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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. *ZZZYVA*, 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 Virginity. *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.