.
- TOBIN SIEBERS  
My Withered Limb. *Michigan  
Quarterly Review*, Spring.
- CHARLES SIMIC  
In Praise of Folly. *The Georgia  
Review*, Winter.
- BETH SIMON  
Clean. *Northwest Review*, vol. 36,  
no. 3.
- FLOYD SKLOOT  
Kismet. *Boulevard*, Spring.
- LAUREN SLATER  
I Thought It Couldn't Happen  
Again. *Health*, October.
- ANDREY SLIVKA  
The Morning Crew. *New York Press*,  
April 8 and 14.
- REBECCA SOLNIT  
Caves. *Grand Street*, no. 64.
- MICHAEL STEINBERG  
Chin Music: A Memoir. *The Florida  
Review*, vol. 23, no. 1.
- M. G. STEPHENS  
Clearwater Blues. *Witness*, vol. 12,  
no. 2.  
Prayer for My Father. *Manoa*, vol.  
10, no. 2.
- PETER STITT  
In Love Begins Responsibility. *The  
Gettysburg Review*, Autumn.
- IRA SUKRUNGRUANG  
The Gift. *Crab Orchard Review*,  
Spring/Summer.
- ANDREW SULLIVAN  
What We Look Up to Now. *The New  
York Times Magazine*, November  
15.
- BARRY TARGAN  
Dickie Dare. *The Sewanee Review*,  
Summer.
- KERRY TEMPLE  
Fork in the Road. *Notre Dame  
Magazine*, Spring.
- ALEXANDER THEROUX  
Odd Collections. *The Yale Review*,  
January.
- PAUL THEROUX  
The Essential Nature of Islands.  
*Outside*, September.
- CLIFFORD THOMPSON  
Black & American: What Does It  
Mean? *Commonweal*, February 13.
- SALLIE TISDALE  
Marginalia. *Portland*, Spring.
- BARRY UNSWORTH  
Naples Is Closed. *Granta*, no. 64.
- ALICE VAN BUREN  
Horse Latitudes. *The American Voice*,  
no. 47.
- CONNIE VOISINE  
What Was So Beautiful about My  
Father. *Western Humanities Review*,  
Winter.
- EAMONN WALL  
The Black Hills, The Gorey Road.  
*New Hibernia Review*, Winter.
- GARRY WALLACE  
Three Old Sheds. *Owen Wister  
Review*, Spring.
- JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN  
What Is a Brother? *Esquire*, June.
- JASON WILSON  
Marbles Champions. *New England  
Review*, Winter.
- S. L. WISENBERG  
The Children of Theresienstadt.  
*Witness*, Spring.
- ROBERT F. WORTH  
The Legacy of a Lynching. *The  
American Scholar*, Spring.
- STEVE YARBROUGH  
The Big Time. *The Oxford American*,  
no. 21 and 22.

- PAUL ZIMMER  
The Blind World, Atomic  
Battlefields. *The Georgia Review*,  
Winter.
- HOWARD ZINN  
The Massacres of History. *The  
Progressive*, August.
- HILLER B. ZOBEL  
The Undying Problem of the Death  
Penalty. *American Heritage*, January.

Issues of *Five Points*, with the essays "Thread" by Stuart Dybek and "The Third Servant" by Margo Livesey, arrived too late to be considered for this year's volume.

Readers will also find many essays of interest in the following special issues of periodicals published in 1998: "A View from the Divide (Creative Nonfiction on Health and Science)," *Creative Nonfiction*, no. 11, Lee Gutkind, editor; "Whiteness: What Is It?" *Hungry Mind Review*, Spring, Bart Schneider, editor; "Personal Narratives," *Prairie Schooner*, Fall, Hilda Raz, editor; "American Families," *Witness*, vol. 12, no. 2, Peter Stine, editor.